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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the English listening journals of 23 Taiwanese university students learning English. The listening journal requires that students listen to one English language program a week, write a brief synopsis, and comment upon self-listening abilities and the program, including what s/he learned. Journals are graded according to effort and improvement over time rather than accuracy. The comments and discoveries made by these students are examined. Topics discussed included clear pronunciation and speech, rate of speech, vocabulary, slang and idioms, cultural differences, gender and age differences, unfamiliar accents, and voice quality. The mandate of listening to comprehend was strengthened when students actually discovered, on their own, that listening did indeed improve overall comprehension, increase vocabulary, and improve understanding of how language is really used. Overall, the journal helped students improve comprehension, increased student participation in the learning process, and developed new listening and learning skills. Students were writing 2-3 pages instead of the mandatory 1 page and even asking teacher questions via the journal. (Contains seven references.) (NAV)

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Self-Directed Listening: What Student Journals Reveal

A paper presented at the 29th Annual IATEFL Conference
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1.0 Background to the Study

As has been pointed out many times in the literature (for example, Byrnes, 1984; Morley, 1990), children have months of listening to their native language before they even utter their first word. In ordinary circumstances, we hear a lot more of our native language being expressed around us (including a lot of talk that is not directed to us) than we ever produce. ESL learners have the advantage of living in the target culture, where they receive the daily language input of everyday life.

EFL learners, on the other hand, do not get such abundant input, yet they are often required to speak even before listening. Students in Taiwan, in particular those at the junior and senior high school level where English is a required subject, almost never have to listen to any English utterances without having a complete Chinese translation in front of them. They are trained to listen to what they already know, not to listen to get information. They do not normally get Krashen's famous $i + 1$, input that is just slightly more advanced than that of the level at which they function comfortably; their listening is not challenged. Furthermore, research supports the claim that language proficiency is the result of receiving sufficient comprehensible input (Krashen, Terrell, Ehrman, & Herzog, 1984).

Taiwan's students are usually good at, are trained to be good at, grammar analysis and reading comprehension questions; these are the types of questions that appear on the all-important Joint College Entrance Examination, for which students also have to write a short composition. Speaking and listening are almost never tested on critical examinations, so it is not surprising that teachers do not devote too much time to teaching these skills.

Although Taiwan's students do have some skill at reading, or rather deciphering written passages, the strategies they use do not usually transfer easily to listening. Students in Taiwan tend to be laborious, bottom-up readers; they are afraid to guess. They have the idea that if they have not translated and understood every single word, they have failed. Therefore, our students say that they do not understand the local English radio station, yet when we question these

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students more carefully, we find that they may have understood most of the broadcast. Their negative attitude has to be changed.

Teachers in Taiwan often hear the following question, in particular from higher level students: "Teacher, what can I do to improve my English?" While we may have specific suggestions for specific students, the usual answer is "Get as much input and practice as possible." The problem is, since we are in an EFL situation, there are not always enough native speakers available with whom students can practice outside of class. Other than searching out native speakers or going abroad, there is another source of authentic English available for listening in our living rooms every day.

By 1993 cable TV was widespread in Taiwan in the major urban areas. Now many of us can choose from over 50 stations, and although we may consider some of the offerings (pornographic films, shopping channels, etc.) to be superfluous and stick primarily to our favorite channels, we are still getting more and more of a choice. This is the trend in cable TV in most modern countries today and it will most likely continue. In the future we can look forward to more choices in TV program types and, for Taiwan, the availability of more English and Japanese programming.

Unfortunately, many of our students approach English TV programs with utter fear and insist they will understand nothing without Chinese subtitles. Some are so convinced they will understand anything that they refuse even to try. Clearly students need training in changing their attitude and in learning strategies to build their confidence in listening to authentic English.

2.0 The Course *Advanced Listening*

Although the English language can come into our living rooms every day, particularly via satellite and cable TV, most of our students are afraid to use this widely available source of English input. Here we come to the main reason for putting the course *Advanced Listening* together: students want and need more authentic English input and TV can provide that input. This is where the work of the teacher is crucial. We can show students that with practice and a few useful strategies, they too can learn to watch, listen to, understand, and even enjoy some TV programs in English. While the most obvious use of authentic TV is in developing listening skills, activities for speaking and writing and the use of supplemental readings are also included in the course (see Katchen, 1995 for sample activities developed for this course).

We are fortunate that we have videocassette recorders (VCRs) because, like the earlier audiocassette recorders, they make possible the use of repetition. In ordinary TV viewing, we see and hear only once and then it is gone. That is not very useful in teaching. Thus, the VCR allows teachers to view several times in order to develop appropriate activities, then allows us to show our video clips more than once as we ask students to perform various tasks, check them, and

review. Copies of the video can also be placed in a student-access lab for further individual review or for homework.

Rubin (1990) observed that training in effective listening strategies enhanced students' listening skills and improved student affect and motivation. In our classes we also found that after receiving some training, students felt they were understanding more, they had a better idea of their strengths and weaknesses in listening, and they felt more confident in their listening abilities. As a result, they began to seek out other kinds of listening materials outside of class and to try out different techniques in working with audiotapes and videotapes.

3.0 The Journals

One way to help students improve their listening abilities is to require them to keep a listening diary (Furmanovsky, 1994, with Japanese university students) or listening log (Trites, 1993, with students in an intensive English program in the USA). In our class with university students in Taiwan, we call it a listening journal. Students must listen to at least one program in English each week and write at least one page about it. Each journal should have two parts: (1) a summary of what the student listened to and (2) comments about his/her own listening ability with regard to the program, including what s/he learned. The actual instructions given to students with regard to the journals are given in the Appendix.

Grades given for journals range from 0 to 5, with an occasional 6 for exceptional work. An average submission receives a 3, while those that evidence more of an effort or express an interesting discovery the student has made about his listening (e.g., It seems I have to make the sound louder when I listen in English than when I listen in Chinese) receive a 4 or 5. Student effort at improvement is deemed more important than accuracy.

When the course Advanced Listening was offered initially (Spring 1992), the listening journal was not used. The second time around (Spring 1993) the listening journal was introduced to handle some of the problems observed previously. The first consideration was making sure students did sufficient work for the course; they needed regular **homework**. This assignment put responsibility for obtaining materials in the hands of the students; they could not blame the teacher if the material was boring. As a result, students often shared material they found and discovered new sources of listening materials. The requirement that students write a short summary of what they had listened to was used as a check that they really did the assignment.

Second, an additional means of **evaluation** was necessary. Students come to our classes with different strengths and weaknesses. Because improvement in language skills is a slow process, grading correctness only meant that those students who come to class with higher abilities would get the highest grades and those with lower abilities would still get low grades, no matter how hard they

tried to improve. Therefore, in addition to testing accuracy, we wanted also to include students' hard work and improvement in calculating their grades.

We also thought that students should **reflect on their own learning**, hence the section on talking about the listening itself. Many of our students will become English teachers; therefore, they should know something about language learning.

During the Spring 1993 course, it was noted about halfway through the semester that some students were showing excitement in the discoveries they were making about their own listening abilities. Therefore, it was decided that when the course was given again, the listening journals would be included and used for this research.

4.0 Data Collection

The listening journals for this study were collected as part of the required activities for the course Advanced Listening offered in Fall semester 1994. The course was elective and students who had not taken it previously (in Spring 1992 when second year students were eligible to take it) could register for it. The class was made up of 23 English majors (4 in their fourth year, 19 in their third year). Ability levels of students ranged from among the top five to among the lowest five (of groups of approximately 10 students for each year) in university grade point average.

Journals were collected during class time on Friday mornings and returned the following Friday, when another set was collected. During the course of each week, the teacher read each journal, wrote a reply and/or comments, and made a copy of the journal entry. Journals were collected ten times during the semester beginning September 30 and ending December 9. The commentary portions of the midterm assignment (due November 4) and final assignment (due December 30) were also included, bringing the total number of entries per student up to twelve.

5.0 Discussion

Students often make the general statement "My listening is poor" without really realizing where their weaknesses as well as where their strengths lie. One of the purposes of the course was to have students analyze their listening more closely in order to discover what kinds of listening were easier or harder for them and why. Often, too, the type of speaker (low voice, fast speech, different accent) or the situation (lots of noise) or the topic (specialized vocabulary) play a key role in the students' comprehension. Here we look at the kinds of comments and discoveries students made about their listening as well as the strategies they reported using and what they said they learned.

5.1 Sources of Difficulty/Ease

Students found that **clear pronunciation and speech** was important to their comprehension. Student C:11/18: "I decided to make the lyric of this song on my own. I found it pretty easy (Well, I can use 'easy' this adjective) to dictate the words. I think it is partly because I am familiar with this song and partly because the pronunciation of this band--Air Supply is very clear, which is one of their characteristics." Student H:11/25: "Compared with *The Discovery Channel*, the pronunciation in *Three's Company* is more difficult, especially Chrissy's voice was so soft and unclear that I always missed her words easily."

Rate of speech was also a factor. Student C:12/2: "But I find it's more difficult for me to understand what the RV seller says. I think it's because he speaks faster than others, and this makes it a little hard for me to catch his words." Student T:9/30, among many others, also commented upon rate of speech. "Every time, when they spoke too fast, I could not always listen very clearly what they were talking about, especially when they connected two words and pronounced them together."

The problem mentioned most frequently was that of **new vocabulary**. Student G:11/4 wrote "Since my vocabulary is poor, it's very difficult for me to understand what the conversation is, especially when the word that I don't know is a key word. Though I have tried to look it up in the dictionary, it's sometimes useless. I guess it's for my pronunciation is not good enough, too." Student A:11/4 expressed a similar idea. "My vocabulary is too small to know each word, and it is hard to spell out the word by the pronunciation only. Besides, the special nouns or idioms such as *leprechaun*, or the names of things could be a problem to us. Because we do not have the background of American culture, there must be some expression we never heard before."

In addition to new vocabulary, **slang and idioms** posed a particular problem for students. Student A:10/28 wrote "This program has English subtitle. By looking at the title, I know what's said exactly, but there's some special expressions that I can't understand. Sometimes there is laughter from the program, but I can't realize where the funny part is. So I think slangs or special idioms could be a problem when listening to a tape."

Student V:11/11 speculated that **cultural differences** might also account for her misunderstanding or confusion at some points in an episode of *Three's Company*. "While the audience laugh at some sentences which the actors say, I don't know why they feel interested at them. I think this is because the different culture. We have the different humor sense from Americans. But, generally speaking, the whole story is very interesting." Student A:10/7 wrote "But when watching the videotape *Doogie Howser, M.D.* it occurs to me that sometimes the background of culture of American life is also a difficulty to comprehend what the actors talks about."

The **gender and age** of the speaker also played a role for some students. Student H thought that in at least one program, women's voices were easier to

understand. Student H:11/4: "I think I would be happier when listening Ms. Sullivan's or Ms. Holt's speech. Women's voice is better. And their speeches are easier to transcribe." Student A:12/30 commented on the special voice quality of some older people. "The young man and the daughter's voice is clear enough for us to know what they are saying, but Auguste Dupin has an accent which old men usually have. It is not so clear and easy to listen."

Student C:11/25 noticed that an **unfamiliar accent** could make comprehension more difficult. "... but as for what the black person says, I feel it's a little hard for me. Maybe it's because that black people always speak English with some accent and sometimes they have their own grammar which is different from the Standard English."

Student C:12/9 noticed that **unusual voice quality used to create a special effect could affect comprehension**. "When the characters in the cartoon speak in a normal intonation and with little accent, it is easier for me to catch what they say. For example, the prince and Cinderella speak in a normal intonation and with clear pronunciation, so I know every word of what they say. However, as for what the stepmother says, I think it is not as easy as what Cinderella says. She speaks in an exaggerated intonation and I think people usually don't say so. Maybe they just want to create some special effects. After all, it's a cartoon." Student D:11/11 also mentioned this feature when transcribing a song from *Beauty and the Beast*. "The singer of it is a 'teapot', an old madam who has a very husky voice. It becomes another difficulty of mine too."

5.2 Listening Strategies

Although they had been told in class that listening a second and third time aids understanding, a number of students discovered for themselves that **repeated listening improved their comprehension**. From Student C:10/7: "... when I first listened to this interview, I just turned the radio on, recorded it and did other things. I found that I could only understand 30% of the conversation; that is, I knew the general idea they were telling about but I didn't know the details. Then I listened to it for the second time, and this time I just made myself sit before the desk and concentrated on it, and I found I can understand 80% of the interview."

Student D:10/28 said of her first attempt to transcribe a weather report "When listening to it at the first time, it's really hard for me to understand what they are talking about. But after recording it down and listening to it word by word, it becomes easier. But there are still some words I can't get it."

In some cases, students found they **could decipher meaning more easily by watching speakers' mouths**. Student M2:10/21 wrote "I found that movies made in early years are more like opera or drama. Actors and actresses read their scripts like reciting poems with an exaggerated tone. But the good point is that they pronounced the words clearer than contemporary stars/actresses, and especially by singing the words, I can trace their mouth shapes and know the

correct vocabularies." Student A2:10/21 expressed a similar notion "Pay attention to their mouths if you don't understand the meaning!"

Students picked up clues to meaning from the **visual images**. Student M:10/28: "Actually, most of the characters speak very fast that I just cannot hear clearly each word they say. But I understand mostly, because my eyes are more sharp than my ears. Pictures help a lot." Student V:12/30 "When I could not get what they said I could guess the meaning from the context about the dialogue and the expression or action of the character." From the written version of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* J2:12/30 expressed confusion about how the window fasteners with nails and springs worked (important for knowing how the murderer escaped) but then understood by seeing that type of old-fashioned window depicted in the video.

Student H:12/30 combined the visual with her **own imagination**. "... However, to follow the story does not always depend on knowing every word of their conversation. By the music, the tone, the gesture, and the scenes, I managed to imagine what the characters were talking about. For example, in the scene which Georges warns Dupin on the stair of the house in Rue Morgue that he cannot receive any help except he finds out powerful evidences. Georges talks so fast that I almost couldn't understand all words of his speech. But by his gesture and Dupin's appearance, I thought he tries to warn something." A2:12/30 put it another way: "And another technique to understand what's going on in the film is use your analytic ability of your brain and pay much attention to every scene and every clue in the film."

Some students commented that if they did not know what a word or group of words was, if they could not segment a stream of speech, they had no way to decipher the meaning without **the help of English or Chinese subtitles**. Others were able to understand more details with the aid of English subtitles. Student H:11/25: "It's lucky because after combining the subtitle with the voices, I understood more and got some interesting jokes."

Student V:10/21 was able to learn new words and phrases from the English subtitles of *Three's Company*. "I learn many new word usages on this tape. Such as *out of something* means that you forget something with you; *tossing and turning* means that someone can't sleep well; *write up a big fat order* means that to order big amount of products. And I also have deep impression of some vocabularies. Such as *chrysanthemums*. Barry will order flowers from Janet's flower shop, but he tries to fawn on Chrissy. He said *chrissyanthemums* instead of *chrysanthemums*."

Another student with a rather high ability, C:11/4, was able to **discover new words** in the following way. "In the process of the listening, I encountered some new words. At first, I could guess their meanings by paying attention to the context of the conversation, but I didn't know how to spell it. Then I tried to spell those new words according to the pronunciation and looked them up in the dictionary to see whether they were the exact words in the story. I learned some new words in this way, such as *stuntman*, *bail*, *bluffing*, *parachute*, and so

on. I think it is a good way to learn new words and it can also reduce the fear when we encounter new words in listening a foreign language."

Students also discovered **the importance of having some background knowledge** concerning what they were listening to. Student C:10/21: "I haven't read the newspaper for several days, so I found that I was unfamiliar with the events happening in this country or in the world, especially those international news. So I think next time I do this intensive listening, I should make myself familiar with what is going on, well, maybe take a glance at the headline in *China Post*. That should do some help." Student H:12/30: "Because I watched the tape after reading the story, generally it was not a big task to catch on the plots."

Background knowledge also extended to **knowledge of specialized vocabulary**. Student S:11/18 watched an episode of the *Donahue* talk show in which the topic was about transsexuals and wrote: "This topic aroused immediately my interest as I happened to have 'Homosexuality, Transvestism and Transsexualism' as my topic for Research Methods last term. I had no difficulties following their talk as all these technical terms, which are marginal to others, used to be the centre of my study."

An older student with a good command of English vocabulary was surprised to learn **new applications of familiar words** as he transcribed radio news stories. Student J:9/30 wrote "I know the vocabulary seldom poses a problem for me, since I had picked up quite a few new terms years ago. But, maybe I should say it is the juxtaposition of some words that really takes me by surprise and makes me confused. I never realized such words would appear in such contexts. And therefore, I am not really ready psychologically for such a word to appear suddenly. For instance, I know the word *retired* perfectly well, yet I have never before associated it with a dump site, and so it takes me a while to realize of its right to appear in the context."

Student C decided that **reading was a good way to improve vocabulary**. 12/30: "I think that in addition to the pronunciation, accent, or pace of speech, the main reason why I can't understand 100 percent of the dialogue in the film is that I don't know the word. And this lack of vocabulary seems to be an obstacle to the progress of my listening ability. However, since reading can enlarge one's vocabulary, I think besides practicing my listening, I should also do more reading. After all reading and listening go hand in hand."

Student H thought it was **easier for her to understand English when she listened through headphones**. 12/30: "Unlike watching some other programs on TV at home, in C512 (Foreign Language Department student self-access language laboratory) I have to wear earphones so that I can watch and listen to the tape. The effect of the earphones makes me listen to all the sounds clearly. This helps me to understand the characters' conversation." Student D:11/4 said "...the background music once in a while increases the difficulty of my intensive listening." These observations are probably related to the idea that we can tolerate a lot of interference in our native language but somewhat less in a language we command less perfectly.

5.3 Discoveries

Students discovered aspects of **how language is really used**. Student C:10/28: "I found that when in conversation, people tend to use *you know* this phrase as a filler word when they don't know how to say the thing in English or don't know how to describe it. They say *you know* and hope that the listener will understand what they want to say. I think this is an interesting linguistic phenomenon."

Student V:12/2 thought that while the dialogue of the film *Kramer vs. Kramer* was generally rather easy to understand, the **special jargon** of the courtroom scene was especially difficult. "The dialogues at the court are too fast and difficult to me. There are a lot of information and cause-effect deduction with it. This scene is the most difficult part of listening the film."

Student H:12/30 began to **pay more attention to speakers' accents**. "Though it was said that the players speak American English in this film, I found certain actors speak English with French accent. The minor characters in this film, Lebon's coworker, his boss, and the two policemen who go to Dupin's and ask his help to solve the mystery, have the same French accent. Especially the two policemen sound to have difficulty on pronouncing *er* in English. Their tongues seem to be unable to wind up much. But generally, their English is understandable. As for the major characters, Dupin, Claire, Philip (the narrator), and so on, they have Standard American English."

Student H:12/2's attention to pronunciation also extended to **listening more carefully to little grammar link words**. "Though the song is much slower and clearer than *Express Yourself*, I still make several mistakes in my transcription. On the weak sounds, the linking sounds or the first words in certain sentences, I'm easy to miss some words, such as *you'D*, *DON'T you forget...*, and so on. Or I'd misunderstand some words. For example, I misunderstood *FELT ALL the pain* as *FELL DOWN the pain*. What a big problem! But this activity helps me to pay attention to linking sounds. I think I'll care about this later on."

Student S:10/28 also discovered how in fast speech, **final consonants in English tend to disappear**. "I used to think that listening to French is difficult because the words stick together. Now I think English is even more difficult for the reason that while the final consonants of French appear at least at the start of the next word, those of English simply disappear."

After doing the midterm assignment, Student H:11/4 made an exciting discovery that **improved her self-confidence in listening in English**. "After taking listening midterm assignment, I went to see the movie *In the Name of the Father*. To my surprise, I can get most speech in English in that film without the help of Chinese subtitle (I swear..). Perhaps it's because I had listened too much American accent, and because was used to the environment after taking the assignment. Therefore, I tried to ignore the Chinese subtitle most the time later." Also Student H:11/11: "In *The Discovery Channel* they introduce natural and

scientific knowledge in the world. Many times I thought I must not have been able to understand such program because it sounded a lot of vocabulary related to professional senses. However, through my senior's encouragement, I try to watch it this time. As I did other activities before, I covered the subtitle in Chinese with a sheet on the screen, watched and listened to the speech. Wow... Unbelievable! I could understand what the narrator was talking about, though there did exist some new words. By the help of visual imagination, the process was easy to go if I didn't care the names of the creature."

5.4 Questions Addressed to the Teacher

The weekly journal assignment made it possible for students to ask the teacher specific questions in the journal, knowing they would get a reply. Some students asked **the meaning of words or proverbs** (*Stone walls do not a prison make*) or about grammar and choice of words. Others asked **questions about content** (*Was the man's name Z-man?*), which was difficult if the teacher hadn't seen the program.

Most interestingly, some students took the option of **giving the teacher the audiotape** of a stream of English speech they had transcribed for the teacher **to check and fill in the missing words**. Most of these were radio news broadcasts or other radio programs; some students even attempted to transcribe a favorite song from tape or CD. While this would have been a lot of work for the teacher had all students chosen this option each week, those few who occasionally turned in tapes were quite serious students and generally rather good transcribers; their transcriptions tended to be essentially correct with a few trouble spots here and there, the place where an unknown vocabulary item appeared or a place so garbled even the teacher could not make out the words.

Another student, a senior interested in news and journalism, always listened to radio news, but instead of transcribing, he attempted to write grammatical summary paraphrases of a few local news stories each week; he requested grammar as well as content correction as journalistic practice.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

Although during the first few weeks of the course some students were unsure how to proceed, the teacher's written comments in individual journals and to the class in general helped students understand the purpose of the journals. Soon they began asking the teacher questions in their journals. They tried new genres and new ways to deal with the material, sometimes at the teacher's suggestion, often on their own initiative. Some preferred to summarize news stories, while others transcribed them word by word or paraphrased them. Others discovered *The Discovery Channel* or attempted to transcribe an English song,

while the less adventurous stuck to episodes of *Three's Company* subtitled in English. Students who stayed with the same genre week after week were encouraged to try something different.

Overall, students liked doing the journal assignment. Because they chose their own material, they often put forth more of an effort, writing two or three pages instead of one. The journals also made it possible to address the needs of each individual student, and because they were written, the questions and answers illustrated more reflection on the part of both students and teacher. As an added bonus, the journals also provided students with more practice writing in English for real communication.

Students occasionally expressed excitement at discovering something about their listening. These discoveries and observations about their own listening and the characteristics of the material with regard to comprehensibility are not insignificant. The future teachers among our students should be thinking about the various factors involved in language learning, and reflecting on their own experiences is a good way to begin.

Our students will not always have their teachers to tell them what to do. It is sometimes said that the purpose of education is not so much to teach specific information, but to teach students how to learn. If we can show students some strategies they can use to get the most out of their listening to the media in a foreign language, then they are more likely to apply our lessons on their own time, long after they leave our classrooms.

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Appendix: The Listening Journal Assignment

You are required to keep a listening journal for this class. The main purpose of the journal assignment is to have you practice your listening in English outside of class and to help you focus on your individual needs in improving your listening.

Each week during class you will give your teacher AT LEAST ONE FULL PAGE (or more if you like) summarizing the various kinds of listening you did in English the previous week. DO NOT include classroom lectures in English as part of your required page, although you may also comment on them. Your listening could come from the radio (*ICRT*) or television (*STAR-TV*, *NHK*, cable TV, etc.) or other videos you may have watched or audio tapes you may have listened to in the self-access language laboratory, the audio-visual center, or at home.

DO NOT include programs which are subtitled in Chinese¹ as part of your required page, although you may comment on them. You may, however, use programs subtitled in English. You may also include listening to and interacting with native speakers or even nonnative speakers, such as a conversation you had with a German businessman in English at the Taipei train station, or a special lecture or club activity which was conducted in English.

When you write your journal, mention the activity, give a brief summary of the content, and also include your reactions. For example, was it easy or hard for you to understand and can you figure out why (the speaker's voice was very soft, the topic included a lot of new vocabulary, the program was so boring you stopped listening after 10 minutes)?

Your weekly journal will be graded primarily on content. It will not be graded like a composition; grammar mistakes will not be marked unless your writing is REALLY bad. We are more interested in WHAT you say and not so much in HOW you say it.

¹This rule was not enforced strictly, in particular with regard to *The Discovery Channel*, whose offerings are all subtitled in Chinese, because students who chose these programs seemed to be challenging their English ability and also increasing their general knowledge.