

## *Using Podcasts for Extensive Listening to Improve Students' Listening Skills*

### **Abstract:**

This research aims at introducing an alternative method for teaching and learning English listening skills using podcasts. On a basis of a survey method, two classes of students at Hanoi University of Business and Technology (HUBT) attended in this survey. Questionnaires and journal entries are used to collect data for this research. The results suggested that just a half of respondents have habits of practicing listening outside classroom. Though podcast seems to be a new tool for them, the pros and cons of extensive listening using podcast was revealed by one month experiment.

### **I. Introduction**

The advancement in information and technology has revolutionized English teaching and learning approaches; learners of English these days can easily make use of their personal electronic devices to study English. In teaching and learning English listening skills, podcasts are said to provide English learners extra listening practice both inside and outside classrooms. They offer students audios and videos listening files with authentic and contextual materials, then students' listening comprehension ability can be increased by time. Especially, they bring students opportunities to practice listening in a self directed manner, and at their own places that means *extensive listening* activities outside classroom with interesting topics podcasts which can be downloaded automatically from free of charge podcasts websites, according to Kavaliauskienė & Anusienė (2009).

Discussing about extensive listening, Harmer (2001) asserts that students can improve their listening skills through combination of both extensive and intensive listening materials and procedures. Extensive listening can help learners to develop fluency, while accuracy in their listening ability can be enhanced through practicing this extensively. Both fluency and accuracy are necessary for students who long for achieving listening competence. However, neither extensive listening seems to be practiced much by students, nor they are aware of benefits of listening outside classroom. To some extents, this matter may be believed to be caused by lack of suitable and interesting EL sources. Currently, it is a question in our mind that whether podcasts can be a suitable and interesting source for EL or not. In spite of benefits of podcasts and

extensive listening in teaching and learning listening skills along with their popularity in the world, it is obvious that they still are a very new medium and activity with most of our country's teachers and students. Then, applicability of podcasts and extensive listening in Vietnamese educational context need researching.

In accordance with mentioned reasons, the researcher urged to conduct a study on the topic: *“Using podcasts for extensive listening to improve students’ listening skills”*. This study was conducted to seek the answers for these following questions:

1. What is current situation of students’ extensive listening practice?
2. What are students’ perceptions of using podcasts for extensive listening to improve listening skills?

**Sub questions:**

- Are there any problems that encountered by students when listening to podcasts extensively?
- Do students agree that podcasts are suitable for extensive listening activity?
- Do students agree that podcasts are useful tool for improving listening skills?
- Which podcasting websites are most interested in by students?
- Will students continue to listen to podcasts extensively in the future?

## **II. Literature Review**

### **1. Extensive and intensive listening**

In listening skills, intensive listening and extensive listening are two terms of distinctive features. As Ferrato and White (n. y) suggests distinguishing intensive and extensive listening, the author provided the following table which concisely summarizes the differences between two being discussed different types of listening.

<b>Contrasting intensive and extensive listening</b>		
<b>Intensive</b>	<b>Types of listening</b>	<b>Extensive</b>
Accuracy	GOAL	Fluency
Listen to details/ special information ; mimic texts; improve and develop listening strategies	PURPOSE	Get general information; enjoy; build word recognition ability; chunking language into meaningful units of sound.
Sounds, words, and pronunciation- linking, connected speech; notice new language features	FOCUS	Meaning; global comprehension
Often difficult; shorter passages; teacher chooses	MATERIAL	Easy; longer passage; learner chooses
Not much	AMOUNT	A lot
Slower	SPEED	Faster
Must finish; time constraints	METHOD	Stop if don't like; rewind and repeat- listen again and again

***Table 1: The differences between extensive and intensive listening***

This distinction is believed to be useful in differentiating between two different listening approaches and also highlighting the benefits of each in teaching and learning listening skills. Harmer (2001) alleges, students' listening skills can be enhanced through a combination of extensive and intensive listening materials and procedures. However, while intensive listening receives a lot of attention from educators and learners, less notice is taken of extensive listening in spite of its substantial merits.

## **2. Benefits of extensive listening**

As asserted by Waring (2008), extensive listening is a way to improve listening fluency, and building fluency means building your listening speed. In other words, students could be able to understand almost everything at the level they are listening through practice of EL. Ferrato and White (n.y:20) show six benefits that extensive listening offering learners including: increasing exposure to spoken English- ideally to many varieties; enhancing rate of recognition- making sense of what they hear, enriching vocabulary and depth of word knowledge, especially when listening and reading at the same time, improving comprehension when listening and reading at the same time, developing pronunciation skills, both receptively and productively, and building up listening perseverance.

The benefits of pronunciation were explained in the study of Trofimovich, Lightbown, Halter, and Song (2009:632, as cited in Borges 2010) that did a research on two groups. The experimental group followed a comprehension- based program and the second was still a typical learning language program. In addition, Yonezawa and Ware (2008, cited in Borges 2010) carry out an extensive listening study using six university classes. They did pre- and post-listening tests plus two surveys. The majority of students in that study reported that doing EL and shadowing was effective in enhancing their English. Moreover, EL also has been proved to bring advantage of flexibility in terms of where and when it can be done as written by Antle (2010). In other words, students can engage in EL while driving or walking or even in noisy locations by using headphones. Additionally, Cutting (2004) points out that learners are empowered to decide their goals, choose their own materials, evaluate the effectiveness of their own learning. They are then in a better position to initiate learning based on personal needs, priorities and preferences. Besides, EL practice can develop students' metacognitive skills for language learning as well.

## **3. Podcasts**

Podcast is a modern digital technology that can be used effectively for language teaching and learning purposes. According to Robinson (2009) the term podcast is a combination of two words: *Pod* mean *iPod*- the name of popular MP3 player and *Broadcasting*. As he defines, podcasts are audio or video files on the web which can be freely downloaded to a computer and listened to on a computer or any portable playback device that supports MP3 files.

Based on the different file types of podcasts, they are divided into three main types are audio only, audio and still images, and video. However, regarding to podcasts' producers, Man (2007) classifies them into two types are *radio podcasts* and *independent podcasts*. Existing radio programs that turn into podcasts are called as radio podcasts such as RTHK- radio television Hong Kong. In contrast, web- based podcasts produced by individuals and organizations are defined as independent podcasts. These podcasts are proved to have huge potential for English language teaching, and then they are called ELT podcasts. ELT podcasts are said to be the most suitable for extensive listening though they can also be potential sources for intensive listening, as indicated by Stanley (2006). The researcher then divides ELT podcasts into three smaller types as below:

**Authentic podcasts:** which are often not aimed at ELT students but are believed to be a potential source for listening. Although many podcasts belonging to this type seem to be more suitable for advanced students, some others are ideal for upper and lower level ones.

**Teacher- created podcasts:** are created by teachers and usually aim to support students' learning by producing listening content not being available elsewhere.

**Students- created podcasts:** are produced by students, often with teacher help. However, concerning about ELT podcasts' content, Man (2007) shows different content types of ELT podcasts such as comprehensive, whole lessons, vocabularies, idioms, conversations with transcripts, and so on..

In this paper, the researcher employed the perspective of Man (2007) and focused on researching ELT podcasts.

#### **4. Basic usages of podcast in education**

As claimed by Thomas (2006) podcast might bring a new paradigm of teaching and learning. With podcasts students can actually ruminate, and listen again to lectures and tutorials as a way of encouraging critical, analytical approaches. Podcasts are a rich source for authentic materials that could be utilized in teaching and as well learning foreign languages.

In 2007, Gura & King (cited in Bartoš, 2008) points out that podcasts bring new chances for educators to discover the areas of teaching which are attractive but seems not to be actually tried by teachers. They can use podcasts for sharing their ideas and suggestions to improve their

method of teaching. More than that, regarding to students, podcasting is said to be alternative method of learning that can help to enhance their listening skills. Patten & Craig (2007) alleges that the use of podcasts empower students to manage their own time that means it enables them to learn at a time that the best suits them the best, take control over their learning, manage the speed of their learning during predefined lecture times. Clearly, Bartoš (2008) proposes in his paper that podcasts can be basically used for lectures recording, independent learning, and project- based learning as well.

### **III. Methodology**

The study was divided into two phases. In the first phase, the researcher's purpose is to discover the students' practice of extensive listening. In second phase, the researcher aimed at finding answers for the second questions about perceptions of students on using Podcasts for extensive listening to improve listening skills. Then, different instruments were employed in two phases, survey questionnaires were used in the phase one to seek for answer to the first research question and journal entries and open-ended questionnaire to the left question.

**Phase one:** With the participation of 49 senior students from two classes at HUBT. In the final year at the university they were expected to be at the Pre- intermediate level. The questionnaire contains totally six questions of which four questions (1, 2, 6) are multiple choice ones with question number two that can be answered by circling more than one option, two left ones; however, are expected to be answered by circling only one among given options. For questions 3, 4 and 5, with each given option in each question, respondents are asked to express their frequency of use by scoring them according to a Likert scale from one to five that referenced from the research on extensive reading by Tran (2009). According to her, this scale not only helps to save time and space but also allows participants to give more specific answers than many other types of close ended questions common used in survey questionnaires and raises accuracy of data interpretation as well.

**Phase two:** The focus group of five voluntary senior students among respondents in the first phase participated in this phase by experiencing podcasts extensively in a month. Journal entries and open-ended questionnaire were employed to collect data. The journal entries contain two main questions. The first one is to ask participants about names, length, website addresses, and

main contents of podcasts that they listen to. With this question, the purpose of the researcher is not only to check for their participation in EL experiment, but also to investigate their often-listen websites, podcasts' length, topics. Regarding to question number two, its responsibility is to seek for students' often- met problems while listening to podcasts extensively day by day, and podcast by podcast. Then, the second question will be along with the data from the same question conducted in the open-ended questionnaire at the end to make the most relevant and sufficient answer.

#### **IV. Findings and Discussions**

##### **1. What is current situation of students' extensive listening practice?**

The first question of the survey questionnaire dealt with the aim to group students based on their EL practice in order to decide which questions they have to answer next. When students were asked whether they have practiced EL or not, 51% of respondents gave the answer “Yes”. The rest of them (49% of total population) truthfully admitted that they have not done EL outside classroom. Thus, those students with the answer “ No” would move to answer question two focusing on examining reasons for their unpracticed EL while others with the answer “Yes” were asked to finish question three, four, five, and six of the questionnaire to reveal the truth about reasons, sources, tools, activities, and time for their EL.

##### **Survey question 2: Reasons for students' not practicing EL**

<b>Items</b>	<b>The number of students</b>	<b>The percentage of students</b>
A.You are too busy.	24/24	100%
B. You are lack of encouragement to do extensive listening.	23/24	95.8%
C. You cannot find suitable sources for your EL.	20/24	83.3%
D. You do not have equipments for your EL.	0/24	0%
E. You are not aware of benefits of EL.	11/24	45.8%
F. Others: .....	0/24	0%

**Table 2: Reasons for students' not practicing EL**

Clearly, all students did not practice EL because of being busy. Senior students had to study a wide range of subjects accompanied with a large number of tasks, assignments.. Consequently, it seemed to be hard for them to have time for EL activity. Falling together in the second position was the items B and C. To be specific, 95.8% of all students admitted that they did not have and had not enough motivation; besides, seeking for suitable EL sources prevented them from EL. Possibly, practicing with unsuitable listening files make them bored and then give up listening extensively. Furthermore, most of them were believed to be in need of being encouraged by teachers first, then maybe friends, parents, and so forth for EL outside classroom like teacher's assignments for their listening, friends' sharing, or some kinds of encouragements from their parents, and so on. In addition to three above reasons, unawareness of this listening activity's benefits was the fourth reason that could explain for their unexpected habits whereas lack of equipment was not a reason for their not practicing EL.

**Survey question 3: Students' EL sources**

<b>EL sources</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>
A. Audio books	2.67	3	3
B. Films and movies	3.11	4	3
C. Songs	<b>3.67</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
D. Radio news	2.56	2	2
E. Podcasts	<b>1.49</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
F. TV programs	2.62	2	3
G. Course books' tapes	2.73	4	3

**Table 3: Students' EL sources**

In regarding of EL sources, the data collected indicated that Songs along with films and movies were the most attracted with by our senior students with mean= 3.67 and 3.11 respectively. Most of students said that they employed songs for EL “usually” (mode= 4) and Films and movies “sometimes” only (mode=3). Follow these two EL sources; course books' tapes, audio books, TV programs, and radio news were the less popular sources for participants'

listening outside classroom respectively with the low scores ( mean= 2.73, 2.67, 2.62, 2.56 respectively). Finally, Podcasts were the left one that receive the lowest score (mean= 1.49) which indicated that they were not popular among students. As a result, a larger number of them “never” used Podcasts for EL clearly expressed through the score of mode=1. After all, it might be concluded that among mentioned EL sources. Songs and films and movies were the most popular ones; and the least common one for students was podcasts which are said to be not only common but also hot in the world for teaching and learning English now.

**Survey question 4: Students’ EL tools**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>
A. Cell phone	3.02	3	4
B. Computer	<b>3.62</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
C. DVD player	2.67	3	4
D. iPod	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
E. MP3, MP4	2.62	3	4
F. Radio	2.42	2	2
G. Television	1.8	2	2

*Table 4: Students’ EL tools*

In term of tools for EL, the above table showed that students mostly listened extensively via their computers by the high score, mean= 3.62, and mode=4. When entering the university, most of students are equipped with computers, so it is believed to be one of the most useful tools for their studying. Therefore, this tool was used most frequently for listening to English outside classroom could be foreseen. The nearest below was cellphone which was less used, gets mean= 3.02. With the lowest score, mean= 1.6, iPods were named as the hardly- used EL tool. Especially, most of senior students admitted that they “never” listened extensively via this tool (mode=1). Others left tools including Cell phone, MP3 MP4, Radio, and Television also were equipments for participants’ EL but only occasionally.

**Survey question 5: Students’ activities while listening extensively**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>
A. Nothing, just listen	2.96	3	4
B. Take notes	2.4	2	1
C. Read <i>transcripts, subtitles, lyrics, ...</i>	<b>3.13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
D. Read or sing along	2.76	3	2
E. Do exercises or housework	2.38	2	2

***Table 5: Students' activities while listening extensively***

While doing EL, most of students had habits to read transcripts (audio books, TV programs, and so forth); subtitles (films, movies); and lyrics (songs)...that proved obviously through the scores Mean= 3.13 and Mode= 4. The activities that got least attention of students were doing exercise and housework, taking notes (mean=2.38, 2.4, and mode=2, 1 respectively). Other activities that also were done while listening but only occasionally and sometimes were just listening, reading or singing along with the materials. In conclusion, students' activities while listening extensively were various. Among them, reading transcripts, subtitles, lyrics...was the most common activity for students, and doing exercises or housework and taking notes were not popularly taken place.

## **2. What are students' perceptions of using podcasts for extensive listening to improve listening skills?**

This question was answered by five sub questions that revealed problems students encountered while listening to podcasts, their attitudes towards using podcasts for EL activity, and their attitudes towards the use of podcasts for improving listening skills, their favorite podcasting sites, and their intentions for listening to podcasts in the future. All results for these will be orderly presented below.

### **2.1. Problems encountered by students while listening to podcasts extensively**

The answer for this sub research question was collected from both journal entries and open-ended questionnaire. Via these two instruments, several common problems students encountered were revealed. *The first one was related to the presence of new vocabulary items.* Some Podcasts

contained a large number of new words, even some words were not found in the dictionary. Consequently, they did not understand those podcasts' content fully and sometimes induce them to the thought of giving up. *Besides, the length of podcast also caused trouble for students.* For student A, Podcasts that she listened to were so long, and then it resulted in her not regular listening because she had a large amount of homework to do in her time off from the class time. *Alternatively, the voice and speaking speed of speakers make podcast difficult for students.* It took them much of time to play the podcasts again and again in order to catch most of important words for understanding because of the speaker exotic voice and fast speed from some podcasts. Another difficulty was *choosing suitable podcasts.* Finally, lack of encouragement was also the problem. They further explained that no check, no evaluation from EL teacher caused them not often listen to podcasts. For what students mentioned, it is necessary for teachers to create more incentives for EL so that benefits of listening to podcasts could be obtained more.

## **2.2. Students' attitudes towards using podcasts for EL activity**

Five participants all agreed that podcasts were suitable for their EL outside classroom. When being asked for the reasons why they believed podcasts suit EL, they expressed some common ideas. *First, they could listen to podcasts anytime and anywhere.* Actually, by downloading functions, they were able to download podcasts into their computers or cell phones to listen again whenever and wherever they liked. *Second, most of podcasts are regularly updated was what* written by three students: A, C, and E. As they said when podcasts were posted frequently, their contents, and the amount of information that they transferred would be updated as well. This actually attracted listeners and made podcasts become one of the most suitable sources for EL outside classroom. Third, all five subjects admitted podcasts offered them *variety of listening levels, speakers' voices, and topics.* According to them, that gave them more choices for EL than other sources. *Fourth, podcasts are free of charge.* Student C said that she thought podcasts were suitable for EL because there were no money having to be paid for listening to them. Then she could listen how much and which podcasts she liked without any wonder. *Finally, subscribing function* is one more reason why students asserted that podcasts were suitable for EL outside classroom. Student A pointed out that subscribing ability of podcasting websites was one of the factors that motivated her to do EL outside classroom though she did not know about podcasts

beforehand. The fact was that whenever the computer informed her about a new podcast she always assessed to it and listened immediately. To her, it was like a reminder.

### 2.3. Students' attitudes towards the use of podcasts for improving listening skills

As results were collected from open-ended questionnaire, five of students all asserted that in their opinions, podcasts were useful source for improving listening skills, especially when being listened extensively outside classroom. Several benefits of listening to podcasts therefore were disclosed. Firstly, *all participants were aware that listening to podcasts extensively not only enrich their English vocabulary but also wider their background knowledge.* With various topics, podcasts actually were believed to able to improve listeners' vocabulary. Via news, they also accumulate more knowledge about the world around, which supported their studying no little. Besides, *Podcasts make them familiar with speakers' different voices; hence, students' fluency in listening was increased.*

### 2.5. Students' favorite podcast sites

Podcasting websites that students were interested in are listed as below:

<http://www.eslplod.com/website/index.php> - (liked by student A, C, and E)

<http://a4esl.org/podcasts/> - (liked by student B)

<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/podcast.html> - (liked by student C)

<http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/> - (liked by student D)

### 2.6. Students' intention of listening to podcasts extensively in the future

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E
Yes	√	√	√		√
No				√	

**Table 6: Students' intention of whether continue to listen to podcasts or not**

Among five participants, student D was the only one who would not continue to listen to podcasts. Although realizing benefits of podcasts, she cannot arrange her time for extensive

listening. Also, her part-time job helped her much in enhancing her listening skills because most of her customers were foreigners. In contrast, four students: A, B, C, E all asserted they were going to continue to listen to podcasts extensively since they were obviously aware of their benefits and actually attracted by them through the four-week experiment.

### **3. Pedagogical implications**

The findings from the first phase of the study imply several things that could be done to better students' practice of extensive listening.

Firstly, teachers had better raise students' awareness of EL's benefits, giving incentives, offering and suggesting suitable sources for EL to make EL become habit and interest of students outside classroom. Harmer (2001) says that teacher should pay attention to foster students listening motivation from which their love for listening could be developed, accordingly they will feel more enjoyable instead of considering it compulsory and tiring task. He then suggests some following methods for teacher on the way to bring more encouragement to students. For example, asking students to record their responses to what they have heard in their personal journals- which are nearly similar with which are used as one of data collected tools of the study. Additionally, learners should be inquired to fill in the report forms prepared by teachers and list topics, assess levels of difficulty, as well as summarize contents of tapes weekly. Besides, Perez et al (2011) advises that students can be assigned to use individual blog, the cooperative bog or facebook discussion group while practicing EL with podcasts outside classroom which are believed not only to raise interaction, motivation, encouragement among students, but also to allow the teacher to observe students' real practice, their reflection for teacher's assessment and improvement in teaching. From the researcher's own experience, teacher can assign students to peer interview podcast or group presentation podcast activities. These involve searching the podcast topics of interest and designing listening questions with answer keys to their partners or classmates. While completing these tasks with teacher's supports, students can be enjoyable and motivating because they cannot only practice and improve their listening competence themselves but feel in the role of an instructor to assist others.

Additionally, teacher seems to be the most supportive assistant, instructor, guides, advisor who could give students useful advices, offer them appreciated podcasting websites that suit their

listening levels, studied contents, among wide range of freely provided podcasting websites. In spite of worldwide popularity of podcasts in teaching and learning. The table in appendix 5 is created by the researcher herself through her own research on podcasting websites on the Internet which may partially help students and teachers to solve presented problems.

Secondly, as presented in the findings, music, movies are preferred by almost students. Those, however are not especially designed for learning and teaching listening. Thus, it is suggested that other educationally designed sources of EL should be employed in their EL more often, specifically EL activities such as course book's tapes, audio books, or podcasts.

Thirdly, listening amount should also be taken under consideration. As examined, the ideal amount of time for EL to improve listening skills effectively is last from 30 minutes to an hour daily.

## **V. Limitations and Conclusion**

Despite the researcher's effort in carrying out this research, there still existed some shortcomings. Perhaps, the major one is a reliance on self-reported data with the participations of just 49 students in the first survey, and five students in the second phase. Then the overall picture of students' perceptions of using podcasts for EL might be not generalized when it was drawn by five of them only. Secondly, also in the second phase, time for participants to experience podcasts outside classroom was restrained only in one month. Consequently, their awareness of podcasts' use for EL might be restricted because of their short-term listening, so a longer time experimental research or longitudinal case study should be carried out.

In conclusion, the amount of regular exposure time to target language input is indispensable to enhance students' listening skills. While using podcasts is proved to bring a huge advantages, especially in terms of listening skills, it is hoped that this research will stimulate consideration of the application of podcasts in listening materials both outside and inside the classroom and make it convenient for students in foreign language acquisition process.

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