

USING PODCASTS TO IMPROVE LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN THE ARABIC CLASSROOMS

FATIMA AHMED

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the use of podcasts to improve listening comprehension in children's Arabic classrooms. Nineteen fourth graders and 19 fifth graders from a private school participated in this study. For 13 weeks, the two groups engaged in different activities: The fourth graders listened to Arabic podcasts while the fifth graders read Arabic stories. Pretest and posttest scores of both groups were compared to examine the effect of podcasts on their listening comprehension. The listening comprehension test scores of the experimental group were higher than the scores of the control group, indicating that podcasts are effective in improving listening comprehension in the Arabic classrooms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fatima Ahmed received B.A. in Arabic language and literature from Morocco and M.Ed., World of language from Concordia College, MN, 2010. Fatima Ahmed is an Arabic teacher at Islamic school and a member of ATA, ACTFL, and AATA. Fatima created and organized a two-week and a week Al Buhayra Camp for Arabic language at girl Scouts Camp 2009 and 2010. She was volunteering for one week at AL Waha Arabic village of Concordia Language Villages.

USING PODCASTS TO IMPROVE LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN THE ARABIC CLASSROOMS

INTRODUCTION

Podcasts offer a 'real-life listening' source that allows all second language listeners to benefit from it. Constantine (2007) explained the importance of using podcasts in the L2 class:

Even at the beginning levels, learners can benefit from global listening even if they only listen from three to five minutes a day. Beginning students will be exposed to the new language . . . The intermediate learner has a need for authentic texts and to be exposed to a variety of voices. By the time learners reach the advanced stage, they must be able to learn from listening. (pp. 1-2)

McMinn (2008) also pointed out that language instructors are able to help learners to practice a foreign language outside the classroom by encouraging them to use podcasts to improve their language skills. Teachers sometimes use the same materials to enhance listeners' performance over and over; in contrast, podcasts can present fresh ideas and motivation (Constantine, 2007).

Language instructors are required to help listeners to comprehend authentic texts; to do so, listening comprehension skill needs to be developed by exposing listeners to different discourses (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008; Pearson & Fielding, 1983; Rivers, 1966; Rost, 2002; Ur, 1984). According to Trinkle (2008), students develop listening skills before they acquire reading skills. Moreover, they are able to comprehend the complex structures of stories that are read to them before they can read on their own. In order to identify the meaning of messages received, the language instructors need to employ certain learning strategies and teaching materials to achieve the goal of learning languages (Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg, 2003; Hadley, 2001; Lin, 2002; Murphy & Youngs, 2004; Osada, 2004; Rost, 2002; Ur, 1984; Vandergrift, 2002). Moreover, teachers and students can create their own podcasts in the second language, which Sze (2006) pointed out motivates students and helps enhance their performance

1984; Vandergrift, 2002). Moreover, teachers and students can create their own podcasts in the second language, which Sze (2006) pointed out motivates students and helps enhance their performance.

In short, using podcasts in a language class helps learners to understand the content and to improve their proficiency and their listening comprehension.

Podcasts offer a ‘real-life listening’ source that allows all second language listeners to benefit from it. Constantine (2007) explained the importance of using podcasts in the L2 class:

Even at the beginning levels, learners can benefit from global listening even if they only listen from three to five minutes a day. Beginning students will be exposed to the new language . . .

The intermediate learner has a need for authentic texts and to be exposed to a variety of voices.

By the time learners reach the advanced stage, they must be able to learn from listening. (pp. 1-2)

McMinn (2008) also pointed out that language instructors are able to help learners to practice a foreign language outside the classroom by encouraging them to use podcasts to improve their language skills. Teachers sometimes use the same materials to enhance listeners’ performance over and over; in contrast, podcasts can present fresh ideas and motivation (Constantine, 2007).

Language instructors are required to help listeners to comprehend authentic texts; to do so, listening comprehension skill needs to be developed by exposing listeners to different discourses (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Kennedy & Trofimovich, 2008; Pearson & Fielding, 1983; Rivers, 1966; Rost, 2002; Ur, 1984). According to Trinkle (2008), students develop listening skills before they acquire reading skills. Moreover, they are able to comprehend the complex structures of stories that are read to them before they can read on their own. In order to identify the meaning of messages received, the language instructors need to employ certain learning strategies and teaching materials to achieve the goal of learning languages. Moreover, teachers and students can create their own podcasts in the second language, which Sze (2006) pointed out motivates students and helps enhance their performance.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of podcasts as a new method that helps learners of Arabic language develops their listening skills. Learners in my class are able to use their writing, reading, and speaking skills in the Arabic language, but they usually struggle to grasp the meaning and to understand all or part of a given speech; this affects their responses to messages. They cannot even listen to comprehend. Podcasts have the potential to help them improve their listening comprehension. With podcasts, they can hear different voices and discussion of different subjects in Arabic language class. The study answers the following questions:

1. Will the use of podcasts improve proficiency in listening comprehension?
2. Will the reading of stories improve proficiency in listening comprehension?
3. Will podcasts improve listening comprehension more than reading stories does?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several elements seem to influence listening comprehension in the second language class such as listening skills, the role of the listener’s experience in analyzing the message codes, and the teaching of listening comprehension, which includes the role of teacher and the use of technological tools.

1. LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Listening comprehension is a complex process that requires concurrent use of the knowledge and skills required for understanding. This study is based on the belief that “language is the means used by a community to express facts, ideas, beliefs, rules, and so on in short, to express its culture” (Anderson & Lynch, 1988, p. 35). In order to facilitate the process for listeners, Pearson and Fielding (1983) added ‘motivation’ as an element to aid them to focus on listening. Since listeners will be exposed to a variety of discourses in the second language, they need to be motivated to focus on listening. Nevertheless, as Anderson and Lynch (1988) pointed out, unless they build some specific knowledge in the second language, they will not be able to focus as they will face various types of difficulties in gaining new knowledge and in comprehending the meaning of messages received in the target language. In order to fill the comprehension gap, listeners need the ability to identify the meaning of messages received. Anderson and Lynch (1988) listed four kinds of listening skills that a listener needs to utilize

comprehending the meaning of messages received in the target language. In order to fill the comprehension gap, listeners need the ability to identify the meaning of messages received. Anderson and Lynch (1988) listed four kinds of listening skills that a listener needs to utilize while listening to a spoken language: (a) identify the spoken signals, (b) recognize a stream of speech as familiar words, (c) grasp the syntax and understand the meaning, and (d) apply his/her own linguistic knowledge in order to answer correctly.

2. THE ROLE OF THE LISTENER'S EXPERIENCE

The purpose of listening to speech in a second language is to identify the topic and to comprehend the complete meaning. Listeners' responses to messages can be affected if they are unable to decode the speech. As pointed out by Anderson and Lynch (1988), in order to gain greater understanding of speech, second language learners need to build background knowledge about its contextual, semantic, syntactic, phonological, and socio-cultural aspects. The researchers (Kennedy and Trofimovich (2008)) found that listeners with more second language experience understood more speech from the first language speakers and second language speakers than listeners with less experience. In order to understand the full meaning of speech in the target language, a learner must utilize a listening process that relies upon prior knowledge and the listener's experience, and must be capable of careful listening.

3. TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

Second language teachers have to implement new theories and listening activities into their teaching process to improve listening comprehension. Prelistening activities, according to Vandergrift (2002), can help listeners focus their attention on meaning while listening. These activities need to be taught by teachers familiar with the benefits of improving listening skills, and the listeners need to have some background knowledge about the target language as well. Since the goal is to help listeners to understand, teachers need to keep learners engaged in the learning process. For example, teachers could use the Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) method to introduce new vocabulary on a given topic and then expose them to listening tasks. Here, learners will be "‘monitoring comprehension’ and ‘evaluating’ their results afterwards" (Vandergrift, 2002, p. 3). Moreover, "students are encouraged to share individual routes leading to success; e.g., how someone guessed (inference) the meaning of certain words or how someone modified a particular strategy" (Vandergrift, 2002, p. 4). Thus, listening strategies should be clear for learners so that they may understand what is expected of them and how to achieve the main goal of a listening comprehension task.

To teach listening well, teachers should not use complicated prelistening and post listening activities during the process. The listener should not be overloaded with these types of activities (e.g., tests of memory). Ur (1984) focused on implementing 'real-life listening' into a language class in order to learn from different sources as a way to improve listening skills. In addition, teachers should integrate real-life listening into second language class which is extremely useful. According to Hadley (2001), teachers should always remember two things: (a) the purpose of listening to a given text, and (b) the level of competence of the students.

In short, the literature suggests that teaching listening comprehension is the most effective way to facilitate language learning for students and to help them build background knowledge.

3. THE ADVANTAGE OF USING PODCASTS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS

Listening activities using podcasts can have great effects as an authentic resource geared specifically toward each level, and teachers should encourage learners to use podcasts outside of the classroom on their iPods or cell phones or by downloading directly from the Internet. Moreover, learners should design their own listening activities and record their own podcasts to practice talking as much as possible about various topics related to their class, and then share these with peers in the classroom.

In summary, podcasts can be used for many purposes – to increase language learning through listening comprehension, discussion with peers, writing summaries, and to create recordings the target language to share with the class. Teachers should take into account that learners are 'digital natives,' and use technology to build their background knowledge and gain new knowledge. Moreover, podcasts are an important tool to use in the class to enhance listening comprehension because they are easy to use in the classroom and encourage long-term learning outside of class as well.

comprehension because they are easy to use in the classroom and encourage long-term learning outside of class as well.

5.1. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The aim of this study is to examine the effect of using podcasts to improve the listening comprehension skill of learners in an Arabic language class. Thirty-eight students (two groups of 19) participated. Data were obtained through pre- and posttests, which were used to measure the listening comprehension of children in an Arabic language class. The highest possible score was 14 points. Results indicated that podcasts affected the listening comprehension improvement of the experimental group. The research question, “Will the use of podcasts improve proficiency in listening comprehension?” was answered in the affirmative: there was a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups. In the experimental group, all posttest scores were higher than the pretest scores. The mean posttest score was 10.37, and the mean pretest score was 4.00, which was shown by a one-sample t-test to be a statistically significant improvement. Thus, we concluded that the use of podcasts helped raise students’ test scores.

In the control group, for all but two students, posttest scores were higher than pretest scores. The mean score of the posttest (7.79) was higher than the mean of the pretest (4.21). The one-sample t-test also determined that the improvement was statistically significant. Therefore, it was affirmed that there was improvement in test scores after 13 weeks even without treatment.

The mean scores for pretests were found to be essentially equal – 4.00 and 4.21 – for the experimental and control group, respectively. Applying the two-sample t-test to these two means indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between the two means. Therefore, age was found to have no effect on listening comprehension.

The posttest mean scores of the experimental group and the control group were found to be equal at 10.37 and 7.79, respectively. The two-sample t-test was used to determine which method is more effective in improving listening comprehension. The change in the mean score was found to be 3.38 for the control group and 6.37 for the experimental group, and was found to be statistically significant. Therefore, it was found that use of podcasts improved students’ listening comprehension.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Results indicated that podcasts affected the listening comprehension improvement of the experimental group. The research question, “Will the use of podcasts improve proficiency in listening comprehension?” was answered in the affirmative: there was a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups. In the experimental group, all posttest scores were higher than the pretest scores. The mean posttest score was 10.37, and the mean pretest score was 4.00. Thus, we concluded that the use of podcasts helped raise students’ test scores.

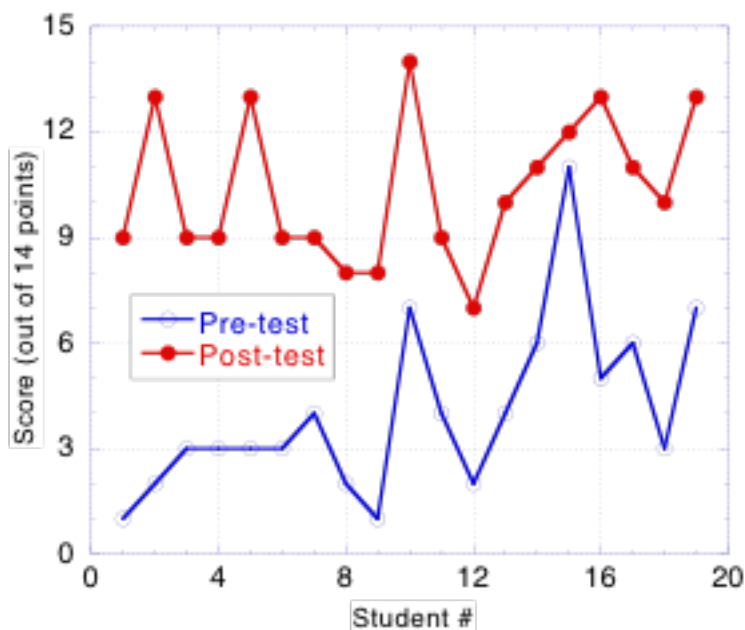


Figure 1. Fourth grade scores for pretest and posttest (experimental group).

In the control group, for all but two students, posttest scores were higher than pretest scores. The mean score of the posttest (7.79) was higher than the mean of the pretest (4.21). The

In the control group, for all but two students, posttest scores were higher than pretest scores. The mean score of the posttest (7.79) was higher than the mean of the pretest (4.21). The one-sample t-test also determined that the improvement was statistically significant. Therefore, it was affirmed that there was improvement in test scores after 13 weeks even without treatment.

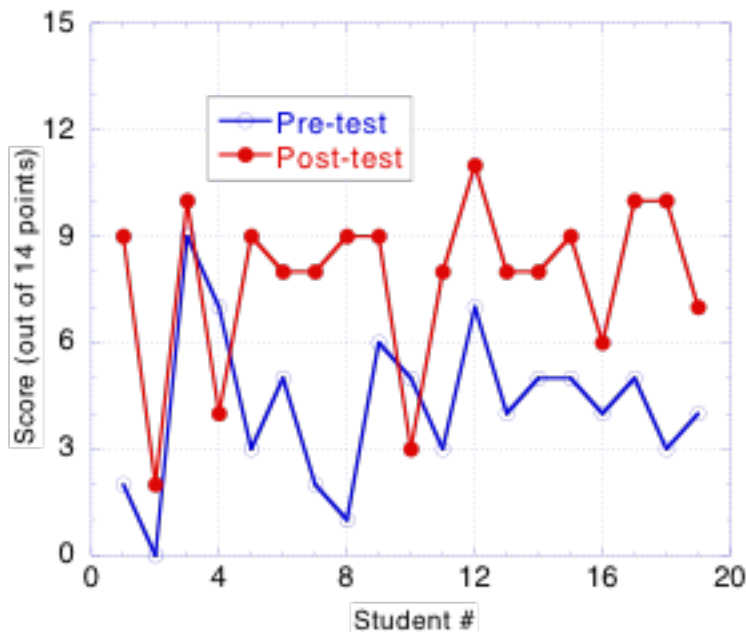


Figure 2. Fifth grade scores for pretest and posttest (control group).

The mean scores for pretests were found to be essentially equal – 4.00 and 4.21 – for the experimental and control group, respectively. Applying the two-sample t-test to these two means indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between the two means. Therefore, age was found to have no effect on listening comprehension.

The posttest mean scores of the experimental group and the control group were found to be equal at 10.37 and 7.79, respectively. The two-sample t-test was used to determine which method is more effective in improving listening comprehension. The change in the mean score was found to be 3.38 for the control group and 6.37 for the experimental group, and was found to be statistically significant. Therefore, it was found that use of podcasts improved students’ listening comprehension.

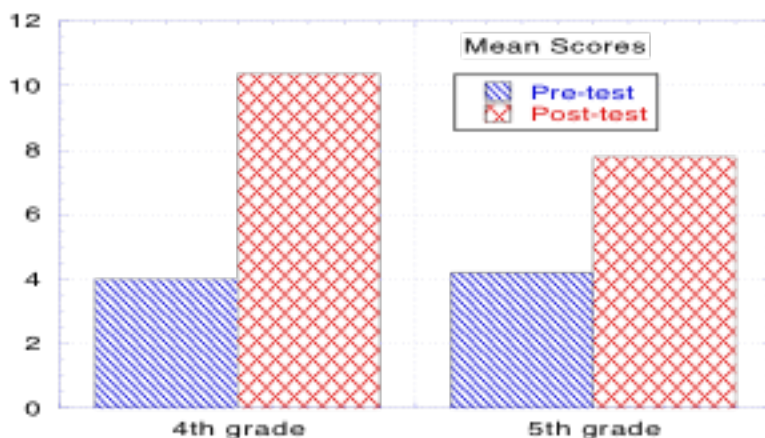


Figure 3. Mean scores of the experimental and control groups.

CONCLUSION

5.4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of podcasts to improve listening comprehension in an Arabic language class. Podcasts were found to be more significant in the experimental group. A pre- and posttest were used to collect data from 38 students. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. It was found that, in the experimental group, all of the posttest

Arabic language class. Podcasts were found to be more significant in the experimental group. A pre- and posttest were used to collect data from 38 students. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. It was found that, in the experimental group, all of the posttest scores were higher than the pretest scores, whereas in the control group, the posttest scores were higher than the pretest scores for all but two students. Thus the experimental group posttest scores showed more improvement than those of the control group.

In conclusion, the result of this study supports our primary idea about the effectiveness of using podcasts to improve listening comprehension in an Arabic classrooms; the experimental group (fourth grade) benefited from using podcasts as a teaching tool more than the control group (fifth grade), which used the reading of stories as a teaching tool. However, we recommend that podcasts be used in Arabic language class as a teaching tool to improve listening comprehension.

As a final point, all language skills are very important and the teacher should work to improve them. It was found that both methods (podcasts and reading of stories) improved all language skills. However, podcasts improved listening comprehension more than reading stories. This does not mean that listening comprehension is more important than reading comprehension. What it means is that Arabic teachers need to integrate podcasts into Arabic class to develop listening comprehension by increasing students' knowledge of the background, the linguistic system, and the content of context from a variety of voices. To do so, Arabic teachers need to be familiar with the technological tools and their purpose.

Furthermore, to help listeners to profit from podcasts, a good lesson plan is needed in addition to the activities of listening that will increase Arabic language learning and enable students to decode the meaning expected from speech

REFERENCES

- Anderson, A., & Lynch, T. (1988). *Listening*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Constantine, P. (2007). Podcasts: Another source for listening input. *The Internet TESL Journal*. Retrieved from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Constantine-PodcastListening.html>
- Hadley, A. O. (2001). *Teaching language in context*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Kennedy, S., & Trofimovich, P. (2008). Intelligibility, comprehensibility, and accentedness of L2 speech: The role of listener experience and semantic context. *La Revue Canadienne des Langues Vivantes [The Canadian Modern Language Review]*, 64(3), 459, 489.
- McMinn, S. W. J. (2008). *Podcasting possibilities: Increasing time and motivation in the language learning classroom*. Retrieved from <http://www.eife-l.org/publications/proceedings/ilf08/contributions/improving-quality-of-learning-with-technologies/McMinn.pdf>
- Pearson, D., & Fielding, L. (1983). *Instructional implications of listening comprehension research* (Reading Education Report No. 39). Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED227464.pdf>
- Sze, P. M.-M. (2006). Developing students' listening and speaking skills through ELT podcasts. *Education Journal*, 34(2). Retrieved from http://podcasterpaul.wikispaces.com/file/view/06_EI_EITPodcasts.pdf

- Sze, P. M.-M. (2006). Developing students' listening and speaking skills through ELT podcasts. *Education Journal*, 34(2). Retrieved from http://podcasterpaul.wikispaces.com/file/view/06_EJ_ELTPodcasts.pdf
- Trinkle, C. (2008). Listening comprehension leads to reading success. *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, 24, 43-45.
- Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching listening comprehension*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Vandergrift, L. (2002). *Listening: Theory and practice in modern foreign language competence*. Retrieved from www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/67