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The Role of Podcasts in Enhancing Listening Skills Among B1 Students through SBI

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Abstract. *B1 learners can follow familiar topics but often struggle with fast, unscripted speech. This article argues that podcasts are a practical way to close this gap and adopts Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI) as its main approach and organises the discussion around three questions: who to teach, what to teach and how to teach. It draws on The Teaching of Listening Comprehension (British Council, 1981) and the Authentic Listening Resource Pack (Hancock & McDonald, 2014), and ends with a classroom framework for B1 teachers.*

Key words: podcasts; Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI); listening comprehension; B1 level; authentic materials; listening strategies; task grading; spoken English; learner autonomy

Introduction

Listening is often called the “forgotten skill” of language learning. Learners spend years with recordings that are clear, slow and carefully scripted, and then meet real speech outside the classroom, where speakers hesitate, repeat themselves and speak quickly. B1 students feel this gap strongly: they have enough grammar and vocabulary for everyday conversation, yet they often say that native speakers “speak too fast”. Podcasts offer a way to bridge it. They are free, cover almost every topic, include many accents and speaking styles, and can be paused and replayed as often as the learner needs.

The 1981 British Council collection predates podcasting, but it deals with questions that remain central: what makes a text authentic, which strategies efficient listeners use, and how tasks should be designed. The modern resource pack is aimed at B1–B2 learners and uses authentic audio and video, short “micro-listening” extracts and a range of accents (Hancock & McDonald, 2014). Together they provide a sound basis for answering the three questions below.

Approach: SBI. The approach adopted here is Strategies-Based Instruction (SBI), a learner-focused approach in which strategy training is combined with everyday classroom instruction so that learners understand how to learn more effectively and can transfer strategies to new contexts (Cohen, 1998; Cohen, n.d.). Cohen describes five phases: strategy preparation, awareness-raising, training, practice and personalisation. This idea matches Rixon’s (1981) “listening strategies route”, which she presents alongside the language-skills route. SBI is combined here with graded tasks (Fish, 1981) and with intensive in-class and extensive independent listening.

Who to teach? The B1 learner

At B1, learners are in what Rixon (1981) calls the “middle ground”. They have enough English to take in some new information at first hearing, and enough knowledge of the world to build a framework that supports them when their linguistic understanding is incomplete. A podcast on a familiar topic such as travel, food, study or technology uses exactly this combination of language and world knowledge.

Fish (1981) reminds us that a student comes to class with two vital assets: knowledge and experience of the world, and a well-developed set of language strategies in the mother tongue, which are rarely used in the foreign-language class. B1 learners also have a motivational need. Many fail to see the relevance of school language compared with the “real language” they experience outside class (Fish, 1981). A podcast made by real speakers for real listeners shows that English is a living medium, and because episodes are short and downloadable, students can listen on a phone, on the way to school or at home, which turns a classroom skill into a habit. Finally, B1 learners often underestimate what they can already understand, so they need tasks that show them what they can do rather than what they cannot.

What to teach?

Authentic language, used authentically. Podcasts are authentic in the sense Fish (1981, p. 108) uses the term: material "not initially designed for language-learning purposes". However, authenticity is not only a property of the recording. Besse (1981) separates the integrality of a text, meaning that it is not cut or altered, from the conditions of its original production and reception, and he speaks of "pedagogical authenticity": the more the classroom use of a text differs from that of its original audience, the less authentic it becomes. Nakić (1981) says the same in practical terms: "when choosing material for listening we should not merely ask where the text is from… but also what happens to it in class." The first thing to teach, then, is listening for a real purpose, such as finding advice, comparing opinions or collecting information for a discussion.

Listening strategies. Rixon (1981) describes what an efficient listener does: decide why he is listening, predict the information he expects, judge what is new and what is already known, and decide which parts of the message are relevant. When a part is not understood, the listener can wait for a rewording, guess, consult a dictionary or a colleague, or, as a last resort, give up; students must be prevented from giving up too soon. Nakić (1981) warns that classroom texts which are always below the learner's level give no chance to develop "prediction, selection" and similar strategies. Podcasts support this teaching well, because titles and descriptions allow prediction and hosts frequently rephrase and explain.

Features of real spoken English. Nakić (1981) notes that learners meet repetitions, pauses and unfinished sentences and do not know what to ignore, so a hesitation sound can seem as important as an unknown word. B1 learners therefore need explicit work on fillers, false starts, linking, reduced forms and different accents. The resource pack makes exactly this its focus, offering strategies for understanding fast, spontaneous speech and highlighting features of spoken English and pronunciation (Hancock & McDonald, 2014).

How to teach?

Grade the task, not the text. A frequent objection is that real podcasts are too difficult for B1. Nakić's experiment with eleven-year-old beginners is encouraging: although the interview was far above their linguistic level, they understood the essential information after two hearings because the task was attainable. They listened for who was speaking, what the topic was and the speaker's attitude to a few key items. Fish (1981, p. 108) turns this into a principle: "instead of grading the language we are now grading the activity the student has to do in connection with a piece of real language." For B1 learners this means that a ten-minute podcast can be used if the task is limited to, for instance, identifying the speakers, noting three numbers or deciding whether the host agrees with a guest.

Use a three-stage cycle within SBI. The table below combines these ideas into a procedure for a podcast episode of three to ten minutes, in class or as homework. In SBI terms, the "before" stage corresponds to strategy awareness-raising and planning, the "during" stage to strategy training and practice, and the "after" stage to evaluation and personalisation of the strategies used (Cohen, n.d.).

Stage	Learner activity	Source of the idea
Before	State a purpose for listening, predict three points or words, and note what is already known about the topic.	Rixon (1981): purpose, prediction, "new versus known"
During	First listen for gist only; then replay a short segment for one specific detail; guess and mark doubtful words.	Fish (1981): graded activity; Hancock & McDonald (2014): micro-listening
After	Compare answers in pairs, check against the transcript, then re-listen to notice features such as linking and hesitation.	Rixon (1981): group sharing of strategies; Hancock & McDonald (2014)

Use short segments and repetition. The resource pack divides recordings into segments and micro-listening extracts so that learners can work on a few seconds of fast speech at a time (Hancock & McDonald, 2014). With a podcast, the teacher can choose a short extract, replay it and let learners compare what they heard with a transcript afterwards. The transcript is for checking, not for reading while listening.

Do not turn listening into a test. Fish (1981) observes that most materials for receptive skills in fact test rather than teach, and that “first listen, second answer the questions” is a school activity rather than a life activity. After listening, learners should respond as real listeners would: discuss, recommend, summarise for a friend or compare views. Short reflection prompts such as “What did you expect to hear? What helped you understand a difficult part?” help learners see their own progress.

A sample 45-minute lesson. The teacher chooses a five-minute podcast extract on a familiar topic, for example how students spend their free time. In the first ten minutes learners discuss the topic, read the episode title and predict three ideas or words they expect to hear. In the next fifteen minutes they listen twice: the first time for gist (Who is speaking? What is the main topic?), the second time for one detail (two reasons, three numbers or the speaker’s opinion). Learners then compare answers in pairs, which Rixon (1981) values because it moves the class from individual effort to sharing strategies. In the final fifteen minutes the teacher plays a twenty-second extract of fast speech several times, learners write what they hear, and the class checks it against the transcript and notices linking and reduced forms. The lesson ends with a short discussion in which students react to the content, not to the questions.

Build autonomy gradually. In week one the teacher selects the episode and models the cycle. In week two learners choose between two episodes on a shared theme and report their main points to a partner. In week three they select their own podcast and keep a listening log recording the purpose, the strategies used and one new feature of spoken English. For selection, the best criteria are a familiar topic, one clear subject, two speakers rather than a crowded panel, and an interesting theme: Nakić (1981) observed that learners found her lesson engaging because the content was interesting and the difficulty stimulated intellectual effort.

Challenges

Podcasts are not a complete solution, and teachers should expect four typical problems. First, speed and accent: some speakers are too fast or too idiomatic. The answer is to start with clear presenters or learner-oriented episodes, to use short segments and to repeat them, as the resource pack does. Second, perfectionism: learners may become discouraged if they try to understand every word. Nakić (1981) shows that teachers used to “all-purpose” classroom texts often ask for full understanding and reproduction, which is far above what learners can do, whereas a comprehension aim such as gist and a few key details is realistic. Third, cultural background: a podcast may assume knowledge that learners do not have, and Besse (1981) reminds us that the conditions of original reception cannot be fully transferred to the classroom, so the teacher should provide a short introduction to the topic. Fourth, loss of authenticity: if every episode is followed by the same set of questions, podcast listening becomes another school exercise. Varying the response, with discussion, recommendation or summary, keeps the purpose real.

Recommendations. For teachers working with B1 groups, five practical steps follow from the discussion. Start every listening with a purpose and a prediction task. Choose short episodes on familiar topics and let students vote on them. Set one achievable task per hearing instead of many questions. Teach and name one strategy and one feature of spoken English in each lesson, such as fillers or linking. Finally, encourage students to continue outside class with a simple log, so that the classroom cycle becomes an independent habit.

Conclusion

Podcasts can play a significant role in developing B1 listening because they combine authentic language, learner control and wide choice of topic. Using SBI as the main approach, the three questions can be answered as follows: the learners to teach are B1 students who have language and world knowledge but lack confidence with real speech; the content to teach is authentic listening for a purpose, listening strategies and the features of spoken English; and the method is explicit strategy instruction through graded tasks, short segments, a before–during–after cycle and gradual autonomy. Further classroom research could measure the effect of regular podcast listening on learners’ comprehension and confidence.

Question	Answer for B1 learners and podcasts
Who?	B1 learners with a basic language base and world knowledge, who need confidence and relevance.
What?	Listening for a real purpose, strategies (predict, select, guess), and features of spoken English.
How?	Graded tasks, short segments, before–during–after cycle, real responses and growing autonomy.

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