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Improving English Language Proficiency through Podcasts: A Multifaceted Educational Approach

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KEYWORDS

Podcasting, language learning, English language proficiency, educational technology, ESL education, multimedia learning, language skills development

Abstract

This paper probes into the strength of podcasts in building the English language through varied dimensions of a learning approach. The paper sought to establish the applicability of podcasts in the learning of languages among EFL students, given that podcasts are increasingly becoming an informal learning platform. The study was carried out among learners of different age groups and language proficiency levels, and the collection of statistics regarding the use of podcasts within language learning was affected through both quantitative and qualitative data. Important findings indicate that regular use of podcasts can make the process of vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and general proficiency stronger. Such findings support the use of podcasts in gaining better language competence in that it not only presents rich contextual content in an accessible manner but also puts into play learner skills. In effect, the inclusion of podcasts into the learning curriculum has implications that are far-reaching in that it could offer an effective improvement in the traditional methodologies of language learning by enhancing a dynamic and flexible learning environment that meets the needs of all learners. This research paper points out the imperative nature of podcasts in modern educational strategies and suggests their application in a wider context of language learning frameworks to bring about superior linguistic competence.

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Introduction

Defining Podcasts

The word "podcast" immediately brings to mind language-learning series or those on crime documentaries, some episodes of which were particularly favourite for members of wide audiences. The world of podcasting is enormous and knows no borders; in fact, it is a veritable tapestry of topics. A podcast is a series of digital media files, usually both audio and video, that focus on a specific theme or topic and are usually found on the internet. These episodes are usually hosted by an announcer whose participation weaves through the episodes. Discussion material usually ranges from anything and everything, from the current daily news and technological advancements to niche hobbies and academic subjects. The actual structure of a podcast could be quite different. Some of them are highly structured and have constructed dialogue in that way,

making sure that the topic is covered in full, while others take a more freeform approach and let hosts engage in fully extemporaneous conversation. It is this format flexibility that makes podcasts compatible with the content, which enables them to host anything from complex scientific research discussions to serious historical event reviews or light-hearted banter about pop culture. Besides, podcasts often use quite sophisticated audio production techniques to make listening to them more engaging. Those include sound effects, background music, and expertly edited material for a polished end product. All these production details make podcasts engaging and professional at the same time—something like a traditional radio broadcast. Most podcasts come with a large online presence. A typical web page associated with a podcast comes with lots of ancillary materials: links to research articles, detailed episode notes, biographies of guest speakers, and transcripts of the episode. These resources enhance the listening experience because the additional background information and content are germane to what the speakers are saying. Additionally, most podcasts have also created a type of community that listeners have with one another through online forums and comment sections, where listeners will discuss episodes and points that they raise, share insights and knowledge about the episodes, and even propose topics for which they would like to hear episodes about. Indeed, it is this multi-dimensional approach to the delivery of content that allowed podcasts to become part and parcel of the new media, gaining even greater popularity among audiences who demand a lot more than passive consumption but a dynamic and interactive experience. Whether one needs to get more depth in a professional field of interest, keep informed of current events, or simply entertain them with engaging stories, there is probably a podcast for that.

History of Podcasts

The origin of podcasts can be traced back to 2004 when the term was first introduced (Madsen, 2009). This new medium quickly became popular, having a global platform that changed how people consumed media. Podcasts offer an incredible opportunity that does not come with some of the limitations that other media types do. The podcasting process is overly simplified, and this is one of the characteristics that give it popularity. First, to create a podcast, a person needs a computer, a microphone, and easy recording software. This makes it possible for anyone with the desire to become a podcaster, whether an amateur or a professional. There are several processes involved when making a podcast. Podcasters first record the content in form of a solo, or as interview segments in case guests are involved. In most cases, no major editing of the audio file is necessary. The only available editing features may be amplification of the file, enhancement of the quality, and the removal of glitches in the file or irrelevant portions of the content. After the prerecording and editing, this content is only prepared for distribution. Content prepared this way can be distributed in a number of ways. The podcaster may host it on a personal or professional website, or on video-sharing platforms like YouTube. Podcasters can also host it on top podcast hosting pages and services like Apple Podcasts and Google Podcasts.

A podcast goes live when it is published on the internet, thus making it accessible globally. All of this happens through the magic of podcast directories. It is through podcast directories that a

listener gets to subscribe to the podcast. Once the episode is released, a listener will automatically be notified of every new episode of a podcast. This requires proper SEO for the podcasts, just like any other product in the digital market. This means that, just like the setting of web pages, episodes need to be properly titled and described, and contain keywords that bring in discoverability through search engines. This is important to bring about and develop different listeners. It is this democratisation of media production that makes a podcast an excellent low entry level for people who had stories to tell or ideas to share but had been shut out of legacy media by the high price of entry or simple gatekeeping of ideas that were not deemed commercially viable. In addition, in many ways, it is this turn of events that brings home how important podcasts actually are and cements the medium's importance in the larger scheme of global digital media.

Podcasts are, in a sense, a string of recorded talk radio shows that the user downloads onto their mobile device or computer. With a wide variety in the frequency of release, style, and format, most follow thematic and narrative structure in an each episode. There are scripted podcasts, but most are free form in their conversation. Podcasting has become a social activity with a podcasting community often being referred to as the "podosphere."

The Impact of Podcasting in Education

Educational institutions have included podcasts more and more in their curricula and have reaped a significant positive impact from their use. Their ease of creation and access, as well as the creative manners in which they can facilitate learning processes, make them a not-to-be-missed educational resource. Podcasts offer a wealth of benefits for educational purposes. They provide an approach to learning that is current with the modern world and the increasing trend towards technology-enhanced education. Consequently, it can be argued that, rather than investing heavily in textbooks, many schools and universities invest in their students and their learning experiences by including cutting-edge technologies such as podcasting, which is perhaps one of the most recently used educational medias.

Literature review

It has been observed that with time, there have been massive changes in the field of education. For instance, in the past, the conventional paper and pencil courses have shifted towards multimedia training, which is a much modern model of education (Keegan, 2002). Out of these multimedia transitions, one of the most significant changes has been the incorporation of Podcasts. Podcasts were like mini radio shows that can be listened to in laptops or mobile phones and be based on any topic that has been delivered (Lee & Chan, 2007).

Consider this scenario: a study conducted by the Office of Information Technology at Duke University in 2005 explored how first-year students utilised free iPods to listen to podcasts. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with students reporting enhanced educational experiences and increased enjoyment (Duke University, Office of Information Technology, 2005). However, not all studies have mirrored these sentiments. Bollinger et al. (2010) found that while many

students enjoyed listening to podcasts, their previous experiences significantly influenced their perceptions. Conversely, Walls et al. (2010) revealed a gap between student enthusiasm and professor expectations regarding podcasts.

In a 2011 study, most Iranian students were aware of podcasts but rarely used them, though they recognised the potential benefits for their studies in college courses. Despite these positive views, some research indicates that podcasts do not significantly influence student learning (Weatherly, Grabe & Arthur, 2002; Daniel & Woody, 2010), suggesting a divide in opinions about the utility of podcasts in educational settings. In the realm of distance learning, podcasts have been effectively employed. Lee and Chan (2007) enhanced the learning experience for remote students in a computer technology course through podcasts. Similarly, Huntsberger and Stavisky (2007) provided podcasts as a study aid, which most students found beneficial, although some encountered technical difficulties with downloading and playing the content. According to Evans (2008), who conducted a study asking students about their views and perspectives regarding podcasts as a study tool, most students preferred podcast lectures to those with reading materials. According to Fernandez et al. (2009), though, podcasts were a great educational tool, they could not replace the dynamic presence of a teacher in class. An experiment by McKinney et al. (2009) gave two sets of students who attended lectures in two different formats. The lectures in the experiment were accessed through podcasts, and one set of students was only provided with slides, thereby ensuring a control set of students. The group that listened to podcasts of lectures was able to test better, marking the potential importance of podcasts in education. Even though educators and related academic institutions are enthusiastic about this new development, research into students' perceptions of the usefulness and actual effectiveness of podcasts is still in an embryonic stage (DuPage et al., 2009). In this regard, future studies should try to close this gap.

This issue of changing educational practices connects with the perennial problems of how to teach pronunciation in an FL context, as highlighted in a previous special issue on pronunciation teaching. The research evidence indicates that it remains problematic because of restrictions imposed by the lack of class time, materials, and inclusion of features such as intonation or prosody in practice sessions, for example, Munro & Derwing, 2007; Ramirez-Verdugo, 2006). There are also some issues relating to teacher motivation or ability to teach pronunciation effectively, and some teachers still report the perception that students neither enjoy, nor benefit from, pronunciation work, e.g., Stevick, Morley, & Wallace Robinett, 1975). The lack of prior phonetic training remains an issue of prime importance, and some teachers also remain unwilling to teach pronunciation (Weinberg & Knoerr, 2003). The role of pronunciation has, in the past, been seen to be a weak one in communicative language teaching. Terrell (1989) and Pennington and Richards (1986), for example, have argued that because communicative curricula rarely pay much attention to pronunciation, it is usually marginalised, or even simply not attended to in classroom practices. Indeed, Elliott (1995) has gone further and suggested that pronunciation is seen as less important than the other language skills. Nevertheless, even with such neglect, pronunciation is a key element

of comprehensibility, and learnable improvement is possible with effective teaching and practice, e.g., Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Leather, 1999).

Research indicates that age, individual differences, motivation and instruction, have a significant effect on the pronunciation (Leather, 1999; Moyer, 1999). This means that a great improvement can be made in the pronunciation through special training and exposure to the native speech (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Graeme, 2006; Ramirez-Verdugo, 2006). It means that the idea of raising awareness in terms of intonation systems should be followed. It will make pronunciation training in case of FL more fruitful. Technology, and in particular podcasting, creates a new road to implement pronunciation training outside the traditional classroom. Thorne and Payne (2005) underline the fact that text-based computer-mediated communication does not give much chance to turn the attention to the speech and comprehension orally. Podcasting allows the students to practice their speaking and can be useful when trying to have students produce audio products to be carried out independently (Lord, 2008). This is a novel way to make pronunciation training more productive, available and interesting for learners.

Methodology

Participants

Effectiveness of podcasts in English learning was surveyed in fifteen participants specifically selected in consideration of three age groups and three proficiency levels in English. Participants were divided into three different groups, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and English Proficiency Levels

Age Group	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total
18-24 years	11	73.3%
25-34 years	4	26.7%

English Proficiency	Number of Participants	Percentage of Total
Beginner	3	20%
Intermediate	7	46.7%
Advanced	5	33.3%

Materials and Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire was designed to take care of prior academic literature and ensure all the relevant points were covered. It had sections that tried to capture information on demographics, frequency, and patterns of activities used to learn English, listening habits with podcasts, methods for recording new vocabulary, and assessments of podcasts' effectiveness in language learning. Questions used a combination of Likert and open-ended formats to derive both quantitative and qualitative information; the questionnaire details can be found in Appendix 1.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via online platforms that serve people willing to improve their language and learn English. The participants were then administered the questionnaire online, after taking electronic informed consent that stated their participation was voluntary and the information would be kept confidential. They were given 2 weeks to do the task, and weekly reminders were emailed to ensure maximum response rates.

Research Design

Both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using mixed methods design following a rigorous analysis of statistical and anecdotal data, hence providing an in-depth understanding of the use of podcasts in language learning. The analysis of the quantitative responses was set to descriptive statistics in order to identify tendencies, while the qualitative responses were subject to the thematic analysis method to extract deeper insights into the individual experiences and perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical approval was taken from the institution review board from the respective university in which the study took place. The research work adopted very high ethical standards, including maintaining the confidentiality of data on participant identification and notifying the rights of participants that at any time they could withdraw from the study.

Data Integrity and Replicability

Careful documentation of all processes from the collection of data to the analysis was done to ensure the research would be replicated in the future and for integrity in the execution of the research process. This documentation will enable further research continuity in the use of podcasts within the context of language learning, thus creating a platform for further academic research.

Results

A Brief View of Demographics

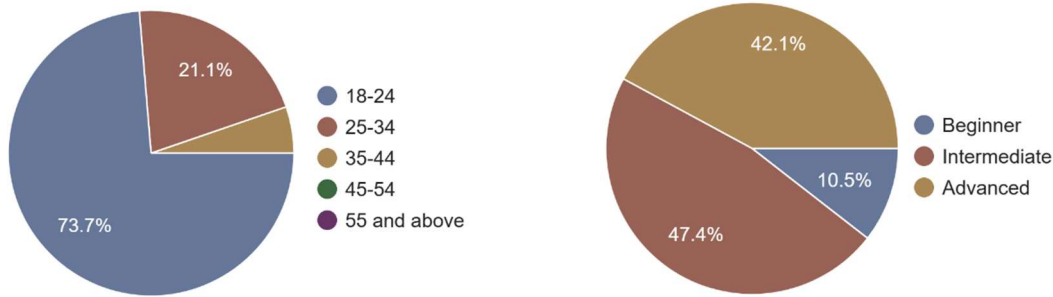
It can be noticed from the demographic data table that most subjects are of a young age because the data shows that 73.7 % were aged between 18 and 24, 21.1 % were aged between 25 and 34, and only 5.3 % fell into the age bracket of 35 to 44 years old. The distribution indicates a wide range of proficiency in English levels: intermediate (47.4 %), advanced (42.1 %), and beginners (10.5 %). This distribution indicates the age bracket of the wide range of age groups and skill levels of the subjects who participated in the survey. Charts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 detail with more data what is mentioned generally here.

Chart 1

Learning Languages Patterns

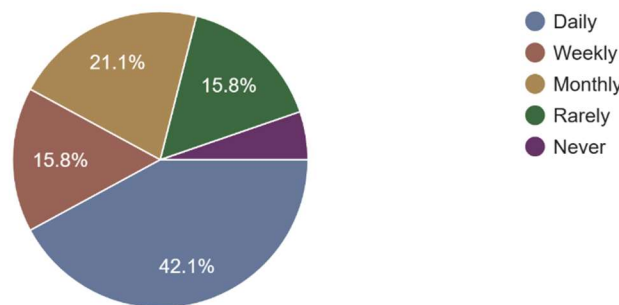
Age Range

Level of English Proficiency



There was a pattern in the way participants participated in English language learning activities: while 15.8% did it once a week, 42.1% did so every day. A 21% did it monthly and 21% rarely did or never even did. The findings from this frequency study show participants' continuing commitment to learn a language.

Chart 2
participation in English language learning activities

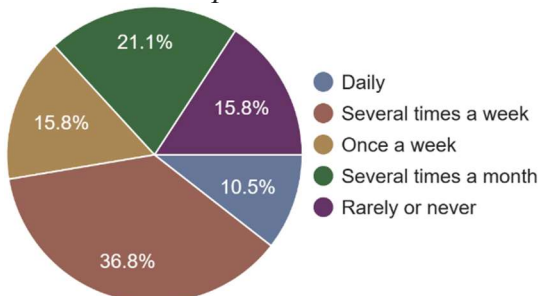


Characteristics of Podcast Engagement

The survey found out different ways through which they listened to podcasts, some would listen daily, weekly, monthly, or not at all, while others had various favourite places for listening, such as commute home gym work. Additionally, session duration was reported by participants as less than 15 minutes up to 60 minutes, showing how flexible podcast listening is within their daily schedules.

Chart 3
Frequency and Locations of English Podcast Listening by Respondents

How often do respondents listen to English podcasts



Location of listening to English podcasts

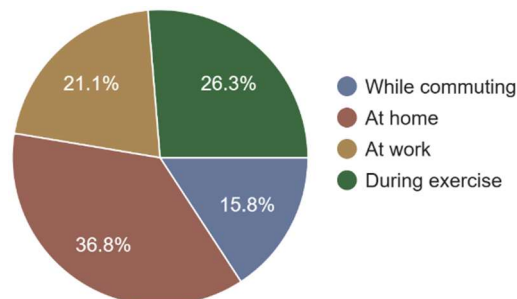
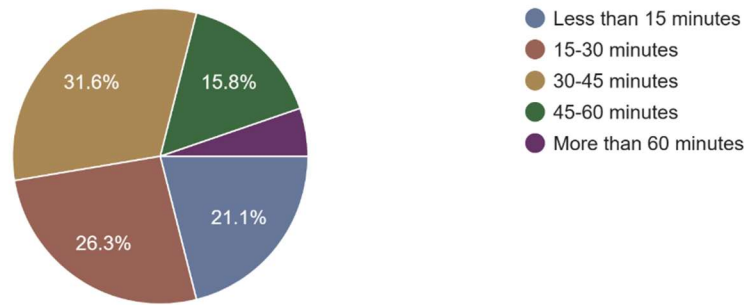


Chart 4

Time spent listening to an English podcast in one session



Evaluating Effectiveness

Participants were to rate English podcasts on a scale between 1 and 10 for effectiveness, to evaluate the impact on vocabulary development and listening ability. The observations here by all accounts seem to stretch across different spectrums, whereby some respondents would give a rating between 1 and 10. It is evident that the English podcasts are more beneficial for some of the participants than for others, thus showing the variability of how people value them.

Chart 5

Effectiveness of English podcasts in enhancing listening comprehension skills

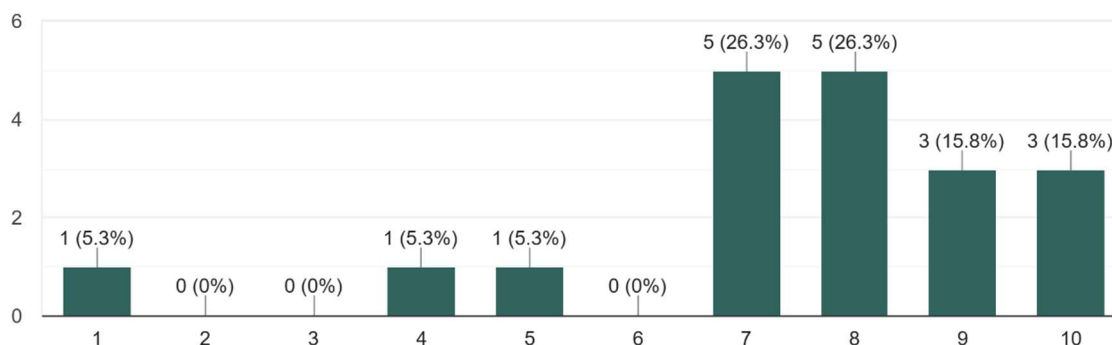
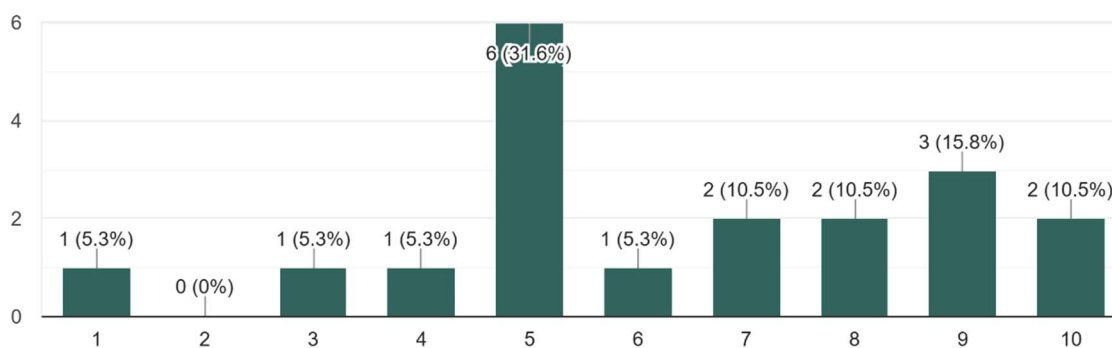


Chart 6

Effectiveness of English podcasts in expanding vocabulary

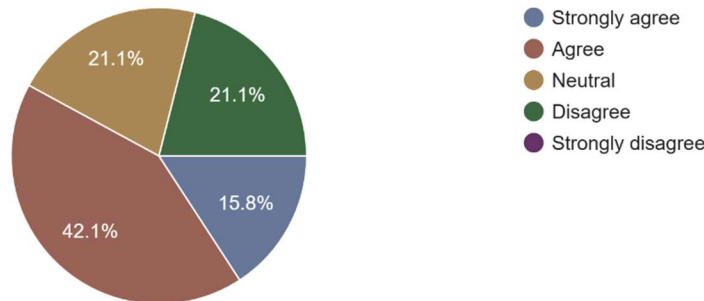


Overall Impact on Language Proficiency

Most respondents reported that listening to English podcasts helped them improve their overall language skills significantly. This study found that most of the students thought that audio files played an important role in developing their language proficiency.

Chart 7

Overall Impact on Language Proficiency

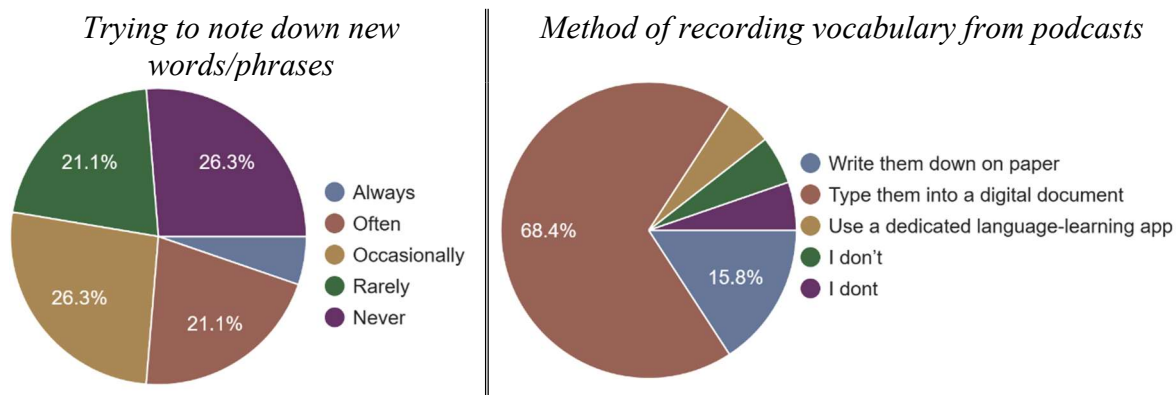


Recording New Words

There were different methods that participants used to keep track of unfamiliar words met during the process of listening to podcasting materials. A total of 69% indicated that they used digital files. Some other respondents used a special app for studying languages. Third was pens and paper. Some wrote down new words, while others did not note new vocabulary words.

Chart 8

Strategies and Methods Used by Respondents for Recording Vocabulary from English Podcasts



More Insights and Personal Thoughts

Additional feedback may have been provided from some of the participants based on some of their personal reflections on their experience with English podcasts. Such further suggestions were on more engaging ways for one to improve their vocabulary, entertaining and educational podcasts that are also used in language learning, among others. Such personal reflections allow us to understand in a better way how people see or relate to English podcasting.

Discussion

This use of podcasts to enhance English language proficiency reflects the dynamic interface between technology and education. In fact, the general findings of this study have helped shed light on how podcasts can help language learning through listening habits, vocabulary acquisition,

and overall language skill improvement. Findings in the implications give a holistic view of digital media integration into instructional practices.

This clearly shows that many of the respondents interact with English language podcasts on a regular basis and incorporate this tool into their daily experience. Their regular, repeated experience is tantamount to Vygotsky's philosophy under the sociocultural theory, where he posits that learning should take place within interactive environments. Podcasts have the capacity to provide an immersive listening environment to stimulate deeper comprehension and fluency in a language. This line of learning is concurrent with the belief that if a language is exposed in a repetitive manner, with varying contexts, such would enhance understanding and recall of language structures. Besides, podcasts are flexible since learners can interact with content that interests them, and at a speed they choose, thus fostering one of the basic principles of personalised learning. When learners take control over their learning environment, the principles of constructivist learning indicate that learner engagement and motivation are increased, hence effective learning.

Participants in this study indicated that podcasts were very helpful in terms of vocabulary learning. This is congruent with what cognitive learning theories predict in that, meaningful contextual exposure is likely to enhance retention of new information. Podcasts provide much exposure to language context, with descriptions of how words and phrases are used in natural speech; such contextual learning provided more information on how to make sense and remember the words. This is also strengthened by the informal and conversational nature of many podcasts, which complements the kind of language-learning situation that might actually occur in real life. However, the effectiveness of podcasts for vocabulary learning is mediated by the vast variability in ease of vocabulary retention reported by most participants, therefore highlighting the role of learner differences in individual learning processes—an argument that is at the heart of Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. According to this theory, different people have different kinds of intellects and learning styles. This implies that podcasts, while helpful to many, might not be the best learning tool for every learner. Tailoring podcasts to fit diverse learning style could be a way to increase their efficacy for vocabulary learning. The marked increase in overall language proficiency as indicated by the overwhelming majority of those surveyed points to the broad scope that podcasts take in education. Not only do podcasts develop comprehension skills, but they also assist learners in comprehending analytically and critically what is to be conveyed and also acquaint the learner with various dialects and accents. This element is crucial in the development of a broad-based language competence—a key point raised by Krashen's input hypothesis—as the theory states that the learner should strive to understand language input that is a little bit above his or her current level.

Given these results, the use of podcasts in language curricula should be more highly implemented by educational institutions. This may entail a re-evaluation of podcasts not as a supplement but as a necessary tool for learning a language. Educators may use podcasts to develop listening skills, enhance vocabulary, and get accustomed to the naturalistic use of the language to inject variety

into what otherwise would be a monotone in learning a language. Many podcasts today also come with worksheet activities, interactive transcripts, and community forums for discussion, making the podcast more engaging and interactive. These are in line with current pedagogical strategies that value learner engagement and learner activity in the learning process.

Limitations and Future Research

Other limitations in the study are the relatively small size and the use of self-reported data, which might not tap the actual effect of podcast use on language proficiency. Future research should be carried out with a much larger sample size, possibly more diverse in nature, for the better generalisability of findings. Longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term influence of sustained podcast listening on language proficiency should also be conducted. Experimental studies could be carried out in which the impact of different podcasts (narrative versus informational) and their impact on different aspects of language learning could be tested. Such studies would clarify what qualities of a podcast serve best for which outcomes.

Conclusion

Exploring podcasts as a multifaceted educational tool demonstrates their tremendous impact on the development of English language proficiency. More than that, it caters to multifarious learning proclivities and, moreover, it bridges the gap between traditional and digital learning environments with a dynamic and interactive educational sphere. Podcasts, being what they are, provide access to material and rich content, a hallmark of their capability as a tool to achieve target language proficiency. As this paper has demonstrated, podcasts are important for many aspects of language learning, such as listening comprehension, vocabulary, and other elements of language learning. These findings are quite in keeping with modern educational theory, which now emphasises the importance of a multimodal learning environment and authentic linguistic exposure. They are effective learning for language education through offering the learner repetitious, engaging, and contextually rich content in an audio format. This mode of learning facilitates the cognitive development of language skills and caters to the learning preferences of those who benefit from an auditory mode of learning. The flexibility of podcasts permits them to be carried almost anywhere and played with anyone, breaking down the walls of traditional classrooms, and allows for a truly personalised learning experience that can be scaled and sustained.

On the other hand, as the study has shown, the influence of podcasts is different for every person, which accentuates the importance of flexible and variable learning approaches. Educators need to adopt their use of podcasts carefully in order to complement other course resources and delivery methods, keeping in mind the need for a well-rounded learning experience. The warm welcome that podcasts enjoy in academia speaks volumes about the emerging sense of their significance in the context of language education. However, podcasts are not limited to the learning of languages; they reflect a lot in a wider perspective on learning emerging as digital and learner-centric. Therefore, in a more exploratory sense, educational institutions should put more effort into

learning to make it easier to deliver their curriculum content and to develop a community that is supportive of the heterogeneous learning needs of students.

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Appendix 1

Data in Podcast

Select Valuable Information: Ensure the statistics and data you use relate to and defend your arguments and are relevant to the subject of the podcast. Make sure the data is current and from reliable sources.

Contextualise your presentation: Be sure that your audience will understand the relevance of the data and statistics you present before them. They need to learn and understand the statistics presented, their importance, and how they are connected to the main topic of the talk.

- *Explanation of terminology:* Whether your data includes technical terminology or industry-specific technical terms, take the effort to describe them for your audience. This guarantees everybody knows the terms used.
- *Historical Overview:* Provide historical context for the data or figures you're displaying. Explain how particular trends or patterns have changed over time and how historical events may have influenced them.
- *Comparison and contrast:* Use relevant data points so as to put into context the information you are giving; this may mean comparing current and historical statistics, contrasting geographical regions, or comparing demographic groups.

Visual Aids: While most of the podcasts are solely audio, you can still use visual aid to supplement the information of your website, or show notes. These graphic supports help the viewers understand complex facts by the help of infographics, graphs, and charts.

Tell a Story Through Data: Data can say much more than simple facts. Tell the ways in which patterns, trends, and insights from your data can add to the bigger picture that the podcast episode is trying to develop.

Use Data to Start a Discussion: Giving data and statistics to the audience can be a great way to start a conversation and debate on the matter. Encourage them to discuss the information and to form a relationship with their personal experiences.

Fact-Checking: Ensure, before making the presentation, that all figures and facts are correct through fact-checking. You will need a second check on all the information that will be passed to your audience through your podcast; misinformation can easily ruin your reputation.

- *Verify Sources:* Ensure you regularly verify your sources to confirm the fact that they are valid and reliable. Use reputable sources that include academic journals, government reports, and interviews with experts.

- *Cross-Reference Information:* To ensure that the information you give is accurate, make cross-references from other sources. If more than one source attests to the same knowledge, it lends more authority to the information.

Quantitative information can provide numerical insights, but it must be balanced with qualitative data, such as anecdotes, case studies, and human stories. This would contribute to the grasping of the topic in a more holistic way.

Regular Updates: If you're discussing facts that could change over time, such as economic indicators or the results of a survey, consider providing regular updates to keep others informed.

- **Scheduled Release:** Create a regular timetable for releasing new episodes. Consistency breeds engagement and keeps people coming back for more.

- **Theme or Series:** Consider organising your podcast into thematic series or seasons. This is a great way to look at topics in depth across episodes, keeping the audience interested in what is next.

Current Events: Analyse news and give your view on recent scenarios related to the topic of your podcast. Stay current with any news and developments that pertain to your career. Give your professional perspective and comment on it.

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