Audiobook in Advanced ESL Classroom:
Developing Critical Listening

Ekaterina V. Talalakina
National Research University Higher School of Economics (Russia)
talalakina@mail.ru

Abstract

In the era of abundance of ICT in education, the focus of academics is gradually shifting from initial urge for testing all possible emerging devices in order to improve learning process to a concern over potential overload with digital media and thus the need for its sifting. Foreign language learning is no exception. The fundamental skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing have all been ICT enhanced in the past decade in both successful and failed attempts to boost language proficiency of learners. At the same time, the only indisputable need for technology in foreign language acquisition in academic environment has always been traced in the sphere of developing listening skills. For many researchers, listening as a basic skill is closely connected to the ability of comprehension [3, 5, 9]. However, true for lower level language learning this argument is fading at a more advanced level of language mastery dominated by reinforcement of critical thinking. A qualitative leap from basic comprehension to critical analysis has to be addressed in the process of developing language competencies. Listening, in particular, requires the design of special learning material, which, on the one hand, meets the criterion of authenticity [2, 7] and, on the other hand, leaves room for scaffolding since formal learning implies the use of specifically-built system of learning tools and not just exposure to random language experiences. [3, 4] In this regard, digital audiobooks present a unique opportunity to tackle the development of critical listening at advanced stages. Audiobooks have recently found a wide application in education from its elementary stage to adult learning [1,16]. Primarily, audiobooks are used as a supplement to reading. The present study, however, is focused on the use of audiobooks for critical listening skills for ESL students without considering the reading component of the traditional approach to audiobooks. In such context, the present article deals with issues of developing a methodology of implementing the use of digital audiobooks in advanced ESL classroom, presents specific examples of scaffolding exercises and analysis of the data collected from field-testing this approach on the stage of higher education through the case study of the Russian students learning English at National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

1. Introduction

Initial hype over information and communication technologies in education when the main issue was to field-test a large quantity of emerging gadgets is gradually turning into the issue of filtering those gadgets according to their quality. Any educational setting, English as a Second Language classroom among others, requires development of special methodological concept to ensure efficiency of new technologies. Unlike, reading, speaking and writing, which can be trained without technology, listening represents a unique challenge under the conditions of not being immersed into authentic environment. Thus, a need to test new technologies facilitating the training of this particular skill is always topical.

2. Listening as trainable skill

Educators have long recognised the need for listening training as a separate category of skills within language instruction. In a comprehensive research on correlation between intelligence and listening ability, Childers (1970) concludes that listening ability is a modifiable skill which is less a function of intelligence and more a function of learning and emphasizes the idea that listening ability is sufficiently independent as to be susceptible to improvement through systematic application of certain techniques and materials [6]. Listening 'as an explicit educational objective in and of itself' was also stressed by Way (1973) who suggested that 'it is possible to train listening skills and to construct the teaching situation in such a way that listening techniques and skills develop more fully and toward a more mature level' [15, 476]. Likewise, Benson (1989) highlights that 'whereas, in the past, listening had been seen mainly as a "model" for the production of speech (listen-speak-read-write), it should now be an end in itself'. [2, p. 423]. Indeed, it can be argued that 'just like any good investment, effective listening provides the students with valuable long-term benefits: competence, confidence, and productivity in their academic, personal, and professional lives' [13].

2.1. Academic listening

Among various versions of listening skills taxonomy, the most popular is provided by Richards (1983) who differentiated 'conversational listening' and 'academic listening' [11]. Academic listening is subdivided into eighteen microskills including ability to identify purpose, scope, topic of lecture, ability to identify relationships among units within discourse, ability to infer relationships, ability to deduce meanings of words from context, ability to detect attitude of speaker toward subject matter and others [11, p.229]. Harper (1985) modified this taxonomy distinguishing between macroskills (ability to identify and recall main ideas and significant details; ability to make inferences; ability to assess lecturer's attitude toward the material) and microskills (inferring meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary from context; recognizing function of referential, conjunctive and transitional devices) [9, p. 611].

Since some of the mentioned skill areas represent quintessential topics within Academic Reading courses (particularly, main ideas, inferences and context clues), some researchers refer such skills to 'metacognitive knowledge' [14, p.15]. Such approach only amplifies the significance of developing these skills in various educational settings.

2.2. Comprehension and critical listening

Traditionally, training listening is aimed at facilitating comprehension [3, 5, 9, 11]. In academic listening, students might have difficulty comprehending spoken language, as audio-material represents a one-way listening situation where they do not have the opportunity to see - let alone interact with - the speaker [4]. Comprehension itself is a complex phenomenon which builds upon, according to Chastain (1979), an acquired series of more specialized supporting bases such as discriminating between sound and intonation patters of language, perceiving oral message, processing it and understanding the final message [5]. Comprehension is certainly essential at elementary stages of language learning, however, the more advanced students get, the less of a challenge such task might represent which can bring about motivation loss.

In advanced ESL classroom, academic skills are closely connected to critical thinking, which involves analysis and evaluation of information received. Way (1973) defines critical listening (part of critical thinking) as the one 'characterized by more intensive focus on what is being said, but the purpose is to detect fallacies in the presentation of a theme' [15, p.474]. Critical listening definitely incorporates comprehension but stretches well beyond it activating other cognitive abilities which imply questioning information and thus stimulating its further discussion. Thus, keeping in mind these two aspects is essential in context of designing instructional listening materials.

3. Audiobooks in educational setting

Generally perceived as a sub-literary phenomenon, audiobooks are viewed as derivatives from their printed versions and thus used in education as supplement to reading aimed at increasing literacy. Particularly, Beers (1998) examines the effect audiobooks produce on struggling young readers in L1, while Woodall (2010) studies the same process with L2 students. In both scenarios, the strategy proves the thesis formulated by Jablonski (2011) that 'by employing creative instructional strategies, teachers can leverage the potential of MP3 audio format and ubiquity of audio players to develop literacy and skills that are reflective of ICT expectations in a twenty first century education' [10, p. 168].

3.1. Advantages of audiobooks in critical listening

Beneficial in teaching reading, audiobooks contain another often neglected educational advantage that consists in their use as independent (not supplemental) technological tool. The assumption of their potentially successful application in listening is based on the idea that, as put by Shokoff (2004), audiobooks are discreet works, different fundamentally in form from the quieter printed page [12]. Strangely enough, until now there is no comprehensive research on audiobooks use in building critical listening. At the same time, audiobooks contain unique features, advantageous in ESL classroom.

1. *Authenticity.* Audiobooks provide authentic material recorded for general audience without consideration for non-native speakers. Both in ESL and EAP, authenticity is cornerstone in building listening skills. Benson (1989) highlights that 'authentic material should be one of the main inputs for the learner, an idea (…) that remains the basis of much subsequent thought about ESL listening' [2, p.423]. Ferris (1996) also suggests that instructors strive for authenticity in their EAP activities, specifically that they give students opportunities to practice listening to real-life lectures by a variety of speakers [7]. Ultimately, authenticity provides comprehensible input requiring negotiation of meaning and containing linguistic features beyond learners' current competence level [11].

2. Eliminated medium factors. Comprehension levels of written and oral speech fluctuate according to medium factors (clausal basis of speech, reduced forms, ungrammatical forms, pausing and speech errors, delivery rate, rhythm and stress) which appear within oral discourse [11]. While these factors pose potential difficulties to ESL students, audiobooks eliminate those difficulties since script-based material lacks oral speech spontaneity.

3. Transparent structure. Written versions of audiobooks (depending on genre) typically contain certain elements of academic reading, namely, explicit main ideas and accurately designed supporting details. Such structural transparency facilitates comprehension which allows moving to further cognitive levels represented by critical thinking.

3.2. Tasks design

Like any other listening material, audiobooks should conform to requirements placed on ESL listening tasks. The first guideline emphasized by methodologists is that every listening abstract should be presented with a specific purpose. Funk (1989) maintains that students should be given a particular task for each listening experience and every effort should be made to make sure they understand what is called for: listening for main ideas, identifying supporting details, detecting moods, differentiating fact from fiction, selecting descriptive vocabulary, etc. [8]. Also, this purpose should transfer well to a real-life situation [11]. To illustrate, tasks to fill in the gaps with verbs will never be encountered in out of classroom, but a task to identify whether the speaker is biased towards what is being said is a day-to-day activity of everyone exposed to enormous mass media information flow.

Further on, since comprehension is an indispensable part of the listening activity, there should always be task addressing this aspect. However, methodologists often advise to exercise caution in designing comprehension-check questions because some of them are more inclined to check memory rather than comprehension. Namely, Richards (1983) believes that true-or-false questions are more oriented towards memory check [11]. Comprehension, conversely, is closely connected with interpretation and evaluation, requiring more elaborate responses from listeners rather than just a mnemonic activity.

In order to design a teaching, not a testing, material, one should carefully consider pre-listening exercises. Ironically, research refutes the validity of vocabulary instruction at this stage. The study by Berne (1995) proves that 'despite apparent importance of lexical knowledge to listening comprehension, studying vocabulary lists prior to listening may not be a particularly effective means of improving listening comprehension performance' [3, p.324]. Chang and Read (2006) further argues that vocabulary instruction can produce a negative effect on listeners' performance for it distracts from the main message of the listening piece [4]. Instead, pre-listening stage can contain tasks which facilitate analyzing listening context and possible filters listeners may encounter [4, 13].

4. Case study

Methodology of using audiobooks in Advanced ESL classroom was developed at National Research University Higher School of Economics. The research broke down into three main stages: first, selection of material and development of scaffolding exercises; then, classroom-based implementation; finally, data collection and analysis. The research question was posed as follows: can the use of audiobooks contribute to development of critical listening in ESL classroom?

4.1. Learning material

The audiobook chosen for classroom-based research was 'The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream' by Barack Obama (2006). The choice was determined by themes of American Studies course comprising such topics as American values, government, elections, economy, social welfare, ethnic diversity. A total of eight audiofiles were included into the final selection and each was assigned a title to match the key words used in the abstract: 'Language of Values', 'Competing Values', 'Deliberative Democracy', 'Diffusion of Power', 'Electoral College', 'Dawn of Social Welfare', 'Winner-Take-All Economy', 'Color-Blind Society'.

The system of scaffolding exercises comprised pre-listening, complete-while-listening and post-listening components. Additionally, packages for each abstract included a glossary of country-specific notions which students might be unfamiliar with. Pre-listening activities revolved around the discussion of the abstract's title. To illustrate, students were asked to discuss their understanding of the expression 'competing values' before being exposed to the speaker's opinion on that matter. Complete-while-listening activity consisted in finishing the sentences by naming major supporting details provided in the audioabstract. Particularly, in 'Competing Values' piece the speaker mentions

five 'communal values' which the students had to write down while listening. Finally, the post-listening part contained assignments to foster critical thinking. Namely, students were tasked with identifying whether the values, presented by the speaker as core American, are typical of other societies and can be considered universal. Such questions prompted students to express their own opinion not necessarily resembling the speaker's one.

4.2. Implementation and findings

The following hypothesis was formulated: audiobook abstracts accompanied by a system of scaffolding critical listening exercises will contribute more to academic listening proficiency than 'specifically-for-students' recorded listening exercises supported by comprehension check only. The hypothesis was tested on sixty ESL university students: thirty in an experimental group and thirty in control group (all sophomores at undergraduate level with initial intermediate-high and advanced-low scores of overall English language proficiency). The set of eight audiobook abstracts were implemented within one-semester course taken by the experimental group. At the same time, the control group was exposed to traditional listening exercises supplemented solely by comprehension exercises. The level of academic listening proficiency was tested in both groups before and after the project's implementation using a listening abstract accompanied by multiple-choice questions testing academic skills such as detecting main ideas and supporting details, implied main ideas, inferences, fact and opinion and others. All listening pieces both for training and testing purposes were presented to the students twice since research reveals that repetition produces positive impact on overall listening ability [3, 4].

Briefly, the findings obtained in the present study indicate that the use of audiobooks in ESL classroom contributed to overall academic listening proficiency with average indicator of a 23% increase, while comparative analysis of empirical data displays that the results of the experimental group on average exceed the results of the control group by 12%. Along with the data collected through testing, classroom observations likewise allow drawing a conclusion that the use of audiobooks increased learners' motivation for self-study since learners expressed enthusiasm and excitement about innovative listening assignments and wished to continue listening to audiobooks as out-of-classroom non-credit activity. Finally, a survey conducted in the experimental group revealed positive students' feedback in terms of reducing their anxiety while being exposed to authentic listening pieces, which can be attributed to eliminated medium factors and transparent structure discussed above.

5. Conclusion

On the whole, the use of audiobooks supplemented by scaffolding exercises with focus on critical listening proved to be successful in terms of contributing to increase of academic listening proficiency of advanced ESL students. Advantages of audiobooks over traditional ESL listening assignments, namely, authenticity, elimination of medium factors, and transparent structure also produced a positive effect on learners' motivation for self-study and reduction of anxiety during authentic listening experiences. Thus, such unconventional for foreign language instruction device as audiobooks are gradually establishing their niche among valuable tools in ESL classrooms of the twenty first century.

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