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НОВИ ПОДХОДИ И ИНОВАЦИИ
NEW APPROACHES AND INNOVATIONS

INTRODUCING AUDIOBOOKS TO STUDENTS OF ENGLISH
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT ULSIT

Teodora Genova

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic period has brought into light different forms of learning and training particularly leading to the use of digital tools and technology. Given the fact that people used to spend their time working and studying mainly at home and predominantly in isolation, they had more time for solitary activities such as reading, which also has proven to have a soothing and therapeutic effect on the reader. In this respect, there has been an upsurge in the popularity of audiobooks since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. This fact can serve as a favorable opportunity audiobooks to enter the classroom and become an alternative to traditional forms of listening tasks when teaching a foreign language.*

This current trend in education corresponds fully to the aims and working outputs of the project entitled “Study of Attitudes to the Therapeutic Potential of Reading in Atypical Situations for the Individual” financed by the National Science Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria with Contract № KII-06-H45/2 from 30.11.2020, which has been implemented at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Sofia, Bulgaria.

The purpose of this report is to examine the potential of how audiobooks can be used as a form of teaching general English to university students as their first foreign language in university context. The web page <https://esl-bits.net/index.htm> has been used to select the appropriate materials for listening.

In addition, a practical example of doing exercises where audiobooks are used is given following the three stages of devising a listening task: pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. To support this, methodology guidance has been followed by the “Shaping the Way We Teach English” webinar series by the American English team (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/>).

As a result of this practical example, the author of the report aims to find out whether there is any effect on their reading and listening skills, which are the most prevailing skills that can be affected after doing the exercises using audiobooks in the short term during the spring/summer semester, academic year 2021/2022.

Keywords: *pandemic; audiobooks; listening and reading skills; ULSIT; English; foreign language teaching*

Introduction

During the pandemic of COVID 19 one of the most common activities performed mainly in isolation was reading. People found books as a source of comfort and relief during these two years of “atypical situations for the individual”.¹ Prevailing number of readers started listening to audiobooks in order to receive a more fulfilling perception of the literary text. The following data only supports this current trend. “According to the Swedish company Storytel, which provides the eponymous streaming service audiobooks, whose subscribers in 2020 will be over 1 million worldwide, during the pandemic of COVID-19 the number of Storytel subscribers worldwide has tripled” (Mukanova, et. al., 2021: 4003). Likewise, “the US-based Audio Publishers Association cites publishers’ audiobook revenue rising to US\$1.3 billion last year. That’s a 12-percent jump that sees 2020 as the ninth year of double-digit growth in the format. That information is drawn from the association’s sales survey, which was conducted by InterQ Research, and looks at 2020 patterns over 2019”.² It can also be noted that audiobooks receive the attention of younger people including children, school pupils and university students. “The association’s main message to the media this morning is that “although listening habits changed in the last year, audiobook listening remained strong and stable despite the pandemic. This is hardly a surprise, of course, after months of reported indicators that digital formats not only held up well but gained traction with consumers during pandemic spread-mitigation measures, in particular. But some specific numbers here are interesting and revealing of a shift toward a younger audience in audio”.²

This fact can serve as a favorable opportunity audio books to enter the classroom and become an alternative to traditional forms of listening tasks when teaching a foreign language or be used as an additional study tool for further practicing and upgrading students’ foreign language literacy at all levels and ages. “And if we talked about reading only in the traditional form used for centuries before, today in the dynamics of the 21 century we can now explore the opportunities that are revealed thanks to modern information and communication technologies” (Mukanova, et. al., 2021: 3998).

Galip Kartal and Harun Simsek (2017: 113) state that “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”. In this respect, the following questions can be asked in this paper particularly and in the realm of English language teaching wholly: What is the place of audiobooks in the English language teaching process? What is the potential of using audiobooks when learning a foreign language in addition to one of the aspects of “reading as a form of intuitive therapy” (Mukanova, et. al., 2021: 3998).

All the surveys conducted on the topic of using audiobooks in foreign language teaching are unanimous – audiobooks contribute to the development of various competences of learning a foreign language and, in particular, English language. They hold the potential of being used as a form of teaching English especially to younger people because they are more inclined to use alternative ways of accessing and processing different kinds of information supported by the fact that there has been an increase in the consumption of audiobooks among them. *“Amid the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, parents responding to the survey said they’d been discovering audiobooks as an outlet for their children. The percentage of parents of children aged 17 and younger who said their children listened to audiobooks last year was 49 percent, up from 35 percent previously”*.²

As Saka (2015: 5) claims *“audiobooks in language learning/teaching contexts have been used for listening skills, pronunciation, critical thinking skills (Marchionda, 2001) and reading skills (Beers, 1998; Grover & Hannegan, 2008; Montgomery, 2009). These studies on audiobooks have predominately focused on the effects of audiobooks upon reading comprehension skills and critical thinking skills of K-12 learners (Donnelly, Stephans, Redman, & Hempenstall, 2005; Lo & Chan, 2008)”*.

In the next section of literature review, the author of this paper proposes the international empirical studies which have significantly contributed to the fact that listening to audiobooks predominantly affects listening and reading comprehension skills of English language learners.

Literature review on using audiobooks for foreign language purposes

Audiobooks for increasing listening comprehension skills

In the paper entitled *The Effects of Audiobooks on EFL Students’ Listening Comprehension*, the authors Galip Kartal and Harun Simsek (2017: 112–114) prove that, after conducting their study, *“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”*. They add that *“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)”*. 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.

Audio books for increasing reading comprehension skills

María Alcantud-Díaz and Carmen Gregori-Signes (2014: 114) claim that *“the use of audio books with struggling, reluctant, or second-language learners is powerful since they act as a scaffold that allows students to read above their actual reading level (Beers 1998: 33, Chen Shu-Hsien 2004)”*. Rahman and

Hadjar (2020: 112) share that *“the result of this research pointed out that the audiobook not only aids the eleventh-grade students of SMA Negeri 2 Buru to develop their reading desire to become better readers, but also helps them gain better comprehension in the reading texts. The advantages of audiobook over traditional reading activities, namely, stimulating, challenging, availability, powerful, and innovative, have been producing some positive interests for learners in learners’ self-study to get better reading comprehension ability”*. In another report, Tusmagambet (2020: 61) says *“the study revealed that the use of audiobooks is statistically significantly effective in developing students’ fluency, especially reading speed, as demonstrated by ANCOVA results”*. Furthermore, in their study Kim (2021) points out *“for example, Montgomery (2009) revealed that English language learners’ reading and academic performance increase when using audiobooks in their classroom”*. Gunduz (2006) also highlighted that *EFL students can develop their reading comprehension skills by listening to texts”*.

Alarmingly, according to a survey on the *“attitude of students to different forms of perception of the text; the degree of use of different formats among different age groups; the level of comprehension and perception of the possibilities for using reading, as a therapeutic technique, etc.”* conducted at the University of Library and Information Technologies (ULSIT) in 2021, Mukanova, Eftimova, Genova and Petkova (2021) find out that *“the lowest percentage of 1% is the respondents who use and prefer audiobooks”*. The authors point out several main reasons: *“they are not aware of this possibility, they cannot fully perceive the work, they are not available in libraries, etc.”* Therefore, this report serves as an attempt to introduce audiobooks to university students at ULSIT who learn English as a first foreign language and fill the gap between the unawareness of the possibility of using audiobooks when reading and becoming familiar with more ways they can be utilized when learning English language in university settings. Moreover, Saka (2015) also warns *“it is clear that there is a need to study the effects of audiobooks on university level EFL learners’ pronunciation and the perceptions of university level EFL learners at different proficiency levels about audiobooks”*.

Methodology

The practical example of introducing audiobooks has been carried out with second-year university students, spring semester, academic year 2021/22, following a mixed type of curriculum – learning general English and English for specific purposes, intermediate to upper-intermediate level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This presents a tentative design of conducting practical exercise including audiobooks to practice their listening and reading skills.

The audiobook teaching material used in this practical example comes from the website <https://esl-bits.net/index.htm> whose *“sole purpose [...] is to help students improve their listening and reading comprehension of the English*

language. As it says, *BITS English Language Learning is completely non-profit and contains no advertising. BITS is an online-only site. No links for downloading items are available and none will be provided*".³ The audiobook material has been chosen under the suggestion of María Alcantud-Díaz and Carmen Gregori-Signes (2014: 115) who highlight that *"to make the task of understanding the audiobook easier, the reading speed can be controlled in a such way that you do not change the reader's live performance, but you can speed up or slow down the playback. A case in point is the audiobooks web page ESL-Bits. In this page, for instance, once the audio has started, you can either listen to the audiobooks at normal speed, play it at twice the speed or at half speed. This method helps them improve both their word recognition and comprehension (Bergman, 1999)"*. The materials are not well-known for the local university context. They are free, easily accessible, and present literary works, which can serve as a chance of perceiving and experiencing new authentic texts.

The selection of this teaching material corresponds fully to the criteria for appropriateness of purpose, level, audience, and the audio quality which according to María Alcantud-Díaz and Carmen Gregori-Signes (2014: 117) *"we have to take into account if the reading flows and enhances the text, if his or her voice inflection keeps the listener engaged and interested and if the reader overdramatises to detract listener's attention from the book to his or her performance"*. In addition, it also overlaps with what *"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"* (Kartal and Simsek, 2017: 115) and goes in line with *"the integration of audiobooks at all grade levels across the curriculum has given great teaching flexibility. The audiobooks can be used at the primary, secondary, middle, and high school and university levels (Stevens, Walker, & Vaughn, 2017:105)"* (Rahman & Hajar, 2020: 105).

The process of implementing audiobooks within this classroom framework is based on the stages described in the article *The Importance of Audiobooks in English Language Teaching* by Sekścińska and Olszańska (2018: 145–146), i.e. pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. The methodology guidance of elaborating the activities has been followed by the "Shaping the Way We Teach English" webinar series by the American English team.⁴

Results

In the result section, the author proposes the creation of the practical exercises devised in the three different stages according to Sekścińska and Olszańska (2018) under the methodological guidance of the online webinar series where some useful ideas are given how to elaborate our own practical examples of using audiobooks in the classroom.

The author of this report uses an extract from the book entitled *What Dreams May Come* written by Richard Matheson.³ The practical example of introducing audiobooks in the university context in three stages is given below.

“The pre-listening” stage, 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 activate background knowledge indispensable for the comprehension process to occur” (Sekścińska & Olszańska, 2018: 146).

For a start, students discuss the title of the book, whether they have read it in their own mother tongue, if they know anything about the author, if they have read any other books by the same author, reading the Amazon book review asking the students to make any predictions about the text. Then students are familiarized with the new vocabulary building and grammar structures. The activity used is categorizing. The vocabulary exercise is categorizing the characters’ emotions using – ed and non – ed adjectives. The grammar exercise comprises of categorizing the regular and irregular past participles in the audiobook extract.

“The while-listening” stage 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 (details), or to find out about the speaker’s opinion (Sekścińska & Olszańska, 2018: 146).

The listening for gist task performed was choosing the correct answer to a question “What is the best summary of the chapter?” from a multiple choice of A, B, C, or D. The second listening for specific information task was to fill in the missing information in the sentences given from the recording.

“The post-listening” stage 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 (Sekścińska & Olszańska, 2018: 146). In this stage, the students had to do sequencing and summarizing the story orally expressing their own opinion on the chapter storyline in the end. The final task prepared helped the students number the story events in the right order and use the appropriate linking adverbs and expressing opinion phrases.

Conclusion

In conclusion, introducing audiobooks to students in university settings and performing the above mentioned tasks turned out to be a successful experiment which has proved that implementing audiobooks in foreign language teaching environment in university context has its proper place and can be used as a supportive methodology technique in pre-intermediate to advanced foreign language reading and listening classes. Although devising tasks based on audiobooks seems to be daunting, this present study can serve as a practical

example how to implement audiobooks in the classroom and “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” (Kartal and Simsek, 2017: 120).

What some of the students say about this tentative practical example of using audio books in the classroom?

1. “I didn’t think it was possible to listen to audiobooks and learn English language in such an entertaining way. I have not had any idea about the potential of audiobooks in my process of learning English”, says Student 1.

2. “This chance of participating in the audiobooks lesson got me motivated to listen to audio books more”, says Student 2.

3. “I didn’t realize I was doing any strict vocabulary and grammar exercises as usual, but it was much more engaging and amusing to dive into the audiobook plot and complete the language practice being unaware of it”, says Student 3.

4. “For me, I was able to pay attention to the pronunciation of the difficult words while I was listening to the story and found it rather helpful”, says Student 4.

Limitation of the study

This report is limited to performing only a few tasks using audiobooks in the classroom and does not include any empirical data on the effect of audiobooks on the development and improvement of the language skills of English language learners.

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NOTES

¹ **Study** of Attitudes to the Therapeutic Potential of Reading in Atypical Situations for the Individual Project. – In: *Библиотерапия : силата на книгите*. [Online]. Available at: <https://bibliotherapy.unibit.bg/bg/> [Прегледан на 11.08.22].

² **APA** Cites 12-Percent 2020 US Audiobook Revenue Growth.– In: *Publisher Perspectives*. [Online]. Available at: <https://publishingperspectives.com/2021/06/audio-publishers-association-12-percent-audiobook-revenue-growth-in-2020-covid19/> [Прегледан на 11.08.22].

³ **BITS**. English Language Learning : Listen & Read.– In: *BITS*. [Online]. Available at: <https://esl-bits.net/index.htm>. [Прегледан на 11.08.22].

⁴ **Listen** Up! Using Audio Books for English Teaching [YouTube Video].– In: YouTube. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Sq1hhkItU4&t=1244s>. [Прегледан на 11.08.22].

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ПРЕДСТАВЯНЕ НА АУДИОКНИГИТЕ НА СТУДЕНТИТЕ, КОИТО ИЗУЧАВАТ АНГЛИЙСКИ КАТО ЧУЖД ЕЗИК В УНИБИТ

Резюме: Периодът на пандемия от COVID-19 разкри различни форми на обучение, особено такива, водещи до използването на цифрови инструменти и технологии. Предвид факта, че хората прекарваха времето си в работа и учене предимно у дома и в изолация, те имаха повече време за уединени дейности, като четене, за което е доказано, че има успокояващ и терапевтичен ефект върху читателя. В това отношение се забелязва нарастване на популярността на аудиокнигите от началото на пандемията през 2020 г. до сега. Този факт може да послужи като благоприятна възможност аудиокнигите да навлязат в класната стая и да станат алтернатива на традиционните форми на задачи за слушане при преподаване на чужд език.

Тази актуална тенденция в образованието напълно съответства на целите и работните резултати на проекта „Изследване на нагласите към терапевтичния потенциал на четенето в нетипични ситуации за индивида“, финансиран от Фонд „Научни изследвания“ на Министерството на образованието и науката на Република България.

Целта на този доклад е да проучи как аудиокнигите могат да се използват като форма на преподаване на общ английски на студенти като техен първи чужд език в университетски контекст. Уебстраницата <https://esl-bits.net/index.htm> е използвана за избор на подходящите материали за слушане.

Освен това е даден практически пример за изпълнение на упражнения, при които се използват аудиокниги, като следват трите етапа на разработване на задача за слушане: преди слушане, по време на слушане и след слушане. В подкрепа на това методологичните насоки са последвани от поредицата уебсеминари „Определяне на начина, по който преподаваме английски език“ от екипа на American English (<https://americanenglish.state.gov/>).

В резултат на този практически пример авторът на доклада си поставя за цел да разбере дали има някакъв ефект върху уменията за четене и слушане на студентите и кои са преобладаващите умения, които могат да бъдат засегнати след изпълнение на упражненията с помощта на аудиокнигите в краткосрочен план по време пролетен/летен семестър на учебната 2021/2022 г.

Ключови думи: пандемия; аудиокниги; умения за слушане и четене; УниБИТ; английски език; чуждоезиково обучение

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