

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PODCASTS IN ENHANCING THE LISTENING SKILLS OF INTERMEDIATE LEVEL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of podcasting platforms at the beginning of the 21st century has led to an easy access to authentic audio materials to be used in foreign language classrooms. Due to their real-life context and exposure to native speakers' accents, podcasts can be a potent tool for fostering language learners' listening proficiency. This quasi-experimental study investigates the efficacy of podcasts in enhancing the listening skills of intermediate level students. Employing the independent samples t-test, this research compares a control group with an experimental group, both subjected to pre-tests and post-tests. The findings of the study reveal a significant improvement in listening proficiency among the experimental group exposed to podcasts compared to the control group. These results underscore the importance of integrating podcasts into language learning curricula, particularly for intermediate learners. Current research contributes to the growing body of literature on the technology-enhanced language learning methods and offers practical insights for educators aiming to optimize listening skill acquisition in language classrooms.

Keywords: Podcast, listening skills, educational technology, listening proficiency, language acquisition, authentic audio materials.

INTRODUCTION

Listening skills are undoubtedly fundamental in the language learning process as they facilitate comprehension, allowing learners to understand spoken language in real-life situations. According to Rost, the main distinction between high-achieving and low-achieving language learners is “their ability to use listening as a means of acquisition” (Rost, 2001:94). Listening comprehension can be improved with the help of a large amount of comprehensible aural input, called ‘extensive listening’. Extensive listening, which can be conducted outside the classroom learners using their own audio materials, provides opportunities to apply three important principles for effective listening practice: variety, frequency and repetition. One of the extensive listening materials that can support those principles are podcasts (a digital audio series that can be streamed or downloaded online). Podcasts as authentic, culturally-rich and easily-accessible materials have been a significant source for improving listening comprehension, pronunciation and fluency of foreign language learners. However, integrating podcasts into curriculum may require additional time, appropriate content selection and necessary technologies such as smartphones or computers with a stable internet connection to listen to podcasts regularly. Due to above-mentioned challenges, podcasting is rarely incorporated as a foreign language teaching material in Uzbek schools and beneficial effects of podcasts on listening comprehension have been underexplored by applied linguistics researchers in Uzbekistan. To address those issues, this research examines the impact of podcasts on enhancing listening skills among intermediate-level language learners and its findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative approaches to language education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of educational podcasts to improve foreign language learners’ listening skills has attracted much attention in several previous studies done by foreign researchers. Podcasting, which was initially created for entertainment by Adam Curry and Dave Winer at the end of the 20th century (Bottomley, 2015:3), started to be implemented into education as lectures in North Carolina, USA. Etymologically, the word consists of “pod” derived from iPod and “casting” as from broadcasting (Sičová, 2022:5). More than 850,000 podcasts are available on the internet (Winn, 2020:6) as for January 2020 and approximately 115,000 of them are English-teaching podcasts. In his publication called *Using social media in the classroom*, Poore recognizes podcasts as an effective teaching tool that

educators can take as an advantage along with blogs, wikis and social networking. (Poore, 2015:34). According to Dale, there are 3 types of podcasts that can be employed by educators: 1) archives of lectures; 2) pre-recorded educational podcasts created by others; 3) podcasts produced by students. (Dale, 2007:12). Additionally, there are numerous podcasts specifically designed for ESL and EFL learners (Stanley, 2006:7). The potential of podcasts to enhance foreign language acquisition, specifically listening skills, has been investigated by several researchers in recent years. In their notable study, Faramarzi et.al. examined the effectiveness of vodcasts (podcasts with video content) in improving EFL learners' listening comprehension in a pre-test/post-test research design. They worked with 120 college-level learners providing them with 20 vodcasts belonging to different genres over a period of 12 weeks. The findings indicated a significant increase in learners' listening comprehension scores at the end of the treatment (Faramarzi et.al.,2019). Similarly, Ukrainian researchers Naidionova and Ponomarenko tried to study the impact of podcasts on developing listening skills and their final results proved their hypothesis regarding the positive effect of this type of audio materials on listening comprehension to be true (Naidionova & Ponomarenko, 2018). Another listening study conducted by Alm explored the role of podcasting in foreign language teaching: 28 German-learning students were exposed to German podcasts as well as wrote reflective blogs on their podcast listening processes during one semester. The results demonstrated that students improved their listening skills with the help of authentic German input and freely selecting the theme of the podcasts brought students enjoyment in their language journey (Alm, 2013). From the most recent works, in her diploma thesis called *Using podcasts to develop students' listening comprehension skills*, Sičová detected an improvement in both listening skills and listening strategies of the B1 level language learners after her treatment which lasted 7 weeks and included 8 podcasts and self-assessment sheets (Sičová, 2022:97). Different aspects of podcasting as a powerful teaching tool were highlighted in the studies, theories and methodologies of various researchers: Yoestra and Putri investigated the influence of podcast exposure on the level of language learners' confidence (Yoestra & Putri, 2019); Alfian and Lio analyzed the potential of podcasting to boost motivation of the foreign language students. Due to their flexibility and convenience, podcasts enable learners to take control of their learning process and it keeps them engaged and motivated (Alfian & Lio, 2019). Hasan and Hoon carried out a meta-analysis of 20 scientific articles devoted to language learning podcasts and their findings suggested that podcasts are efficient media tool for achieving high-level listening proficiency (Hasan & Hoon, 2013). Dale (2007) concluded in his research study

that podcasts should be used to enhance the interaction between teachers and students rather than being used as an alternative tool for this type of collaboration.

METHODS

Participants

Participants in this study were 30 second-year students of the Department of Integrated Course of English#3 of the Uzbekistan State World Languages University. They were selected from 2 existing groups: 22/02 and 22/30. The group 22-30 was taken as a control group while the group 22-02 was chosen as an experimental group. There were 15 students in the control and 15 in the experimental group. All of them met the selecting criteria of the research since all of them have obtained B2 level of English language proficiency. The research was conducted over a period of 4 weeks.

Instruments

The study utilized a comprehensive assessment protocol consisting of pre-tests, weekly podcast-based assessments, and post-tests to evaluate the impact of podcasts on the improvement of listening skills of intermediate level EFL students. Over a period of four weeks, participants were exposed to a series of eight podcasts as part of the experimental treatment. Weekly assessments were administered every Tuesday to gauge the comprehension and retention of the podcast content among participants.

Procedures

The study followed a structured procedure to investigate the effectiveness of podcasts in enhancing EFL learners' listening skills:

1. Pre-test Administration: Prior to the intervention, all participants completed a pre-test comprising 35 items, including matching, true/false, and multiple-choice questions, aimed at assessing baseline proficiency in listening comprehension and vocabulary.

2. Intervention Implementation: Over the course of four weeks, participants in the experimental group were assigned two podcasts per week to listen to repetitively. Each week, following podcast exposure, participants completed a test consisting of 15 items based on the content of the assigned podcasts. These assessments incorporated various question types, including matching, true/false, and multiple-choice questions, to evaluate comprehension and retention of the podcast material.

3. Control Group Procedures: Participants in the control group did not receive the podcast intervention but engaged in regular classroom activities during the intervention period.

4. Post-test Administration: At the conclusion of the intervention, both control and experimental groups underwent a post-test comprising 35 items, including matching, true/false, fill-in-the-gaps, and multiple-choice questions, mirroring the format of the pre-test. The post-test aimed to assess the overall impact of the podcast-based instruction on participants' listening comprehension skills and vocabulary acquisition, comparing outcomes between the control and experimental groups.

Scoring

Scoring for the assessments employed a binary system, with participants receiving a score of 1 for each correct answer and 0 for each incorrect response.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of pre-test, post-test, and weekly assessment scores was conducted to examine the effectiveness of podcast-based instruction in EFL learning outcomes. Statistical analysis of pre-test and post-test results which were employed to compare performance between the control and experimental groups and assess the significance of any observed differences was conducted using a software program for statistical analysis called JASP.

RESULTS

The data from listening tests (pre-test and post-test) was analyzed using the JASP software program. Table 1 and Table 2 show the results of statistical analysis from pre-test:

Group Descriptives						
	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
pre-test	comparison	15	18.800	2.366	0.611	0.126
	treatment	15	20.647	2.774	0.716	0.136

Table 1. Group descriptive statistics (pre-test)

As we can see from Table 1, the mean score for the control group's listening pre-test was 18.800, while the experimental group's mean was 20.647, indicating no significant difference between the two groups in regard to listening proficiency.

Independent Samples T-Test

	t	df	p
pre-test	-1.770	28	0.088

Note. Student's t-test.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test (pre-test)

Additionally, p-value obtained from analyzing pre-test using independent samples t-test also indicates that the means are homogeneous since it is greater than a predetermined threshold ($0.088 > 0.05$). Therefore, it can be claimed that the participants in both groups were similar in their listening comprehension at the start of the experiment.

After the treatment, the post-test was taken from both groups. Table 3 illustrates the difference in the mean scores of both control and experimental group:

Group Descriptives						
	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
L2 Listening Comparison		15	20.200	4.212	1.088	0.209
	Treatment	15	29.000	2.000	0.516	0.069

Table 3. Group descriptive statistics (post-test)

From Table 3, it is evident that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the control group ($M=20.200$) and the experimental group ($M=29.000$). It can be claimed by the results of the independent samples t-test that are given in Table 4:

Independent Samples T-Test			
	t	df	p
L2 Listening	-7.309	20.007	< .001

Note. Student's t-test.

Table 4. Independent Samples t-test (post-test)

The independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between the results of post-test since the p-value which is $< .001$ according to the table 4 is less than 0.05.

In order to measure the strength of the relationship between the variables (podcast exposure and listening skills of the language learners), effect size was also measured:

Independent Samples T-Test					
	t	df	p	Cohen's d	SE Cohen's d
L2	-7.309	20.007	< .001	-2.669	0.609
Listening					

Note. Student's t-test.

Table 5. Effect size (Cohen's d)

The data in the table illustrates a Cohen's d of -2,699 indicating a large effect size.

DISCUSSION

The results from Table 1 demonstrate that at the outset of the experiment, there was no significant difference between the control group's mean listening pre-test score ($M = 18.800$) and that of the experimental group ($M = 20.647$), as evidenced by a p-value of 0.088 from the independent samples t-test. This suggests that participants in both groups had similar listening comprehension abilities prior to the intervention.

Moving to Table 3, a notable contrast emerges between the mean scores of the control group ($M = 20.200$) and the experimental group ($M = 29.000$) post-intervention. The independent samples t-test results in Table 4 affirm this difference as statistically significant ($p < .001$), indicating that the experimental intervention had a substantial impact on improving listening proficiency compared to the control condition.

Moreover, the effect size, reflected by a Cohen's d of -2.699, underscores the magnitude of this difference, pointing to a large effect attributable to the intervention.

These findings suggest that the experimental intervention led to significant improvements in listening comprehension skills among participants, highlighting the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing language learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of this study provide compelling evidence regarding the effectiveness of utilizing podcasts as an intervention for enhancing listening skills among intermediate level students. Initially, there was no significant disparity in listening proficiency between the control and experimental groups, indicating comparability in abilities prior to the intervention. However, following exposure to podcasts, the experimental group exhibited a remarkable

improvement in listening comprehension, as evidenced by significantly higher post-test scores compared to the control group.

The statistical analyses, including the independent samples t-test and the calculation of effect size, consistently demonstrated the substantial impact of the podcast intervention. The large effect size (Cohen's $d = -2.699$) further underscores the magnitude of the observed improvement, affirming the potency of podcasts in fostering language learning outcomes.

Overall, the results support the efficacy of integrating podcasts as a supplementary instructional tool in EFL pedagogy, highlighting its potential for enhancing listening skills and fostering autonomous learning. Therefore, in response to the research question, "Is there any significant difference in the intermediate level students' listening skills development between the experimental group exposed to podcasts and the control group?" the findings unequivocally support the hypothesis that exposure to podcasts leads to significant enhancements in listening skills development among intermediate level students. These results not only contribute to the existing literature on language learning methodologies but also offer practical implications for educators seeking innovative approaches to optimize language learning experiences.

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