

Phonetic Transcription and Audiobooks as Tools to Improve Listening Comprehension Skills in English

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Spanish and English phonological systems vary considerably regarding the number of vowel sounds (12 in English, but only 5 in Spanish). This makes that Spanish-speaking students present many difficulties when interacting orally in English. For this reason, a Teaching Innovation Project approved by the University of Valladolid was carried out on the Soria Campus with the aim of improving students' listening comprehension skills by providing them with basic phonetic notions and training in transcription, as well as doing some pre-arranged self-study practice. The results obtained were slightly higher in the final test in most cases, suggesting the positive impact of the intervention.

Keywords: teaching innovation project; phonetic transcription; audiobooks; listening comprehension; oral comprehension; educational intervention

Introduction: Contextualization and Justification

It is common to find Spanish students claiming that, despite having studied English for several years, they experience important difficulties communicating effectively in that language, mainly understanding native English speakers. The main reason for this situation might lie in the existing differences between the English and Spanish phonological systems: it is not only the case that certain English consonant sounds do not exist in Spanish (such as voiced fricatives and affricates, which are so frequent in English but non-existent in Spanish), but also that the number of vowel sounds varies considerably in both languages (there are twelve sounds in English but only five in Spanish). Also, important differences regarding sentence stress and rhythm can be observed, which frequently give rise to misunderstandings or even the absolute incomprehension of a sentence. English is a stress-timed rhythm language, whereas Spanish is a syllable-timed rhythm.

These differences between both languages, which are unknown to many students of English (even of a high level) have produced numerous contrastive research works, as well as textbooks including practice exercises for students (Mortimer 1985; Wells 2006; Hewings 2007; Hancock 2008; Estebas Vilaplana 2009, Mott 2011; among many others). These works are devoted especially to vowel sounds because of their difficulty, and because commuting one vowel phoneme with another can give rise to a completely different word (for example, *cat* vs. *cut* vs. *cart*; or *sheep* vs. *ship*), and impede effective communication.

Whereas a native speaker of English or children growing up in an environment with an important immersion in the English language (for example, a native English environment at home) get these differences gradually when acquiring the language, adult foreign learners seem to require some kind of training (or at least a different way of learning) to assimilate them and avoid interference with their mother tongue, which has also produced several studies (Galloway 1981; Leather and James 1991; Flege, Bohn and Jang 1997, Escudero and Boersma 2004; Morrison 2005, Peltola et al 2007; Herschensohn 2009; Hernández 2011; Jeong et al 2011; Sebastián-Gallés, and Díaz 2012; Morrill 2016; among others). Knowing the articulatory features of the English phonemes will thus help students of a foreign language to recognise and articulate the target language sounds more easily and accurately.

In this sense, a basic knowledge of phonetic transcription and auditory practice can be useful activities. The present work aims at assessing the impact of an educational intervention consisting of (1) providing students with basic notions of phonetics and transcription practice in in-situ seminars, and (2) carrying out auditory practice using audiobooks where students have to pay special attention to the aspects explained in the in-situ sessions on transcription.

Learning a Second Language: Speaking and Listening Skills

Speaking and listening skills are crucial for communicating in a conversation in a foreign language, and that is why teachers nowadays tend to adopt a communicative approach. However, there are still some who focus on grammar and vocabulary and disregard the relevance of oral skills or do not pay them the attention they require (Foote et al 2016). This section comments on the main methodologies used to improve students' communicative skills, first from the perspective of teaching methodologies and then with special emphasis on the impact of audiobooks.

Methodologies for Foreign-Language Teaching: Oral Aspects

Having clear pronunciation is essential for communicating in oral situations and being socially accepted (Gilakjani 2012). Pronunciation has not been a main focus in foreign-language teaching (Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2016), but has been worked on using different methodologies (Hernández 2011), which Ketabi and Saeb (2015) summarise as follows. First, in the 1800s and 1900s, the 'direct method' was used, which was an intuitive-imitative method based on the assumption that a foreign language can be learnt in a similar way as a child acquiring their first language, so after a period of listening to the target sound system, learners would have internalized the sounds and be able to produce them accordingly, without receiving any explicit training. Then, in the 1940s and 1950s, the Audiolingual Method and the Oral Approach acquired importance. Both methods emphasized the relevance of an accurate pronunciation, and "the target sound system was practiced through pattern drills, mimicry, repetition, and the elimination of aberrant native language influences" (Ketabi and Saeb 2015: 183). In the 1960s and 1970s, pronunciation was left on the second stage, and grammar and vocabulary gained importance again. In the late 1970s, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

method was introduced, and pronunciation teaching in the classroom was seen as a potential restricting factor for effective communication, though pronunciation was considered “an essential element of communicative competence which is the primary goal in CLT” (Ketabi and Saeb 2015: 184). In the 1980s there was an increased awareness of the relevant role of pronunciation in communication, and in the 1990s the interest in pronunciation teaching was maintained but with a special emphasis on discussions such as intelligibility (i.e. to have a clear pronunciation that allows the foreign speaker to reach a functional comprehensible speech) versus ‘nativeness’ (i.e. the purpose of achieving a native-like pronunciation) (Nowacka 2012), and suprasegmental factors, such as stress and intonation of the discourse. Pronunciation relevance has been promoted in the 21st century, though it has not reached the same standards as during the Reform Movement, and it does not receive the attention that other language skills receive (Murphy 2014). Lately, the Jolly Phonics and Letterland methods have attained greater relevance at schools, particularly those of early childhood (Campbell et al 2012 and 2014). However, in Primary Education pronunciation is not worked on in depth – in fact, a relative reluctance among teachers to teach pronunciation has been observed (Foote et al 2011; Thomson 2013; Wahid and Sulong 2013). Therefore, the current situation of pronunciation teaching is a theoretically accepted, though not-yet-implemented, need with a special emphasis on intelligibility.

Now, pronunciation and listening seem to be related skills (Sakai and Moorman 2018) – it is thus expected that if students can understand sounds clearly, they will also be able to produce them (i.e. to have good pronunciation). In this sense, a corrective feedback on pronunciation may be helpful for improving students’ listening skills. However, other tools, such as audiobooks, may also be useful for improving listening skills.

The Relevance of Audiobooks

Audiobooks are recordings of books read aloud which can be found in different formats (e.g. electronic files, CD, or DVD). They can be accompanied by a printed book (so that the content can be read at the same time) or can be standalone (i.e. only the oral material). Audiobooks should not be mistaken with ‘graded readings’ – graded readings, which frequently come with an audio version of the book (i.e. an audiobook), are books

addressed to foreign learners of a language and have been adapted to different learning levels.

The impact of audiobooks has been proven effective on a wide range of areas (Stern 2011; Cahill and Richey 2015), such as improvement of dyslexia (Milani et al 2010), academic learning (Ben-Avie et al 2015), social interaction (Marchetti and Valente 2016), multimodality (Marchetti and Valente 2018), or learning materials to improve reading and writing skills when accompanied by the written text (Pearman 2008; Oakley and Jan 2008; Morre and Cahill 2016; Stevens et al 2017).

However, the effect that audiobooks have on improving oral skills in a foreign language has not been studied in depth. This study aims at determining the impact that audiobooks have on the English listening comprehension skills of Spanish students. In the following sections, the teaching intervention is described in further detail.

Proposal of Innovative Intervention (Innovative Teaching Project of the University of Valladolid)

Since in the foreign-language teaching programs in Spain modules are not frequently devoted to phonetic training (or, at least, are not allocated as many hours as those devoted to grammatical training), a teaching innovation project (framed under the Teaching Innovation Project plan by the University of Valladolid, Spain) has been designed. The teaching intervention consists of providing basic phonetic and transcription notions, and extra practise with audiobooks, with the main aim being to improve the students' listening comprehension skills in English. In the following sections, the project is explained in further detail.

Aims of the Teaching Innovation Project

The teaching intervention carried out had three aims:

- Aim 1: Making students familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet and acquire basic phonetic and phonological notions that allow them:
 - Aim 1.1: To recognise and produce all English sounds (consonants and vowels).
 - Aim 1.2: To read the transcription of any word (even an unfamiliar one) in a dictionary and be able to pronounce it precisely.

- Aim 2: To improve students' oral comprehension skills in English in different types of discourse.
- Aim 3: To determine if audiobooks have positive effects on recognition and listening skills.

Description of the Intervention

In the following sections, information about the methodology, participants and the materials used in this teaching intervention is provided.

Methodology. The intervention entailed two different stages: Firstly, a few in-situ training sessions (a session a week over three months) were provided. These dealt with basic phonetic (the International Phonetic Alphabet, transcription and articulation of both consonant and vowel sounds, accents and weak forms, word stress and sentence stress) and phonological notions (rhythm and intonation) of standard British English, Received Pronunciation (RP). In addition to the classroom sessions, students had access to practical exercises previously uploaded to the online Moodle-based platform of the university.

Secondly, students were required to work on their own with some graded readings including audio material (audiobooks and written text). Students had to work fortnightly with the assigned reading and comply with these guidelines. Firstly, they had to read the book and look all unknown words up. Then, they had to listen to the audio again, but now at the same time as reading the book, paying special attention to the elements mentioned at the previous stage (i.e. the aspects explained in the classroom sessions: pronunciation of sounds and rhythm of sentences) to create associations between the spelling and the pronunciation. Finally, they had to listen to the audio without reading the text. Students could repeat each of these stages as many times as needed.

The table below (Figure 1) encompasses all the actions and resources required for this educational intervention.

Figure 1 – Work scheme of the teaching innovation project

Action	Time	Expected result	Required resources
Initial level test	January	To get the level of English that students have, with a special emphasis on their listening skills.	The Oxford Placement Test, and a listening exercise (word recognition) based on Hancock 2008.
Theoretical in-situ sessions	One session a month in January, February, March, April, May	To acquire basic notions of phonetics and phonology. To be able to read properly any transcription in English, as well as to recognise and produce all English sounds.	Handouts of phonetics and phonology to prepare the in-situ sessions (one session a week from January to May).
Self-study practice of transcription in the online application (Campus Virtual)	Further practice available online after each theoretical session in February, March, April, May	To improve the transcription and recognition of English sounds.	Online Moodle-based platform of the university.
Self-study practice with graded readings with audio (available in the library of the Soria Campus, the University of Valladolid)	One book fortnightly in February, March, April, May	To consolidate the recognition skills of English sounds and rhythm (weak forms).	Graded readings with audio, which students can find in the library of the Soria Campus. The required levels of the readings must be low or intermediate, since they will be used to practise pronunciation from the very beginning, not grammar or vocabulary. Students can borrow their next book when they are done with the one they have been working with.
Final level test	May	To assess the level of English that students have after the	The Oxford Placement Test, and a listening exercise (word

Action	Time	Expected result	Required resources
		intervention, with a special emphasis on their listening skills. To compare the results to determine the effect of the intervention.	recognition) based on Hancock 2008.

Participants in the teaching innovation project. The participants (and main benefactors from the project) were 15 voluntary students of the degrees in *Nursing* (4th year), *Early Childhood Education* (2nd year) and *Translation and Interpreting* (2nd year) on Soria Campus, the University of Valladolid. All of them were taking a course in English as part of their degrees at the levels of B2 (in the *Nursing* degree), C1 (in the *Education* degree) and C2 (in the *Translation* degree), according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. For this teaching intervention, students were not divided into groups according to their English level because the aim of this intervention is not to improve their level of English but their listening skills from the first stages.

Materials and resources used in the teaching innovation project. For the development of this project, three basic resources have been used. Firstly, for the theoretical session, the contents were explained using graphic support and audio files. For the practical exercises in the classroom, different materials were used, such as Mortimer 1985, Ashby and Maidment 2005; Mott 2005; Baker 2006; Wells 2006; Hewings 2007; Hancock 2008; Estebas Vilaplana 2009; Cruttenden 2014; and Carley et al 2017, among others.

The second resource used was the online platform of the University of Valladolid (*Campus Virtual*) with additional exercises that help to assimilate the theoretical contents on a self-study basis. Also, students had the audio files at their disposal to work with.

The third and last resource is a wide variety of graded readings with audio (audiobooks) that the students can acquire or borrow from the library. These are the titles available and bought by the University of Valladolid for this teaching innovation project:



- Troy Stone (easystarts)
- Adventures of Tom Sawyer (level 1)
- Sherlock Holmes and Duke Son (level 1)
- Robinson Crusoe (level 2)
- Henry VIII and his six wives (level 2)
- Kong the Eighth Wonder of the World (level 2)
- Gulliver's Travel (level 2)
- Amistad (level 3)
- Persuasion (level 2)
- History of Britain (level 3)
- Braveheart (level 3)
- David Copperfield (level 3)
- Shakespeare: his life and plays (level 4)
- King Solomon's Mine Book (level 4)
- Alexander the great Book (level 4)
- British and American short stories (level 5)
- Great Expectations (level 6)
- Why Didn't They Ask Evans? (level 6)

Finally, two level tests were performed at the beginning and the end of the intervention so that the results could be contrasted easily: first, the Oxford Placement Test, and then a recognition test based on Hancock 2008, which was included as reference under Appendixes. Although Hancock suggests certain contrastive exercises specifically for Spanish speakers, the test included all contrastive exercises provided by the author so that it was complete and exhaustive.

Assessment of the Evolution in the Teaching Innovation Project

The improvement of the listening skills of the students, and thus the main aim of this intervention, was measured by using an assessment test. It was the same level test used at the beginning of the project (i.e. the Oxford Placement Test and the word recognition test based on Hancock 2008), but the order of the responses was changed to avoid right answers due to photographic memory.

Also, in the last seminar the lecturer reviewed all the concepts explained in the five workshops, asking related questions to the students to make sure they had understood and assimilated the content.

Presentation and Discussion of the Results

In this section, the results obtained by students in each level test will be provided in a chart, and then interpreted and discussed.

Presentation of the Results

The table below presents the scores obtained by the fifteen participants in each of the assessed aspects. In the first section, the initial scores are provided, i.e. before taking part in the project. In the second section, the final scores are detailed, i.e. after participating in the project.

The first and the second columns refer to the score obtained in the Oxford Placement Test. The first column states the level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and the second column specifies the total number of right answers as well as the score obtained in each of the sections, i.e. the grammar and the listening part. Finally, the third column registers the number of items recognised in the recognition test.

Figure 2 – Results of the teaching innovation project

STUDENTS	START (January 25 th)			END (June 25 th)		
	Level of English		Recognised sounds	Level of English		Recognised sounds
	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages	Score (grammar + listening)		Common European Framework of Reference for Languages	Score (grammar + listening)	
Student 1	B1	122 (55+67)	179/205	B2	126 (55+71)	180/205
Student 2	B1	125 (57+68)	180/205	B2	138 (65+73)	179/205
Student 3	B2	142 (66+76)	177/205	B2	143 (69+74)	185/205
Student 4	B2	142 (71+71)	176/205	B2	144 (71+73)	178/205
Student 5	B1	129 (58+71)	165/205	C1	152 (70+82)	160/205
Student 6	B1	128 (59+69)	179/205	B2	142 (71+71)	179/205
Student 7	C1	163 (80+83)	180/205	C2	170 (83+87)	189/205
Student 8	B2	143 (73+70)	178/205	B2	148 (73+75)	181/205
Student 9	B1	132 (67+65)	176/205	B2	135 (62+73)	183/205
Student 10	C1	163 (83+80)	190/205	C1	153 (78+75)	192/205
Student 11	B2	150 (75+75)	185/205	B2	152 (75+77)	190/205
Student 12	C2	170 (84+86)	187/205	C2	175 (90+85)	191/205
Student 13	B1	123 (56+67)	182/205	B2	125 (56+69)	183/205
Student 14	B2	140 (66+74)	177/205	B2	142 (66+76)	180/205
Student 15	A2	87 (49+38)	155/205	A2	96 (49+47)	163/205

Discussion of the Results

As can be seen in Figure 2, the listening and recognition skills of all students improved after the intervention, despite the limited time (i.e. half of the academic course). The score for the grammar part remained unaltered in most cases, or was higher in the final test, whereas the listening skills improved, at least slightly, in the great majority of participants, and was even significant in the case of some students, such as students 5, 9 or 15.

Figures 3 and 4 below show the evolution of students' listening skills. Figure 3 presents the results obtained in the Oxford Placement Test in both the initial and final tests. An improvement can be observed in all cases, except in students 3, 10 and 12.

Figure 3 – Initial vs Final Score in the Listening Test (Oxford Placement Test)

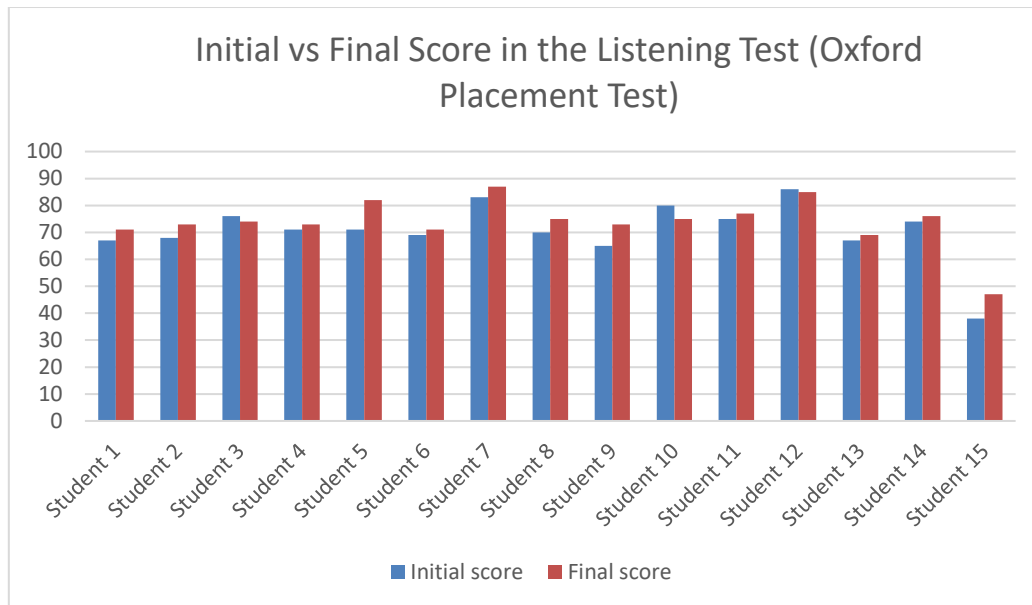
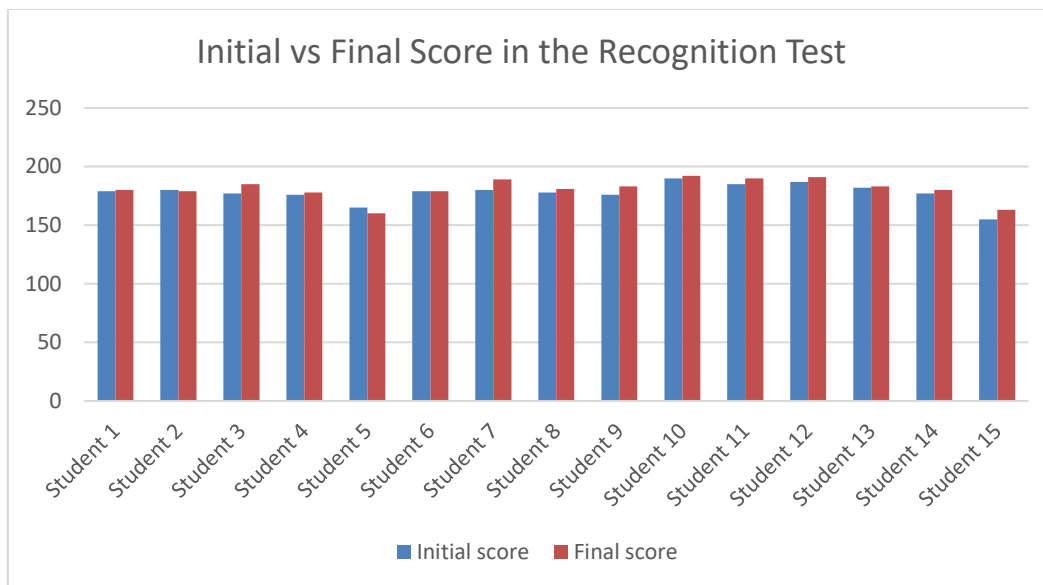


Figure 4 presents the results obtained in the recognition test, where again a slight improvement of the recognition skills was observed in all students, except for student 5 and 6. The most significant improvement was observed in students 3, 7, 9 and 15. Students 9 and 15 showed a significant improvement in both tests (i.e. the listening part of the Oxford Placement Test and the recognition test).

Figure 4 – Initial vs Final Score in the Recognition Test



Conclusions

Spanish students frequently claim to have problems in understanding spoken English, especially when listening to native speakers. With the aim of improving students' listening skills, a teaching education intervention was carried out. It consisted, on the one hand, of providing students with some basic notions of phonetics and transcription through some in-situ seminars, and on the other of arranging some pre-set listening practices with audiobooks that students were required to work on alone.

The results obtained showed that most of the participants improved their listening skills after the intervention, and in some cases the improvement was very high. It can thus be concluded that having basic phonetic notions and using audiobooks regularly may have a positive impact on the recognition of sounds and the listening comprehension skills.

In future works, it might be advisable to study in greater depth the existing relationship between pronunciation and understanding, as well as the influence of certain methodologies on listening comprehension skills.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the restricted time. It would be advisable for the study to cover a longer period of time, so that students can be exposed to a longer intervention, so both the efficiency of the intervention and the evolution of students can be observed easily.



It would also be advisable to increase the number of students and divide them into groups of: (a) a control (i.e. students not undergoing any intervention), (b) students undergoing an intervention based on providing basic notions on phonetics and transcription through seminars and transcription practice, (c) students undergoing an intervention based on self-practice with audiobooks, and (d) a group exposed to both interventions, that is to say seminars on phonetics and transcription and self-practice with audiobooks. The increase in number of students and the division of groups would allow for more conclusive data and for observing the efficiency of each intervention more accurately.

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