

# THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDIOBOOKS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract:** Recent studies have revealed that listening is a prerequisite to other language skills such as speaking, reading and writing and hence plays a very important role in foreign language acquisition. As a result, it seems extremely important to develop learners' listening skills so that they will become competent users of the English language. The aim of the article is to show how audiobooks may be incorporated into the English classroom and used for educational purposes. In addition to providing background information concerning the listening ability, the authors investigate the educational value of those 'talking books' and describe how to organise an audiobook-based lesson.

**Key words:** listening, audiobooks, language, teaching

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## Introduction

With the increase in the popularity of English language learning and teaching, scholars have been searching for new methods and techniques which could improve the effectiveness of the teaching process. Traditional teaching methods are no longer appropriate for the new generation of learners who have been profoundly impacted by the rapidly-changing world. Sousa [1] emphasises that twenty-first century learners "respond more than ever to the unique and different," and reveal so-called "novelty-seeking behaviour." Mundane or tedious tasks from textbooks are no longer likely to hold learners' attention for a sufficient period of time, and that is why it is highly advisable that technology be incorporated into teaching practice so as to enhance students' motivation to learn. In addition to professional and content knowledge, effective teachers should display a great deal of creativity and should be able to elicit curiosity and interest in their learners.

Though audiobooks are quite popular, they are rather regarded as a pastime and not as a teaching resource. However, they do seem to be one of the most helpful teaching tools which may significantly improve students' linguistic competence. Not only do they enable learners to enrich their vocabulary, but they are also highly conducive to the development of their writing and reading skills. Audiobooks are, in fact, a real goldmine for foreign language teachers. Narrated by native speakers, those may help students to overcome their problems with pronunciation and may significantly improve their linguistic fluency, which is underlined by Peterson [2] who states that "[t]hrough listening learners can build an awareness of the interworkings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills."

## Hearing vs listening – Is there a difference?

Listening is an indispensable part of foreign language learning and teaching. Vandergrift and Goh [3] highlight that "it enables language users to receive and interact with language input and facilitates the emergence of other language skills." The effectiveness of the learning process can thus be enhanced when listening activities are incorporated by teachers in their teaching practice. Exposed to real language use via listening tasks, students get accustomed to the linguistic features of a given language, learn new vocabulary in context and improve their aptitude for attentive listening.

Though the two terms 'hearing' and 'listening' seem to refer to the ability to perceive audible sounds, they are actually two different terms which cannot be used interchangeably. There is no denying that both hearing and listening use the same auditory organs, i.e. ears, but the former is often referred to as an automatic process, and the latter as an active process that requires a lot of conscious effort on the part of the listener. Beck and Flexer [4] state that "[h]earing is a sense; listening is a skill" and add that "[l]istening can be thought of as applying meaning to sound: allowing the brain to organise, establish vocabulary, develop receptive and expressive language, learn and internalise concept. Indeed, listening is where hearing meets the brain." Similarly, Adler and Rodman [5] claim that hearing because it is an automatic process, cannot be paused or stopped, and occurs with or without a person's consent, which is also emphasised by Baars and Gage [6] who contend that "[w]e can close our eyes and shut our visual images but we cannot shut our ears to shut out auditory events." We are constantly processing sounds, but it does

not mean that we consciously notice the whole auditory input as it is impossible to pay conscious attention to all the stimuli reaching our auditory system [7]. Human beings can hear without listening [4], which is substantiated by Subrhi [8] who asserts that hearing is primary and continuous, while listening is secondary and temporary.

It would thus be reasonable to conclude that hearing is intrinsic to listening, and without the ability to perceive sounds we would not be able to listen. As an innate ability, hearing cannot be developed, contrary to listening which is done intentionally and involves a great deal of multifaceted cognitive processing. Listening engages the brain and is an integral part of a communication process. Indispensable for comprehension to be achieved, listening entails the ability to decode auditory input into comprehensible linguistic structures, and to understand and interpret the message by utilizing long-term memory.

### Top-down and bottom-up listening

According to Lam [9], a great number of learners consider listening and speaking to be more difficult than reading and writing because “young learners start learning the written form of the language with little regard to its aural-oral aspect.” Speaking and listening are, however, “part and parcel of the spoken language [9],” and each competent user of a language should master both skills to be able to engage successfully in acts of communication. Gilman and Moody [10] point out that “adults spend 40-50% of their communication time listening, 25-30% speaking, 11-16% reading, and only about 9% writing.” Such studies clearly demonstrate that listening is by far the most widely used language skill in everyday communication.

A great many researchers, together with Lam [9] and Nunan [11] have already determined that listening enables learners to familiarise themselves with the features of the spoken language. Students should therefore be exposed to variety of listening tasks so as to be able to cope with real-life communicative situations more effectively. Once regarded as “the Cinderella skill in second language learning [11],” listening has been gaining in popularity and new strategies improving listening comprehension are constantly being designed. No longer is listening viewed as a secondary skill but rather a prerequisite to other language skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking in particular [12]. It provides real-world language input for the learner and facilitates subconscious acquisition of foreign language structures. However, as Lam [9] emphasises listening materials assigned for educational purposes are “often ‘artificial’ in order to suit the level of the students (...) [and they] do not have hesitations, repetitions, very loose organisation,

and incomplete sentences.” Hence, this is where audiobooks may appear to be an extremely useful teaching resource.

Nunan [11] argues that there are two general approaches to listening development which involve either the top-down or the bottom-up processing of the linguistic input. In the top-down information processing, learners depend upon their prior knowledge of both the context and the situation to arrive at comprehension. They make predictions about the recording and strive for deciphering the general meaning of the listening task. In the bottom-up approach, learners concentrate upon linguistic elements of the spoken discourse and decode what they hear “in a linear fashion, from the smallest meaningful units (phonemes) to complete texts [11].” According to the bottom-up view of linguistic processing, listeners go through all the levels of language, from phonemic through morphemic and lexemic to semantic in order to interpret the auditory input.

Typically, listening activities necessitate the activation of either top-down or bottom-up strategies. It depends on the purpose of the listening task which strategy is employed, but generally speaking, the two processes are essential in real-life communication. That is why it is essential that students be equipped with both processing skills, which may be achieved by various listening tasks, such as listening for specific details, listening for general meaning, and listening for the general idea or gist [13]. Richards [14] provides a more detailed description of exercises which involve bottom-up processing and states that learners should be able to do the following:

- Identify the referents of pronouns in an utterance
- Recognise the time reference of an utterance
- Distinguish between positive and negative statements
- Recognise the order of words in a sentence
- Identify sequence markers
- Identify key words that occurred in a spoken text
- Identify which modal verb occurred in a spoken text

Exercises which involve top-down processing will, in turn, force learners to interpret the main idea, describe speakers’ intentions or to make predictions about the situations being referred to, and they typically require students to do the tasks described below [14]:

- Use key words to construct the schema of a discourse
- Infer the setting for a text
- Infer the role of the participants and their goals
- Infer causes or effects
- Infer unstated details of a situation
- Anticipate questions related to the topic or situation

As in real-life situations, both listening strategies are essential to be acquired by English language learners because “they both play important, but different, roles in listening [15].” Teachers who want to create listening tasks

on the basis of their own materials need to be aware of that fact and should create exercises which will facilitate the development of both processing skills.

### Stages of listening

Quite surprisingly, Mercadal-Sabbagh and Purdy [16] assert that “although it is our first communicative behaviour, listening is usually our most underdeveloped communication skill.” From an early age, children are taught how to speak a language; they are corrected on the spot when they make a mistake, but they are not given any instructions related to attentive listening. Listening thus appears to be developing naturally as far as the mother tongue is concerned, but it does not mean that language users are able to listen carefully to their speakers even when the conversation is conducted in their native language. There has recently been a remarkable increase of interest in developing listening skills, and new strategies or techniques for teaching this receptive skill have been suggested. However, to be able to enhance listening comprehension, teachers need first to understand how complex a process it is.

According to Tyagi [17], for instance, listening can be broken down into five distinct stages:

1. **hearing**, which precedes the listening process and refers to the physiological perception of sound waves and separating the message from other confusing sounds;
2. **understanding**, which means decoding the linguistic input into comprehensible chunks of knowledge structures;
3. **remembering**, which involves the juxtaposition of the incoming information against background knowledge and storing the message for further processing;
4. **evaluating**, during which listeners single out facts, distinguish them from opinions, and determine if there is bias or prejudice present in the message. It is vital for the listener not to start evaluating the message prematurely because the message should be completed before the listener provides a response which is the final stage of the listening process;
5. **responding**, which is the quintessence of the communication activity. It makes it possible for the speaker to verify if their message was properly decoded and understood by the receiver, and if the purpose of the communication has been achieved.

### Listening sub-skills

Listening is an extremely difficult and complex skill which students need to master as it is a fundamental competence without which successful communication will not take place and language proficiency will not be achieved. The teachers' role is to enable students to develop their ability for

attentive listening and to equip them with all the necessary knowledge essential for effective listening. Teachers need to inculcate good listening habits in their learners, but they should do it gradually, bearing in mind that listening encompasses various sub-skills that students need to acquire. Those sub-skills, also known as micro-skills, are often defined as “specific behaviour that language users do in order to be effective in each of the [language] skills [18],” such as speaking, listening, reading or writing. Field [19] also substantiates this claim stating that “[s]ubskills are seen as competencies which native listeners possess and which non-natives need to acquire in relation to the language they are learning.”

Richards [20] provides a very lengthy taxonomy of listening skills. He enumerates thirty-three micro-skills which appear to be essential for conversational listening, and eighteen micro-skills which, to his mind, are relevant to academic listening. Richards [20] underlines that the conversational micro-skills are significant for academic listening as well, but there are certain micro-skills which are peculiar only to academic listening that requires some additional abilities from the listener. Lynch and Mendelsohn [21] emphasise that “Richards' analysis has been extremely influential in helping language teachers to distinguish and prioritize the components of different types of listening, and his article is still widely cited in discussion of materials design.” In his micro-skills taxonomies, Richards [20] does not only take the surface structure of the linguistic message into account, i.e. the linear organisation of syntactic phrases which are overtly spoken and heard but also the deep structure of the sentences being spoken out loud. Apart from language-related abilities, he draws attention to other non-linguistic ones which are also essential for effective communication. Table 1 presents an abbreviated version of Richards' taxonomy.

Field [19] concludes that teaching specialists should not concentrate only on the development of a global listening skill but rather on discrete aspects of this receptive skill. He advocates a subskill approach to teaching listening and states that there are three target areas which listening training ought to cover [19]:

1. types of listening (e.g. for gist, for information, etc.);
2. discourse features (e.g. reference, markers, etc.);
3. techniques (e.g. predicting, anticipating, recognising, etc.).

### Putting theory into practice

Rost [22] divides listening tasks into one-way and two-way. In one-way tasks, listening input comes from an outside source, e.g. a CD player, and the learner is required to do exercises connected with the recording. In contrast,

Table 1: Micro-skills for conversational and academic listening (adapted from Richards [20]).

<b>Micro-skills for conversational listening include the ability to:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>retain chunks of language of different lengths for short period</i></li> <li>2. <i>discriminate among the distinctive sounds of the target language</i></li> <li>3. <i>recognize the stress patterns of words and the rhythmic structure of English, identify words in stressed and unstressed positions</i></li> <li>4. <i>recognise reduced forms of words and distinguish word boundaries</i></li> <li>5. <i>recognise typical word-order, patterns in the target language</i></li> <li>6. <i>recognise vocabulary used in core conversational topics, detect key words (i.e., those that identify topics and propositions)</i></li> <li>7. <i>guess the meaning of words from the context in which they occur</i></li> <li>8. <i>recognise grammatical word classes (parts of speech) and major syntactic patterns and devices</i></li> <li>9. <i>recognise cohesive devices in spoken discourse</i></li> <li>10. <i>recognise the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals</i></li> <li>11. <i>reconstruct or infer situations, goals, participant, procedures, and use real-world knowledge to work them out</i></li> <li>12. <i>identify and reconstruct topics and coherent structure from on-going discourse involving two or more speakers</i></li> <li>13. <i>process speech at different rates and speech containing pauses, errors, corrections</i></li> <li>14. <i>make use of facial, paralinguistic, and other clues to work out meanings</i></li> <li>15. <i>adjust listening strategies to different kinds of listener purposes or goals</i></li> <li>16. <i>signal comprehension or lack of comprehension, verbally and nonverbally</i></li> </ol>
<b>Micro-skills for academic listening include the ability to:</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>identify the purpose, scope and topic of lecture and follow topic development</i></li> <li>2. <i>identify relationships among units within discourse and the role of discourse markers in signalling the structure of a lecture</i></li> <li>3. <i>detect the attitude of speaker toward subject matter</i></li> <li>4. <i>follow different modes of lecturing: spoken, audio, audio-visual</i></li> <li>5. <i>follow the lecture despite differences in accent and speed</i></li> <li>6. <i>recognise irrelevant matter: jokes, digressions, meanderings</i></li> </ol>

two-way tasks could be referred to as collaborative ones as they usually involve mutual communication between learners who need to process the information they have heard so as to provide a comprehensible feedback. Additionally, Rost [22] suggests that, for planning purposes, listening tasks should be broken down into three phases:

1. **Pre-listening** – which is to help students to prepare for what they are going to hear by providing essential vocabulary and the pronunciation of key words and phrases, familiarising students with grammar structures which will occur in the text and activating background knowledge indispensable for the comprehension process to occur.

2. **While-listening** – which is to check students' understanding of the recording. Depending on the purpose of the listening task, the teacher decides what type of listening task students will be required to perform; whether they are to listen for the gist or for specific information, or to find out about the speaker's opinion.
3. **Post-listening** – which is to facilitate the integration of the information from the text into learners' existing knowledge by recycling language-related elements, i.e. vocabulary and grammar structures. At this stage, learners may be engaged in speaking or writing activities during which they are asked to utilise the knowledge gained from the recording.

At each stage different types of exercises may be used. However, Richards [20] points out that the following types are the most common:

1. **matching and distinguishing** – exercises in which a response is presented either in a written or in a pictorial form and the listener's task is to choose the correct answer or to match, for instance, two items;
2. **transferring** – in such exercises, listeners acquire information in one form, and then they need to transfer it into another form, e.g. after listening to a recording in which two people are talking about their dream house, learners are asked to draw the house;
3. **transcribing** – involves writing down what has been heard, e.g. dictation;
4. **scanning** – entails listening for specific information;
5. **extending** – such exercises develop students' imagination as learners are asked to do some additional task on the basis of the recording, e.g. provide a conclusion to a story;
6. **condensing** – i.e. summarising main points;
7. **answering** – learners are asked to provide answers to questions which check their listening comprehension. Different kinds of questions may be asked so as to concentrate upon distinct aspects of listening, e.g. detail, inference, attitude, function or gist-content/purpose questions;
8. **predicting** – these are exercises in which learners are asked to make predictions about some aspects from the recording.

An effective language teacher knows how to develop their learners' listening skills, and how to organise listening practice so that it will be the most beneficial for students. They are also cognisant of the mechanisms for successful listening skill development and try to incorporate near-native teaching materials into their classrooms. Field [19] underlines that authentic materials "afford examples of the hesitations, false starts, filled and empty pauses, etc., which

characterise natural speech” and adds that pieces of authentic listening should be introduced “at an early stage of learning, alongside scripted texts, to help learners to become familiar with the real cadences of the target language.” That is why audiobooks seem to be a perfect teaching resource as they are created by native speakers and for other native speakers.

Audiobooks, also known as talking books, originated in America in the 1930s [23], but the advent of the Internet that has brought about significant changes for audiobook users. The Internet has made audiobooks easily accessible to the general public, and technological development has contributed to an upsurge in their popularity as well as to the improvement of their quality. Burkey [23] explains that a book may be read with a single-voiced or multi-voiced narration, but the narrator is always carefully chosen as it needs to be a person “knowledgeable in the techniques of communicating the author’s intention through audible emotion and expression.” Accompanying sound effects and music make listening to audiobooks a pleasurable experience, and the listener may concentrate on the plot of the story without straining his/her eyes. Besides, audiobooks are very popular with people because they can be listened to anywhere, anytime, even while engaged in another activity.

Burkey [23] emphasises that “[a]udiobooks are a powerful tool in building fluency, the ability to read smoothly and expressively (...) [a]nd listening to audiobooks boosts pronunciation skills.” It is widely known that adult learners of the English language often indulge in listening to their favourite authors with a view to improving their linguistic competence. However, not much is written about the use of audiobooks in English classrooms, especially with very young learners. Since it is such a valuable vehicle for the L1 acquisition, comparable to the impact of a book read aloud to a child by their parents, why not use those talking books as an alternative to traditional listening tasks included in textbooks?

There are different ways of using audiobooks to develop linguistic competence of young learners. First, audiobooks serve as a perfect launching pad for developing both receptive and productive language skills. They may constitute the cornerstone of the lesson, or they may be used as a follow-up exercise to give learners some additional practice of the key points or even to check students’ knowledge. Important as it is, audiobooks may also be used with different types of student grouping. They are appropriate for all the main types of instructional settings, i.e. whole class, small groups or individual work, and make individualised teaching highly adaptable as teachers may create different activities for slow and fast learners. Moreover, children may be asked to listen to audiobooks as part of their homework,

which may spark their interest and encourage them to reach for other books of this type.

Listening to audiobooks is very beneficial for students for the following reasons:

- it improves both reading and listening comprehension;
- it exposes learners to proper use of linguistic structures;
- it boosts learners’ pronunciation skills;
- it brings a greater variety of ideas into the classroom, thus raising students’ interest in the lesson;
- it provides the basis for speaking and writing exercises;
- it develops learners’ writing skills;
- it fosters students’ love of literature;
- it draws their attention and increases concentration span;
- it develops their imagination;
- it improves their retention;
- it exposes learners to a variety of voices and accents;
- it provides the opportunity to stop, repeat and replay the recording.

Designing a lesson based on an audiobook is not, however, an easy task. First, the teacher needs to find an audiobook which is age-appropriate and suitable for the learners’ level of English. Besides, it must be interesting and suitable for the purpose of the lesson. In addition, the text cannot be too difficult because learners may get easily demotivated and discouraged from performing the task.

Having chosen an adequate audiobook, the teacher may proceed to plan the activities. During the pre-listening phase, the teacher should try to capture students’ attention and to spark their interest in the story that they are going to listen to. It is also essential to evoke from students’ existing knowledge all the information which may appear useful in comprehending a given story. For instance, if the topic of the lesson is Food, the activities used as a warm-up may be as follows:

- acting (e.g. rubbing a stomach, the teacher says, “Oh! I am very hungry! Who is hungry too? What would you like to eat?”);
- showing real objects or flashcards presenting vocabulary that students need to revise and asking them questions such as “Who knows what that is?”;
- showing the cover of the audiobook and asking learners to make predictions about the text.

Once learners are familiarised with new vocabulary or grammar structures, proper listening tasks may follow. At this stage students may be asked to:

- fill in the missing information;
- put pictures or events in the correct order;

- choose the correct answer to a question;
- decide if a given information is true or false;
- match elements in accordance with the information included in the text.

During the post-listening phase, learners concentrate on certain aspects of language and may be asked to do the following activities:

- summarise the story orally or in writing;
- re-listen to some short pieces of the text and do additional vocabulary exercises;
- decide if the sentences connected with the listening are true or false;
- listen to a short piece of an audiobook and repeat after the recording;
- listen and transcribe what is spoken (a dictation activity);
- listen and fill the gaps with the correct words;
- prepare questions connected with the recording so as to test classmates' memory.

Post-listening activities aim to reinforce learners' understanding of the recording and help them to remember key linguistic structures from the audiobook. During the post-listening phase, the teacher may build upon the vocabulary used in the audiobook or may integrate the listening activity with other skills such as reading, speaking or writing by asking learners to perform some tasks orally or in writing or to work on the text connected with the listening. (For some practical tasks based on audiobooks and ready-made audiobook-based lesson plans, see Olszańska [24]).

There are a lot of audiobooks available online, and it is not that difficult to find an audiobook appropriate for primary-aged learners. In addition, one audiobook may be used at different stages of the lesson and for different purposes. The only thing that needs to be done is design exercises and decide whether they will be used as pre-, while- or post-listening activities, and which linguistic item or language skill the teacher intends to focus on. Significant as they are, audiobooks are often accompanied with their printed version which the teacher may use to enhance learners' pronunciation skills. There are also a lot of films on YouTube which present native English speakers reading books aloud. Teachers may make use of such films because, apart from the auditory stimuli, there is also visual input, which may make the lesson even more attractive to learners.

### Conclusion

Audiobooks appear to have a great educational value for foreign language teachers. They are a perfect vehicle for developing various language skills and increasing learners' linguistic competence. Besides being a great pastime, they

provide a vast range of possibilities to create various language tasks, and only the teachers' imagination is the limit. Audiobooks have already become "one of the most popular sections of the library" [25], and it is high time they entered English classrooms as well. Narrated by native speakers and for native English speakers, they are an authentic teaching material, whose value cannot be underestimated. Hopefully, by using audiobooks for teaching purposes, the teacher may also encourage students to listen to audiobooks at home for pleasure, which may significantly contribute to the growth in literacy. Although the creation of exercises may be a little time consuming, once done they may be modified and used with other groups of learners for many years to come.

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