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The Effects of Audiobooks on EFL Students' Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of audiobooks on listening comprehension skills of EFL Students, and their attitudes towards using audiobooks in a foreign language classroom. The participants are 66 first-year students of a state university in Turkey. The research follows a pre- post-test control group research design using quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative data, obtained from the General Listening Comprehension Skills Scale (GLCSS) scores of the students before and after the treatments, were analyzed using independent samples t-tests. As for the qualitative data, participants' opinions about the use of audiobooks were elicited via a survey and subjected to content analysis. The outcomes of the GLCSS, developed and conducted by the researchers, revealed similar listening comprehension scores for both groups before the treatment. Throughout a 13 week period, in the experimental group, the teacher used both printed and audio versions of the selected books. The control group was allowed to use only printed versions while all the other in class processes remained the same for both groups. The findings showed that using audiobooks had a positive impact on students' listening comprehension skills. The analysis of the survey data showed that audiobooks had contributed to participants' listening comprehension, pronunciation, and motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of any foreign language education is to enable learners to understand and use sparse the target language effectively. Hence, reading, listening, writing, and speaking are crucial in EFL classes. The former two are defined as receptive and the latter two as the productive skills. Receptive skills are preconditions for successful production skills as highlighted by Brown (2004) as follows: "How could you speak a language without also listening?" Hence, determining an effective method or methods to teach these skills has been considered among an essential problem of foreign language instruction. As no single method does answer this need, a combination of learning techniques and strategies need to be employed. In a study on Turkish EFL learners listening strategies, Takkac and Akdemir (2015) emphasized the importance of using different

strategies in foreign language listening. They found that Turkish EFL learners, except for other characteristics in the literature, are respectful, text-independent, and willing. Gunduz (2006, p. 258) states that “in teaching listening, a teacher can fall into the bad habit of using the same listening materials over and over again.” When considering new trends in foreign language education and the different needs of learners, it is essential to explore the use of new learning tools in the classroom. Specifically, in order to meet the needs of university foreign language students for learning a foreign language, the methods and the materials used in the classroom must be diverse. For instance, Lee’s study (2015) showed that picture books can be used with low level or struggling readers. In addition, new trends need to be explored to teach listening to students in the foreign language classrooms.

Developing L2 listening comprehension is not easy in second language contexts. One of the major factors making L2 listening difficult to develop is lack of exposure (Rost, 2006). In Turkey, there is no mainstream assessment of the listening, writing and speaking skills for the ELT program candidates. This situation directs students to focus on reading, grammar, and vocabulary. As a result, students have problems in listening, writing, and speaking when they are enrolled in ELT programs (Sert, 2010). Therefore, assisting ELT program students to improve their listening comprehension skills during the first year is of utmost importance for future academic success.

Shiffrin and Schneider (1977), mention two types of cognitive processes in second or foreign language use. These are controlled and automatic processes. The controlled process requires particular attention to control, and hence processing is slow. The automatic process, on the other hand, involves executing a cognitive activity without attentional control. When the process is more automatic, it is easier to comprehend. As one of the most problematic areas in listening for second language learners is the speech rate, audiobooks may help to follow spoken form with the written form (Chang & Read, 2006). Also, Sternberg (2003) argues that human mind processes the visual and oral information through distinct channels. Similarly, Paivio’s dual-coding theory (1971) stresses the effectiveness of using verbal associations and visual imagery together in cognition. For instance, Saricoban and Yuruk (2016) found that visual context is helpful in improving reading comprehension skills of Turkish EFL learners. As audiobooks provide text and audio simultaneously, tenets of dual-coding theory are well adhered to.

Audiobooks were first introduced in 1931 within the scope of "Books for the Adult Blind Project." However, the use of audiobooks has gone far beyond its original purpose. First, they were used as a tool to improve reading comprehension of children (Koskinen, Blum, Bisson, Philips, Creamer, & Baker 2000; O’Day, 2002) or struggling readers (Harris, 2001; Stone-Harris, 2008). However, little research has been conducted about the impacts of audiobooks on EFL learners’ listening skills.

Rubery (2008) points out three key differences between audiobooks and traditional reading aloud. Whereas reading aloud is restricted in space and time, listening to audiobooks does not have such constraints. The final difference is related with voice. Whereas reading aloud necessitates face-to-face encounter, audiobooks can be listened to via computers, MP3 players, smart phones, CDs, cassettes, walkmans, and so on. The vast opportunities present for playing audiobooks make it easily accessible. According to Wolfson (2008) a further advantage of audiobooks is that they are read aloud by professional narrators, famous actors/actresses, and even the authors themselves. The only difference between listening to audiobooks and reading from the print is that readers substitute the visual understanding of written media with the auditory understanding. Audiobooks cannot be ignored as the number of audiobooks as well as that of listeners is steadily increasing.

Therefore, integrating audiobooks into teaching and the learning environment, especially into the foreign language instructional setting is very important.

Audiobooks and Teaching Language Skills

Easy access and use of audiobooks by teachers and students contribute to teaching foreign language skills. Some previous experimental studies found that listening to audiobooks improves both reading comprehension and listening skills (Jakobs, 2006, Turker, 2010). Moreover, a good audiobook helps to capture the elements of characterization, theme, tone, and setting in the classroom (Brown, 2002). Besides, listening to audiobooks encourages independent reading (O'Day, 2002). Broughton, Brumfit, Flevell, Hill and Pincas (1978, p. 108) state that “A great many courses for the teaching of English to foreigners published today have taped materials to accompany them, and it is nearly always valuable to have these available to support the written text, if for no other reason— especially for the teacher who is a non-native speaker of English.” These taped materials enable also the acquisition of accurate pronunciation.

Pronunciation is one of the key issues in EFL classes. The underlying reason of inaccurate pronunciation in EFL setting is because until the end of the 1960s listening was neglected and considered as a passive process in language learning (Demirezen, 2005, p. 184). He claims that “there is a scarcity of pronunciation curing method in teacher training area that handles a fossilized pronunciation mistake, utilizing special techniques within a class hour.” As the narrators of audiobooks are native speakers, language learners do not feel timid about their pronunciation and they can break fossilized pronunciation errors by listening and repeating as much as necessary. Some earlier research findings showed that audiobooks had positive effects on the pronunciation of EFL learners (Saka, 2015; Tagninezhad, Khalifah, Nabizadeh & Shahab, 2015)

The Role of Listening Comprehension in EFL

Discussing the importance of listening in learning a language, no matter whether a first or second, is futile (Rost, 2001; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006). Brown (2004, p.119) presents the importance of listening for language learning with a question whose answer is assured: “How could you speak a language without also listening.” Listening is the “least understood and most overlooked of the four skills” (Nation & Newton, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Listening cannot be considered as a passive process (Broughton et al., 1978; Rankin, 1928; Rost, 2001). Additionally, White (2006) clarifies the role and importance of listening by stating that in L2 it goes beyond getting meaning from sounds as it enables social relationships and understanding the wide world. Hence a traditional method of teaching is insufficient as it does not consider factors including the various aspect of listening such as learner responsibility, authenticity, task-based learning, intercultural competence, and changes in the usage of English worldwide. He suggests that listeners should be more responsible for finding out and applying strategies that would help to understand spoken English. Authenticity should be thought in a broad sense, and more task-based listening strategies need to be employed while teaching the relevant skill.

Listening is much more than hearing (Downs, 2008, p.1). One can hear, but may not listen. In a similar way, one can listen, but may not understand. (Broughton et al., 1978). This highlights the importance of listening for language learners. Nation and Newton (2009, p. 51) suggest the following activities to make listening easier: listening while reading, repeated listening, interactive

listening, and non-linguistic or semi-linguistic support. According to them listening while reading may include a “written text, a PowerPoint presentation, and captioned movies.” Repeated listening, for them, improves fluency. Audiobooks allow us to listen while reading as well as repeated listening. Likewise, Wilson (2008) mentions some features of good listening texts: Interest factor, entertainment factor, cultural accessibility, speech acts, density, language level, quality of recordings, speed and number of speakers, accent, all of which are present in audiobooks.

Aims and Research Questions of the Study

There are several studies investigating the role of audiobooks in language learning, particularly on reading comprehension (O'Day, 2002; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004; Thooft, 2011). However, little research has been conducted on listening. The present study focuses on the impact of audiobooks on the general listening comprehension of university first-year students and their relevant views about using audiobooks in the classroom. Thus, the research questions are as follows:

1. Do audiobooks have any effect on EFL first-year learners' listening comprehension skills?
2. What are university first-year EFL learners' opinions about using audiobooks in the foreign language classes?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The present study is conducted at the English Language Teaching (ELT) department of a State University in Turkey. The program offers a four-year undergraduate degree in English Language Teacher Education. Students take basic language development courses such as lexicology, contextual grammar, reading, listening, speaking and writing in the first year of the program. The following years include teaching of pedagogic and pedagogic content knowledge. The participants are 66 first-year students studying in this program. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 22.

Data Collection and Analysis

The listening comprehension levels of the students were determined by the General Listening Comprehension Skills Scale (GLCSS), which was developed by the researchers. Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFA) were used to establish the validity and reliability of the scale. In order to validate the applicability of the scale, psychometric features such as Cronbach Alfa coefficients and structural validity were calculated. After the exploratory factor analysis, the scale showed a single-dimension structure. The scale was administered to 259 students enrolled in the program excluding the first-year students in order to control this structure and test on-dimension model. After the factor analysis, the obtained fit indexes and chi-square values are investigated. CFA results fit index statistics which were made to find the match between

GLCSS and the data collected; proving that the values obtained were at a satisfactory level. The quality of the test, also referred as content validity, had been assured by expert opinions of the ELT professors working at the same department. The ultimate test, composed of eleven items, became a single-dimension scale with high validity and reliability levels. In this scale, students can obtain scores ranging between zero and eleven. The administration time was 30 minutes. The scale included note-taking questions. Independent samples t-tests were run to find out the difference between the control and experimental groups' listening comprehension pre- post-test mean scores.

The qualitative data were obtained through an opinion survey prepared to elicit the ideas of participants about using the audiobooks consisting of six questions. These were reviewed by the professors in the ELT program. The qualitative data obtained from the opinion survey were analyzed via content analysis.

Materials

In this experimental study, which aims to identify the effectiveness of audiobooks on improving the listening comprehension of EFL learners, two audiobooks were used. These were chosen according to the current estimated level of the students. The first, "The Pearl" by John Steinbeck and the second, "The Call of the Wild" by Jack London were both unabridged and narrated by native speakers. Underlying reasons for the preference of these two books were:

- These are neither short nor long for in-class reading (The audio version of The Pearl is 3 hours and 30 minutes, and The Call of the Wild is 3 hours and 52 minutes).
- The topics were interesting for the university-level EFL students.
- The quality of the narration sound was very good.
- These were considered to be suitable for the current level of the participants.

Procedure

In order to determine group equivalency, GLCSS was administered to students before the treatment. GLCSS pre-test mean scores the groups were analyzed using independent samples t-test. No statistically significant difference was found in the GLCSS pre-test scores of the experimental and the control group (Table 1). In other words, the listening comprehension levels of both groups were similar to each other at the beginning of the study.

Table 1. GLCSS Pre-test Scores of the Control and Experimental Groups

Pre-Test	Groups	N	x	SD	t	p
GLCSS	Control	34	4,56	2,351	,360	,720
	Experimental	32	4,34	2,497		

The treatment lasted for 13 weeks. The lessons were given to both groups by the first researcher. The control and experimental groups received and did the same pre-reading, while-reading, and

post-reading activities. However, participants in the experimental group, unlike the control group, listened and read the books simultaneously. The control group used the print version of the books.

Table 2. The Activities Conducted With the Experimental and Control Groups

Week	Experimental Group	Control Group
	The Pearl: Chapter One-Six	
Weeks 1-6	Each week: KWL, Mark my Words, Mark Who, Question Mark Book Mark, Simultaneous reading and listening of one chapter of the audiobook	The Pearl: Chapter One-Six Each week: KWL, Mark my words, Mark Who, Question Mark Book Mark , Silent Reading of the One Chapter of the book
	The Call of the Wild: Chapter One-Seven	
Weeks 7-13	Each week: KWL, Mark my words, Mark Who, Question Mark Book Mark, Simultaneous reading and listening of one chapter of the audiobook	The Call of the Wild: Chapter One-Seven Each Week: KWL, Mark my words, Mark Who, Question Mark Book Mark, Silent Reading of the One Chapter of the book

The KWL (What I Know), Mark my Words, Mark Who, and Question Mark Bookmark charts were all adapted from Beers (2003). These four charts were used with both experimental and control group students every week. Table 2 shows the activities conducted in both groups. As the table illustrates, the only different activity used with the experimental group was listening to the texts while reading.

RESULTS

In order to see whether there is a statistically significant difference in listening comprehension test scores of control and the experimental group, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The parametric statistics were utilized after conducting a test of normality. The analysis indicates that the general listening comprehension post-test mean score of the experimental group is statistically significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (Table 3). In other words, we see that the use of audiobooks significantly increased the listening comprehension skills of the participants.

Table 3. Comparison of the General Listening Comprehension Skills Scale Post-Test Result of Control and Experimental Groups

Post-Test	Groups	N	x	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Listening	Control	34	4,94	2,131	-2,861	,006
	Experimental	32	6,53	2,369		

The qualitative data obtained from the opinion survey were analyzed via content analysis. The analysis showed that students' views on audiobooks can be categorized as follows: the effects on listening and reading comprehension, on learning accurate pronunciation, future use & motivation, and drawbacks. The categories have been discussed based on the direct quotations elicited from the survey.

Effects on reading and listening comprehension

All of the participants in the experimental group believed that audiobooks improved their reading and listening comprehension. These results are also supported in the quantitative findings of this current study. The following quotations indicate the positive contribution of to reading and listening skills. The following comments can be given as representative answers:

“Thanks to the chunk by chunk reading of the narrator, audiobooks helped me to understand sentences easier.”

“I think audiobooks were really useful for our reading and listening. Personally, I had the desire to read that book.”

“My listening abilities got better after this activity. I learned how to pronounce the words correctly.”

“I find audiobooks to be very useful in learning a foreign language. I enjoy listening to audio stories. It has increased my reading comprehension.”

“Whether you read or, listen. For example, if we want to read the book, if we want to improve our English but we cannot find much time for them, audiobooks enabling us to listen wherever possible fit us.”

Pronunciation

All participants found audiobooks useful for their pronunciation. In particular, the presence of the text and audio material together enabled participants to read and listen simultaneously. Thus, participants have two senses involved during the learning process which makes the learning easier and more enjoyable. Hearing the correct pronunciation of the words while reading them helped students to improve their pronunciation. Student opinions can be summarized with the following quotations:

“Audiobook enabled me to learn pronunciation of some words that I did not know.”

“We know we'll be able to speak fluently if we continue listening to native speakers.”

“As I know the correct pronunciation of lots of words, I have more courage to speak.”

“Audiobooks” clarified my pronunciation, and I learned the correct pronunciation (to tell the truth, my pronunciation is bad). In audiobook except for one or two instances, it was clear what narrator was saying and because of that I presumed the meaning of the words familiar to me.”

“Thanks to the audiobooks we listened; I learned how to pronounce the names of people from different countries.”

Future use & motivation

The participants also indicated that the audiobooks motivated them to read and listen to more books. The following quotation show how students developed positive attitudes towards audiobooks.

“My interest in listening to English books increased. Now I’m trying to listen whatever I find in English.”

As the participants of this study studying at a teacher education program, two of the participants indicated their willingness to use audiobooks in their teaching career in the future. Here are the quotations:

“We can even meditate or lie down while listening to an audiobook. As an English teacher, I will use it in the future. It is a very useful resource.”

“When I become a teacher, I will use audiobooks in my class.”

Overall, the participants reported an increase in interest using audiobooks as a learning and teaching tool in future.

Drawbacks

Almost all of the students stated positive ideas about audiobooks. However, there were two students who did not enjoy audiobooks.

“Well, audiobooks were fine. With audiobooks, we have improved reading and also listening. However, for me it was boring because I am not good at listening to people even in real life so listening to someone who reads a book ... is not for me. I would prefer some dialogues and more actual practices.”

“...I still don’t like them. They are too long, and you cannot see its effect in a short time.”

DISCUSSION

Previous studies on using audiobooks mainly focused on young learners. Studies on the effects of audiobooks on university level students (Taguchi et al., 2004; Woodal, 2010) focus on reading comprehension, fluency, or vocabulary learning (Beers, 1998; Marchionda, 2001). Several studies have examined the effects of audiobooks on reading comprehension (Thooft, 2011; Turker, 2010), while others on listening skills were mainly based on qualitative data or observations indicating a positive contribution (Shany & Biemiller, 1995). Although the present study focuses on first-year university students, its findings have important suggestions about the effects of audiobooks for older students and young adult learners.

This study found a statistically significant difference between the GLCSS post-test scores of control and experimental groups in line with the findings of earlier studies (Jakobs, 2006). Hence, the present study will contribute to the relevant literature as the impact of audiobooks on general listening comprehension has not yet been explored in EFL students within a Turkish university context. Based on the statistical difference, classroom observations made, and participant views audio accompanied texts increase motivation of students to attend classroom practices and enjoy reading. This study also supports the findings of Koskinen et al. (2000) and O'Day, (2002) who determined that audiobooks facilitated students interest to read more and more.

The participants' responses to opinion survey provided intriguing insights on the effectiveness of audiobooks. O'Day (2002) stated that students find audiobooks supportive to comprehension and enjoyable. Moreover, in the present study, the participants found audiobooks effective for pronunciation, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and motivation. If we are to compare the qualitative findings of the study with previous research, we see that the results of the present study support the findings of previous research (Beers, 1998; Grover & Hannegan, 2005; Lo & Chan, 2008; Marchionda, 2001; O'Day, 2002; Saka, 2015; Serafini, 2004; Van Bon, Bokseveld, Font Freide, Tagninezhad et al., 2015; Van den Hurk, 1991; Wolfson, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to determine the effects of audiobooks on listening comprehension and to determine students' views about using audiobooks in regular classroom settings. The opinion survey enabled us to understand students' experiences and perspectives as well as the benefits and drawbacks of using audiobooks in foreign language learning classrooms. The outcomes of the present study have proven that students develop positive attitudes towards audiobooks, enabling us to make some further suggestions both for students and teachers such as integration of audiobooks into the regular classroom practice, assigning homework based on audiobook usage, and setting up listening and pronunciation contest based on the audio-text.

The main conclusion of this research is that audiobooks have significant contributions on listening comprehension skills of first year EFL Department students. Considering the practical implications of this study, it can be concluded that audiobooks can also be used as supportive materials in advanced foreign language reading and listening classes. The findings of the present study could be used to encourage teachers to use audiobooks in a university EFL context while planning the syllabus of advanced reading or listening classes along with standard books. Depending on the level, age, interest, and time constraints, shorter audiobooks may be more suitable.

The present study, as well as the current literature on audiobooks, indicates that audiobooks can be used with students at all proficiency levels. The present study has focused on using audiobooks at the tertiary level. However, factors such as the quality of the audio, the tone and pace of narrators, and the difficulty of the books are to be taken into consideration while deciding to employ audiobooks in educational settings along with students' current foreign language levels. Moreover, in order to enable sustained interest of the students, audiobooks to be used in and out of the classes could be chosen by the students according to their own preferences.

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