USING PODCASTS AND SONGS TO DEVELOP B1 LEARNERS’ LISTENING SKILLS

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Abstract: B1 learners of English often understand the general topic of a recording but lose detail, struggle with connected speech and give up when they miss a word. This literature-based article asks how podcasts and songs can be used in a structured way to support the development of listening skills at B1 level. Drawing on research on listening processes, Communicative Language Teaching and task-based language teaching, it argues that authentic audio is most useful when it is aligned with learner needs, listening sub-skills, staged tasks and formative feedback. The methodology is organised around three questions: who to teach, what to teach and how to teach. A 45-minute lesson, “Listening to a Podcast on Healthy Habits”, is proposed together with assessment criteria and digital tools. The pedagogical implication is that teachers should prepare learners before listening, guide repeated listening with clear purposes and help learners reflect on how they listen. The lesson has not been tested experimentally, and classroom-based research is needed to examine its usefulness.

Keywords: listening skills; podcasts; songs; B1 learners; authentic materials; Communicative Language Teaching; formative assessment; English language teaching

Introduction

Listening is the skill through which learners receive most of their input in a foreign language, yet it is often taught as a test of comprehension rather than as a skill that can be developed. Learners at B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) can usually follow the main points of clear, standard speech on familiar topics (Council of Europe, 2020). Their listening, however, often breaks down in real time: they stop to translate an unknown word, miss the next phrase, find fast or connected speech difficult to segment and lose confidence when they cannot replay the recording as often as they wish.

Podcasts and songs are popular sources of authentic English that learners can access outside the classroom (Harmer, 2015; Murphey, 1992). They are relevant to English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology because they bring together learner analysis,

content selection and classroom procedure, but unplanned use of such materials can easily become passive entertainment or a series of unrelated gap-fills. This article therefore examines the research question: *How can podcasts and songs be used in a structured way to support the development of listening skills among B1-level English language learners?* Its central argument is that authentic audio supports listening development when it is aligned with learner needs, listening sub-skills, staged tasks and formative feedback. The article has three aims: to identify the listening needs of B1 learners, to explain how authentic audio supports meaningful listening practice and to propose a structured lesson with appropriate assessment.

Listening is not a passive activity. Rost (2011) describes it as an active process in which listeners interpret speech using both what they hear and what they already know. Field (2008) distinguishes decoding, which turns the sound stream into words, from meaning building, which uses context and background knowledge, and argues that lower-level learners often devote so much attention to decoding that little remains for meaning. Goh (2000) similarly identifies ten real-time problems faced by second language listeners, including not recognising words they actually know, quickly forgetting what has just been heard and missing the next part of a message while still thinking about the previous one. Listening practice therefore needs to train both processes rather than only checking answers.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) holds that the goal of teaching is communicative competence rather than mastery of structures alone. Richards (2006) presents CLT as a set of principles, including attention to learners’ needs, meaningful use of language and the use of authentic materials alongside accuracy work. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) add a metacognitive perspective: learners improve when they plan how to listen, monitor their comprehension and evaluate their results, and a cycle of pre-listening prediction, repeated listening with different purposes and reflection can support this development. Songs, in turn, offer repetition, rhythm and emotional engagement, which Murphey (1992) links to memorable language and motivation.

In task-based language teaching (TBLT), Ellis (2003) defines a task as an activity with a primary focus on meaning, a gap and a communicative outcome beyond displaying

language. A listening activity qualifies as a task when learners must do something with what they hear, such as complete notes, make a decision or report to a partner, rather than only answer isolated questions. Willis (1996) proposes a framework of pre-task, task cycle and language focus, which parallels the pre-, while- and post-listening stages used in this article.

University learners at B1 level can typically follow clear speech on familiar topics but still find natural-speed recordings demanding (Council of Europe, 2020). Listening ability, vocabulary and confidence vary within a class, and it would be inappropriate to assume that all B1 learners find podcasts equally difficult or equally interesting. Needs should instead be investigated through short questionnaires on listening habits, a diagnostic listening task and observation. Learner analysis is thus the starting point for the other two decisions.

Content should reflect what learners need in order to understand real speech. Core listening sub-skills include listening for gist, listening for specific information, predicting content and inferring a speaker’s attitude (Field, 2008; Rost, 2011). Learners also benefit from guidance on features of connected speech, such as weak forms, linking and reduced sounds, and from lexical chunks and discourse markers (“to begin with”, “what I mean is”) that signal the structure of a talk. Listening strategies, such as predicting before listening, noting key words and continuing after a missed word, help learners cope with breakdowns (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Learners can also be given simple phrases for talking about what they heard, such as “I think the speaker will say…”, “The main idea is…”, “I missed that part” and “What I heard was…”. Material should be chosen for suitability: a short podcast extract with a clear topic and moderate speed for intensive work, and a song with clear lyrics for extension or home listening, always respecting licensing and copyright.

Structured listening can be implemented through five steps: learner needs analysis, pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening, and feedback with reflection. In pre-listening, the teacher activates vocabulary and invites predictions; in while-listening, learners first listen for gist and, after comparing answers, listen again for detail with a new purpose, which lowers the load of each listening (Field, 2008). The post-listening stage uses the content in speech or writing, and learners reflect on which strategies helped them. Formative feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998) highlights successful strategies and a few priority problems. This

sequence reflects CLT because meaning and authentic input remain central (Richards, 2006), and TBLT because listening has an outcome and is framed by pre-task and post-task stages (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). The three decisions thus form one chain: learner analysis determines the sub-skills and strategies selected as content, and the content shapes how preparation, repeated listening and feedback are organised.

This section proposes a 45-minute lesson, “Listening to a Podcast on Healthy Habits”. It is a pedagogical proposal derived from the literature and has not been tested experimentally. The target group is a B1 university class whose needs have been checked beforehand (see 3.1). The teacher selects or records a clear podcast extract of about three minutes on everyday healthy habits. By the end of the lesson, learners should be able to (1) identify the main idea of a short podcast extract; (2) note at least three specific details; (3) use one listening strategy when a word is missed; and (4) reflect on which strategy helped them most.

Pairs discuss how they usually listen to English outside class and what podcasts or songs they enjoy. This activates interest and lowers anxiety, so listening practice starts from familiar experience.

The teacher introduces six key words and phrases with pictures and short examples. Learners predict what the speaker will say about sleep, food and exercise. This provides the vocabulary and expectations identified in 3.2. Learners listen once and complete Task A below. Comparing answers with a partner allows them to confirm understanding before the teacher checks. Learners listen in two parts and complete the note-taking grid in Task B. After each part they compare notes, and the teacher replays short sections where many learners missed information. This is the core of the research question.

Task A: Listening for gist (first listening) **Listen once to the podcast extract. Decide who is speaking, what the main topic is and whether the speaker is giving advice, telling a story or describing a routine. Complete three multiple-choice items on the main idea and the speaker’s attitude. Compare answers with a partner and give one reason for each.**	**Task B: Listening for detail (second listening)** **Listen again in two short parts. Complete a note-taking grid with three habits, one reason for each and one number or time mentioned. Then check the notes with a partner, mark any gaps and decide which part you want to hear a third time.**

Pairs discuss which habit they would adopt and why, using information from the

podcast. The teacher then gives anonymised positive examples and two or three priority issues, such as missed weak forms or giving up after an unknown word, and learners name one strategy that helped them. Learners complete a digital exit ticket (or paper slip) naming three details they remember and one listening strategy they will try next time. As extension, learners listen at home to a song with clear lyrics and complete a short gap-fill or summary task.

Assessment criteria should match the lesson objectives (Buck, 2001). *Understanding of main ideas* considers whether learners identify the topic, purpose and speaker’s attitude. *Understanding of specific details* considers the accuracy and completeness of notes. *Use of listening strategies* considers prediction, note-taking and recovery after missed words. *Reflection* considers whether learners can explain what helped or hindered their listening. Short descriptor scales informed by CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020) allow formative comments rather than only scores (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Podcast apps allow learners to slow playback slightly, replay short segments and use transcripts for checking after listening; online quizzes can check recognition of key vocabulary; and digital exit tickets provide quick reflection data. Learners’ listening logs should be used only for learning, and no one should be required to share personal listening history. Teachers should use materials that are legally available for educational use. Where devices or connectivity are limited, teachers can play recordings through a classroom speaker, and paper exit slips, printed transcripts and checklists are suitable offline alternatives.

Discussion

Podcasts and songs have clear pedagogical potential: they provide authentic input, offer varied accents and topics, and can be revisited outside class. Challenges remain. Learners differ in proficiency and confidence, so tasks can be offered at two levels and extra replays can be allowed. Authentic recordings can be too fast or contain unfamiliar cultural references; pre-teaching key vocabulary, choosing short extracts and using transcripts after listening may reduce this risk. Without a clear task, listening can easily become passive, so each listening needs a purpose and an outcome. Classroom time is limited, so the stages are

kept short and the lesson uses only one extract. Song lyrics may be unclear or unsuitable in register, and teachers should use legally available audio and preview lyrics carefully. Most importantly, the lesson has not been evaluated in a classroom, and no claim is made that it improves listening; classroom-based research, such as action research with comprehension tasks and learner reflections, is needed.

Conclusion

Structured use of podcasts and songs can support B1 learners’ listening skills by providing authentic input together with preparation, repeated purposeful listening and formative feedback. The argument developed here is that three decisions must be connected: investigating who the learners are, selecting the sub-skills and strategies they need, and choosing procedures that move from support to independence. Authentic audio should therefore be carefully staged and accompanied by assessment criteria that reflect the lesson objectives. Whether it produces measurable gains remains a question for future research.

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