

Selection and Evaluation of Podcasts in Teaching Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Listening is a core skill for the learners in English as a second/foreign language (EFL/ESL) contexts, and that needs to be improved through practice. However, EFL/ESL learners listen to their English teachers' voices only. Consequently, learners have difficulty while they listen to English native speakers; reasons may vary from learner to another. Learners have difficulty in listening either on the speakers' accent, speed, topic, the length of the texts, or other problems. Thus, listening to audio podcasts through repetition help the learners solve such problems and make the learners listen to the texts leisurely in their pace and to improve listening skills independently. There are numerous English podcasts published on the internet and designed for both teachers and learners. For example, BBC learn English, VoA learn English, British council learn English, EFL podcasts, Podcasts in English (Pie), and English Listening Lesson Library Online (ELLLO). All these resources offer an opportunity to practice and develop the listening skills. However, selecting listening materials for class use will be crucial. Therefore, to select and evaluate an effective text from internet, some criteria are needed. Thus, the current paper intends to present three intermediate level audio podcasts as a sample from each of the three online podcasts (ELLLO, BBC: six minutes learn English, and British council: Learn English) based on the selection and evaluation criteria adapted from experts in the field. Accordingly, ELLLO has very good audio podcasts for teaching and learning English at EFL/ESL contexts than BBC and British council audio podcasts. Moreover, teachers can use them directly without adapting the listening texts, and they are good resources to enhance learners' language proficiency, communication, and listening micro-skills.

Keywords: Listening difficulties, Podcasts, ELLLO, BBC, and British council: Learn English

Introduction

It is observed that most EFL/ESL researchers and teachers come to assign online listening texts to their learners without considering the selection criteria set by experts in the field. However, there are some criteria that researchers suggest to select and evaluate online listening materials for class use. For example, Nunan (2003) suggested that teachers should consider the listening texts difficulty and authentic texts in the selection of the listening materials. Authentic texts here refer to the speed of a speaker, not fast or not slow rather in average speed. Rost (2011) also suggested some key elements for selecting listening materials and sources from the internet. Some of these elements are relevant, short extract in length, explicit, textual, and visible. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) pointed out that selections of appropriate materials need careful attention. Buck (2001) points out that the importance of internet audio materials is often possible to listen to it first, at leisure to find out exactly how suitable it is.

As a whole, it is possible to find suitable listening materials on the internet for teaching listening. Using evaluation of websites and selection criteria of listening texts are useful strategies, and they help teachers find appropriate online listening resources for classroom use. Therefore, the current paper focuses on the two researchers recorded listening text selection criteria (Vandergrift and Goh 2012; and Underwood 1989), and the evaluation criteria of the websites set by (Dudeney and Hockey 2008).

Learners' difficulties in listening

Researchers have paid some efforts to identify second language or foreign language learners' difficulties in listening. For example, Buck (2001); Harmer (2001) Brown (2000); Brown (2007), and Rost (2011); Field (2008) Ur (1999); Anderson and Lynch (1988) and Underwood (1989) discussed that learners have several problems to comprehend listening texts. As a solution, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) suggested that learners are "primed" to listen to a specific piece of text through pre-listening activity, but they are seldom taught how to listen

once video or audio begins. Moreover, Harmer (2001) suggested that the solutions of learners' difficulties while they listen to listening materials are by having the following strategies; pre-teach vocabularies, have extensive reading and listening, ensure authenticity, choose the right topics, create interest, activate schemata, vary topics and genres, employ testing and teaching, offer appropriate challenges, plan for manufacturing success, and agreeing on a purpose.

To address learners' difficulty in listening, they have to practice listening individually through podcasts. To teach listening comprehension successfully, O'Malley and Chamot (1995) proposed some techniques to be used such as exposing learners to different accents and registers by listening to the radio, records, TV, movies, tapes, etc. In addition, Nunan (2003) suggests that for overcoming the listening texts difficulty, expose learners to practice with clear recordings, put pauses between phrases or sentences. According to Dudeney and Hockey (2008), using websites is also one of the easiest and least stressful ways of getting started technology in the classroom.

Podcasts in teaching listening

Podcasts in teaching listening are one of many language teaching tools through the use of technology. Podcasts are audio and video files. They are free of charge materials and can be downloadable to a computer and a portable audio and video device. Erben, Ban and Castaneda (2009) referred that Podcasts as "listening-facilitative tools". For Vandergrift and Goh (2012), podcasts are one of the multimedia tools for listening development. Geoghegan and Klass (2007) stated that a podcast is audio or video content available on the internet that delivered automatically to your computer or portable media player. Similarly, Braun (2007) mentioned that podcasts are regularly produced audio and video files that are available for subscription and that can automatically be downloaded to a computer and a portable audio and video device. According to these researchers, the main feature of podcasts is, "It can be downloadable", but some of the podcasts cannot be downloadable and the listener can use them online. Thus, the searcher of the podcasts have to consider the specific

websites which have downloadable audio podcasts to teach and learn listening.

It can be concluded that, all podcasts are not podcasts unless they can be downloadable and they are meant for teaching and learning a language like English. Most of them are easily accessed and downloaded to PC or smartphones. Experts suggest a list of useful web resources for listening practice such as BBC: six minutes learn English, British council learn English, and ELLLO (Lynch 2004; Brown 2007; Erben, Ban and Castaneda 2009; Geoghegan & Klass 2007; Vandergrift and Goh 2012, and Rost 2011). In the next section, the paper discusses the criteria for evaluating websites and selecting listening texts.

Criteria for evaluating websites

Dudeny and Hockey (2008, p.34) introduced four criteria to evaluate websites which are considered the starting points for the objective of the lesson to teach English through technology and to know the usefulness and appropriateness of websites for classroom use. These are *accuracy, currency, content, and functionality*. Each of these criteria has two queries for the website searcher. *Accuracy* encompasses who the page writer is, and the factuality and reliability of the content. *Currency* focuses on whether the content and the web page updated or not. The *content* includes the attractiveness, the simulation, interestingness, and the navigation of the page. The *functionality* looks at whether the page works-well and has a lot of large files or not.

Criteria for selecting recorded listening texts

To decide the selection criteria of the listening texts, Underwood (1989) and Vandergrift & Goh (2012) introduced text selection criteria. Underwood (1989) acknowledged eight selection criteria of recorded listening materials before using them for class use. They are summarized as follows. The *Language*: select the language of the text which provides comprehensible input and those which have approximately the right level of difficulty. *Length*: according to the proficiency level, for most elementary and intermediate level of listener

more than two minutes and listening without a break is difficult. *Content*: while selecting listening materials use plain, straight forward content. *The use of visual support material*: choose particular pictures, maps, charts, model, etc. with range of activities based upon them. You may choose a particular video recording for listening work because they are especially appropriate for the particular purpose. *The style of delivery*: includes speed or pitch or volume of the speaker, which has to be without excessive or sudden changes, but not slow or flat tone; not more than two or three speakers; accents has to be the received pronunciation (RP) or Midwest standard US speaker. *The speed of delivery*: the words of a text should be spoken at normal speed, not slowed down in attempt to help the students, with its natural rhythm and intonation. *Spontaneity*: choose texts which are as real as possible rather than scripted ones. Spontaneous speech will include repetitions, false starts, redundant parts, and hesitations, in which students need to get hearing and dealing with. At last, the *quality of production*: choose the text which is quite clear, clearly audible and check the background sounds, voice or music or the noise of the traffic or machine, etc. are distracting or not.

Vandergrift and Goh (2012,) also proposed seven questions for selecting texts with their authenticity. The first four questions cover the communicative context of the material, and the remaining three questions focus on the features of the text. These include: what are the original communicative purposes for the material? Who is the intended audience? Who is speaking? What kind of visual support is available? Is the level of language appropriate? Is the length of the text appropriate and realistic for the learners? Is the text really meant for listening?

To sum up, the selection criteria of listening texts of these experts related in one or the other way. Who is speaking, refers to the style of delivery, and speed of delivery; who is the intended audience refers to the content; is the text really meant for listening refers to spontaneity. Length and visual materials are there in both criteria. Therefore, the researcher adapted their common selection criteria with the one which is not there in either of them. Thus, the adapted criteria include *the*

length, content, language, spontaneity, quality of production, visual support, style of delivery, communicative purpose, and speed. The next section discusses the evaluation of websites and the podcasts.

Evaluation of the websites

Using 5-point scale ranging from excellent to very poor, the evaluation of the three websites (BBC, English Language Lesson Library Online (ELLLO), and British council) websites were evaluated and analyzed.

The first criterion, **accuracy** looks at the web page writer and the reliability of the page content. Accordingly, the web page writer of BBC six minutes English is the department of BBC world service devoted to English language teaching; British council learn English web page by British council cultural and language education, and ELLLO is designed in 2004 by Todd Beuckens an English language teacher in Japan. All the web pages of these podcasts have reliable contents.

The second criterion, **currency** focuses on the web page up-to date and the content update. Thus, BBC has an up-to-date listening audio podcasts in its web page and its contents also updated. The last update of the audio podcasts of ELLLO webpage updated in 2016, and the contents did not updated whereas the British council does not show the date in its bottom or top of the web page (no date); however, the contents of the last update of British council on the transcripts and listening activities shows as it is updated in 2019.

The third criterion, **content** query looks at the attractiveness of the site and its navigation. As a result, all the websites have interesting and simulating sites with easy navigation.

The last criterion, **functionality** requires whether the site works-well or not, and whether it has a lot of large files and the quality of loads, and sounds. Therefore, all the websites work-well, and they do have a lot of large files which can be downloaded.

Evaluation of the podcasts

Three audio podcasts randomly selected from each of the three websites. They all have commonly listening inputs: dialogue; level: intermediate; accent: British; however, ELLLO podcasts have variety of English accent speakers. Based on the listening text selection criteria adapted from Underwood (1989) and Vandergrift and Goh (2012), each podcast is evaluated (using 5-point scale ranging from excellent to very poor i.e., excellent, above average, average, below average, and very poor) as follow:

BBC six minutes learn English podcasts

With regards to the *language* criteria, it has excellent familiar topics with lexical items and accent. According to Vandergrift and Goh, the *length* of the texts depends on the purpose of the lesson (listening for the main idea, for global understanding, or listen and predict); however, very short texts less than a minute create different set of challenges. Thus, the length of the texts are 6 minutes that is excellent. The *content* of the site is very latest and have interesting topics (training artificial intelligence, improving memory, and the power of crying); the *speed* of the speakers is at the normal speed, not slowdown in an attempt to help learners; the *style of delivery* focuses on the number of speakers, thus all the selected listening texts have two speakers with gender balance therefore, they are on the excellent scale. There is a little *spontaneity* or features of the texts, and they do not have either repetition, false starts, or hesitation; as a result, the spontaneity is on the average scale. Buck (2001) points out that spoken language, especially in informal situations, consists of short phrases of clauses, called idea units. These units strung together by coordinating conjunctions. Therefore, the feature of the listening texts of BBC six minutes English falls on the average scale. The *quality of the production* of the texts are on the excellent scale, since they are clearly audible, and they do not have background noises. There are no *visual material* that draw the inferences to enhance learners' comprehension, except the cover of the audio; consequently, it is in the average scale.

The last but not the least is *communicative purposes of the texts*, as the podcasts show they are suitable for the level (intermediate)

British Council: Learn English podcasts

With regards to the *language* criteria, it has excellent familiar topics with familiar lexical items and accent, and the *length* of the texts are 3 minutes in average that is on an excellent scale. The *content* of the site is not that much very latest, and do not have interesting topics (arriving late, making a decision, and meeting an old friend); thus, it falls down on above average scale. The *speed* of the speakers is normal, not slowdown in an attempt to help learners; therefore, they are on the excellent scale. *The style of delivery* focuses on the number of speakers, thus one of the selected listening texts have four speakers. According to Underwood, not more than two voice possibly three; Vandergrift and Goh also claimed that several speakers may create problem for understanding the texts; thus, for this criterion it falls down on above average. There is *spontaneity* on the listening texts; speakers used either repetition, false starts, or hesitation; as a result, it falls on an excellent scale. The text features of the podcasts show as the spoken features are available, and audible clearly. Therefore, the feature of the listen texts of British council learn English falls on an excellent scale. *The quality of the production* of the texts are on the excellent scale, since they are clearly audible, and they do not have background noises. There are no *visual material* that draw the inferences of learners' to enhance comprehension, except the cover of the audio; consequently, it is on the average scale. The last but not the least is *communicative purposes of the texts*, as the podcasts show they are suitable for the level (intermediate)

ELLLO podcasts

With regard to the *language* criteria, it has familiar topics with lexical items and variety of English accent and it falls in the excellent scale. Lynch (2004) suggested that listening to different native speakers' accents of English will help students in their listening skill. The *length* of the texts are 2 to 4 minutes in average that is on an

excellent scale. The *content* of the site is straight forward and plain with good topics (*Bucket list; Expiration dates, and Brain drain*); thus, they fall on above average. The *speed* is normal, not slowdown in an attempt to help learners; therefore, they are on the excellent scale. The *style of delivery* focuses on the number of speakers; thus, all the three audio podcasts have two speakers. There is *spontaneity* on the listening texts; speakers used either repetition, false starts, or hesitation; it falls on an excellent scale. The *text features of the podcasts encompass* the spoken language; speakers used frequently elliptical forms of grammatical units, reductions, and repetition of cohesive devices. The *quality of the production* of the texts are on the excellent scale, since they are clearly audible, and they do not have background noises. The *visual material* i.e., pictures are included in each audio podcasts. According to Buck (2001) modern technologies are available which allow the provisional of visual information along with the audio and multimedia tests are appearing. Moreover, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) suggest that visual media have an impact on listening development since it is a part of listening context and fully supports comprehension as it would in the real-life listening contexts; it increases the authenticity of the classroom listening. All ELLLO's audio podcasts have visual material; they are evaluated as an excellent web page. The last but not the least is *communicative purposes of the texts*, as the podcasts show they are suitable for the level (intermediate).

Conclusion

The present paper shed some light on the evaluation of websites for teaching English listening skill through technology and the selection criteria for recorded listening texts. The evaluation of websites showed that all the three websites have excellent scale with regard to accuracy, content, and functionality. Though, BBC is an excellent website in connection to its up-to-date podcasts i.e., currency criterion, than ELLLO and British council in which in all its podcasts, speakers quote someone's interview from the radio program in the middle of the dialogue and they explained new words. This may create confusion for the listeners. According to the suggestion of Vandergrift

and Goh (2012), teachers can adapt such podcasts if they want to select them. The selection criteria of listening texts indicated that ELLLO has excellent podcasts than BBC and British council podcasts. Though ELLLO does not have up-to-date web page, the podcasts have visual materials, varieties of English accent speakers, many spoken languages, and no ads either in the beginning or at the end of the listening texts in which teachers can use them directly. Therefore, they are good resources to enhance learners' language proficiency, communication, and to teach listening micro-skills. Producers and designers of British council and ELLLO have to consider having updated web page and up-to-date podcasts with latest and interesting topics.

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