

Animated Songs In English To Develop Effective Listening Skills Among Adult ESL / EFL Learners.

By

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ABSTRACT

Listening as a language skill is often neglected on the ground that we could hear everything. But listening is not simply hearing, it is an active process of receiving aural as well as visual stimuli attentively through ears and eyes, followed by comprehension and retention of the message or intention of the speaker and finally accomplishing the process with an appropriate response. To develop listening, we need proper and graded training and motivation to listen and learn the skill. Development of listening skills results in increasing acquisition of the target language, but it becomes truly difficult to motivate adult learners and develop their effective listening skills, as most und undergraduate post-graduate learners in India are from the vernacular medium of education and often learn English as Foreign Language. However, our recent study with both animated and non-animated songs in English with sixty-two participants across nine Colleges and one University in West Bengal, India, proved that animated songs in English are more effective in developing active listening skills among advanced learners who hardly had any prior training on listening at their primary and higher-secondary level of education. In this paper, we have made a detailed discussion on the importance of listening skills and have shown how animated songs in English may be an effective teaching material to motivate and develop listening skills among advanced ESL and EFL learner in general.

Keywords: Animated English songs, Effective Listening Skills, EFL/ESL adult learners.

INTRODUCTION

English Language skills have four basic dimensions – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But in countries like India, language skills such as reading and writing have been given maximum emphasis at the primary, secondary, and higher secondary levels of education. A curriculum with prescribed English language classes comes only at the tertiary level, and that too for technical and medical students only. But nothing is denying the fact that even in those English language classrooms, maximum hours are dedicated to improving speaking and writing skills rather than developing listening as a language skill.

It is Listening as a language skill that essentially awakens awareness of any language as it is a receptive skill that first develops in a human being (Renukadevi, 2014). It is only through listening to a language a child eventually learns to speak that language. Listening is a basic skill where we attentively receive auditory as well as visual stimuli through our eyes and

ears, comprehend the information and the intention received, restore them, and then make an appropriate response.

So, listening as a language skill is far different from simple hearing. Hearing involves the process by which sound waves enter the ears. Listening involves comprehension of what is said and should result in a mental reaction (Fischer, 1984). In other words, although people hear sounds during all of their waking hours, it is how these sounds affect their minds is important. While hearing may be defined as the auditory perception of sounds, listening is the interpretation of the sounds that are heard. It is the conscious and voluntary mental process of perceiving the stimulus or a set of related stimuli and analysis of the sensory information for its intended meaning.

Though Adrian Doff (1988) talks about Casual listening and Focused Listening, whereby casual listening, meant listening without much concentration unless we hear something which interests us; and focused listening to it is intensive listening for information or for transacting business (Doff, 1988). Listening involves processing that data, reconstructing the data, and giving meaning to the data. But hearing is just letting the sound signals bombard your eardrum. The signals are received and recorded but they are not processed. Listening thus is an active process whereas hearing is passive (Kumar, 1996).

Listening therefore is not limited to the reception of words and sentences but includes all auditory and visual signals – noise as well as words; unintentional as well as intentional sounds, the tone, and intonation of the speech; the pauses and the silence; the eye and facial expressions; the body languages and appearance of the speaker. And once this aural as well as visual stimulus is received with attention, efforts are taken to perceive or comprehend the information and intention of the speaker through various skills, schemata, and comprehension processing. And before acknowledging the reception through a verbal reply or a non-verbal action or expression, the message or intention should be restored long in the memory.

Nothing is denying the fact that utterances can be the products of multiple intentions (Grice, 1969). And perhaps this multidimensional quality of a speech makes the process of communication highly complex. However, it is often seen to be true that active listening has often helped in understanding the speaker's intended proposition effectively.

So, effective listening always gives way to an efficient communication process. It provides a better understanding of the message or intention of the speaker; reduces confusion, misunderstanding, conflict, or negative assumption of any kind. It also provides a better understanding of what is expected of the listener and helps to decide more appropriately and effectively the feelings that the listener should keep for the speaker's message.

In the profession, efficient listening skills make workers more productive, and accountable and cultivate positive working relationships with bosses, clients, as well as colleagues. It helps to build rapport as well as trust with co-workers, bosses, and clients; facilitate better work in a team-based environment; resolve conflicts and problems with customers and find underlying meanings in what others say. In other words, effective listening helps to become a better leader, better manager, and better employee.

Now, in India, most of the learners at the undergraduate, as well as post-graduate level, are from the vernacular medium of education, and most learn English as a foreign language rather than a second language. Learners learning and listening to English as a second language (ESL) refers to those lot who does speak English often at home or outside the classroom and receive most of their education through the medium of English as well. But this is not the

situation in every corner of the world. Rather, the majority of the learners in most parts of the country learn and listen to English as a foreign language (EFL) when they go to schools where instruction in the classroom (other than English as a subject) is not normally given in English and the learners speak some other language as their mother tongue too (Prator, 1979). Therefore, these learners get no benefit in or outside the classroom in terms of communicative experiences or gaining the language or knowledge schemata. They are rarely exposed to English outside the English classroom and are likely to have more difficulty when confronted with unstructured spontaneous communication in English (Tatem, 1982). But the irony of the fact is that in India English is taught and learned as a second language.

However, an effective solution to this serious problem is to adopt a more humanistic approach towards these so-called ESL learners in the English language classrooms and provide them with a controlled situation where they would get the required confidence and ambiance to listen and speak English to their classmates and teachers. But unfortunately, such approaches, arrangements, and laboratories are rare. What makes the matter worse is that learners who study in vernacular medium schools till higher secondary level by choice or by compulsion (as few could afford to study in English medium schools), have to study their undergraduate as well as post-graduate level in English. So, these ESL learners may be substantially versed in English grammar and syntax and at times in vocabulary, but their lack of exposure to authentic discourse, within the classroom both as speakers and listeners, prevent them from getting engaged in unstructured communication confidently outside the EFL classroom (Carroll, 1966).

It is also evident that promoting listening comprehension results in the increased acquisition of other language skills and consequently leads to the acquisition of the target language (Yun Kul, 2010). But how can such a vital language skill – effective listening skills – be learned in the classroom, while most of the learners at the tertiary level are adult learners and are from the vernacular medium in primary, secondary as well as higher secondary levels of education?

The classroom is our field of operation (Eapen, 1995). It is the place where dynamic actions, whether legitimate or illegitimate, whether planned or unplanned, take place. It is perhaps the basic structure of the curriculum system where the students and the teachers meet. For language learning, a classroom may not be a perfect milieu, but a language laboratory. However, not all educational Institutes have an English language laboratory. And thus, it becomes even more difficult to facilitate and develop language skills like listening inside a regular classroom. Motivating adult learners to attentively listen to English in such a condition is beyond imagination. Nevertheless, English songs in animation as a listening material potentially turned the classroom into a relaxed, friendly milieu and learners found it interesting and motivational to learn more about listening skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent researchers like Gurendi Wiwoho suggested the use of a listening-first approach towards successful listening comprehension teaching in his paper “Listening-First Approach and Listening Strategies towards Successful EFL Listening Classroom”. The paper cited significant research findings in second language acquisition and reviewed the concept of listening comprehension and listening strategies and their relationship in language teaching and learning. The paper emphasized aural comprehension training, and relaxation for oral production in the initial phase of instruction fosters the development of linguistic competence and produces better results than those obtained through intensive oral practice (Wiwoho, 2021).

Jesús Toapanta in his research “Metacognitive awareness in L2 listening: a transition from doing listening to teaching it” stated that second language listening (L2 listening) is taken for granted in the language classroom and is not always taught. In his paper, the author presents the results of an intervention study that incorporated guided discussions and reflections into an activity that consisted of playing an audio recording and answering comprehension questions (Toapanta, 2022).

Since the lockdown to the upsurge of Covid 19 around the world, the use of ICT or use of technology in the EFL classroom has become the new way to improve students' comprehension. Researchers Intan Sofiana and Feisal Aziez used digital audiobooks to improve students' listening skills and enhance students' critical thinking while listening to the audio. According to them, digital audiobooks help students understand what the speakers say since it contains an illustration of the context (Sofiana & Aziez, 2022).

Ester Sekeon, Paula Rombepajung, and Tirza Kumayas in their paper “Students' perception toward English Song as a Learning Media of Listening Comprehension” used songs in the classroom to develop listening skills. Listening to English songs made the learners more familiar with the English word and made it easier to memorize a new vocabulary in the lyrics. They also enjoyed listening to English songs as songs made the atmosphere of learning more relaxing (Sekeon, Rombepajung, & Kumayas, 2022).

It has been often observed that to every non-native ESL learner, the linguistic use and social norms followed by a native speaker of English are unfamiliar and foreign. The customs and culture, emotions and sentiments, language, and expression of social norms of the Indians or many of South East Asian countries are not similar to those of the Europeans and native speakers (Moulic & Rahman, 2019). Therefore, ESL learners often face difficulty in judging the emotion and linguistics used by a native speaker especially when the learners are listening to an audio extract in British or American English. Thus, they often end up demotivated soon without listening to the extract completely.

And listening being more a receptive skill, it unavoidably depends on pronunciation to a substantial extent (Tench, 1981). But most ESL learners especially in India have problems perceiving certain English sounds like /θ/, /ð/, or /ʒ/ (fricatives) with any kind of accuracy. The sounds like /θ/, and /ð/ do exist in General Indian English (GIE), but most Indians articulate the sounds as plosives than fricatives.

English is a stress-timed language possessing a speech rhythm in which the stressed syllables recur at equal intervals of time (Richards, Platt, & Weber, 1985). But many languages like Bengali are syllable-timed languages having a speech rhythm in which all the syllables recur at equal intervals of time. And this difference between the two languages causes great difficulty to non-native ESL learners especially in placing stress on the right syllable and using the appropriate tone and thus hampers the encoding and decoding of information (Maniruzzaman, 2015). Moreover, unlike native speakers, the grasping capability of non-native ESL learners is much slower and they often try to comprehend every received content in their mother tongue, creating a wide gap between their actual listening and perception and between their actual thought and speech.

Therefore, selecting listening materials is more a complicated task than selecting reading materials, especially for adult ESL/EFL learners. However, to prepare our learners for real-life listening, and to expose them to authentic materials, we have used animated songs in English as listening material to develop effective listening skills in them. And the outcome

positively suggests that animated English songs are a better listening material to use in the language classroom to develop effective listening skills among advanced ESL/ EFL learners.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

The research aims at finding an effective, authentic, and motivating listening material to develop Listening Skills among adult or advanced ESL/ EFL learners.

Music generates happiness for its listener (Schubert, 2009). Music increases stimulation and mood, therefore affecting and benefiting the attention process (Nurhasanah & Suryaman, 2022). Listening to music has been shown to improve memory functioning, increase the rate of healing, improve workouts, and more (Edwards, n.d.). But not all English songs could be used as authentic material for listening tasks for advanced adult ESL/ EFL learners whose orientation towards listening to the English language, in general, is almost nil since their primary level of education.

Therefore, the study looks forward to authenticating the hypothesis that an effective listening skill can be developed among adult ESL/ EFL learners, especially through animated songs in English.

METHODOLOGY:

The research paper is an outcome of an empirical study done with sixty-two (62) adult learners.

The sample size is determined by the volunteering participants only, who willingly opted to be a part of this research. However, efforts were made to remain strict on the criterion that participants must be adult learners; and they should be from different regions or Institutes and different socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants from one University and nine general degree Colleges willingly participated in the research. 64.3% of them belong to the age group 22 years; while 21.4% belong to the age group of 21 years; the rest 14.3% belong to the age group of 20 years of age.

Apart from being adult advanced learners, their participation remains valid and rational as all of these participants speak Bengali as their mother tongue or L1 and 89.3% had English as a second language at their higher secondary level of education. The same percentage of the learners confirmed that Bengali or vernacular was the medium of instruction for them at their schools across all levels (primary, secondary as well as higher secondary) of education. However, 85.7% of them confirmed that English was the medium of instruction only at the undergraduate level.

So, all these sixty-two participants are learning English as a foreign language. And they have no or very little orientation in listening and speaking in the English language.

At the onset, these learners are served with a questionnaire on learners personal profiles and the variables they bring into the classroom. Then the experiment was conducted in two phases –

Data Collection Procedure:

Phase 1: After the pre-listening activity, learners were asked to listen to the official video of the song "*How Far I'll Go*" (how far I'll go, 2015) sung by Canadian singer-songwriter from Brampton, Ontario Alessia Caracciolo, known professionally as Alessia Cara. The genre of the song is R&B/Soul, Pop. Contemporary R&B (or simply R&B) is a popular music genre that combines rhythm and blues with elements of pop, soul, funk, hip-hop, and electronic music. The genre features a distinctive record production style, drum machine-backed rhythms, pitch-corrected vocals, and a smooth, lush style of vocal arrangement (Contemporary R&B, n.d.).

Phase 2: Once again after certain contextualization especially about the film Moana Sing-Along, learners are given to listen to the animated version of the song "*How Far I'll Go*" (how far I'll go, 2016) by an American actress and singer Auli'i Cravalho who made her acting debut as the voice of the titular character in the 2016 Disney 3D computer-animated musical feature film Moana. The song is from the animated movie Moana Sing-Along released in 2016. The genre of the song is the same the song is R&B/Soul, Pop.

In each case, learners are asked to listen to the songs through their mobile phones using earpieces or headphones.

A feedback form is also served to them at the end of the listening session to get their opinion about that particular session of listening activity.

Goals selected for the research population:

Bottom-Up Processing Goals:

- a. Listening to any particular and significant content word especially requested.
- b. Identifying the Content word(s) that is stressed or chunked within a speech to make it a point most appropriate to the speech event (Carlisi & Christie, 2000).

Top-Down Processing Goals:

- a. Using knowledge of the topic to predict the content of the text.
- b. Recognize the point of view or make inferences (Gill & Hartmann, 2000).

Parallel Processing Goals:

- a. Using knowledge of the discourse or phrases predict the emotional attribute of the speaker
- b. Make inferences from expressions and emotions or familiar word(s).

There are six (6) Questions in total based on the above processing goals. Questions are provided in the form of google form. Participants are requested to answer the questions after listening to the song.

The Feedback Questionnaire:

The feedback questionnaire was to confirm from the participants themselves the following:

- i. How far do both types of songs help in motivating them to listen effectively?
- ii. What specific difficulties did they face while listening to both types of songs in English?
- iii. Whether the pop version or the country song type song in English is a better choice as listening material to practice with and develop effective learning?

RESULTS

Result summary of Phase 1: Research population listening to the official video of the song "How Far I'll Go" (how far I'll go, 2015) sung by Alessia Cara.

Here is the graphical representation of the percentage of accurate and inaccurate answers and their averages of the overall 62 research population on the official video of the song "How Far I'll Go" (How Far I'll Go, 2015) sung by Alessia Cara.

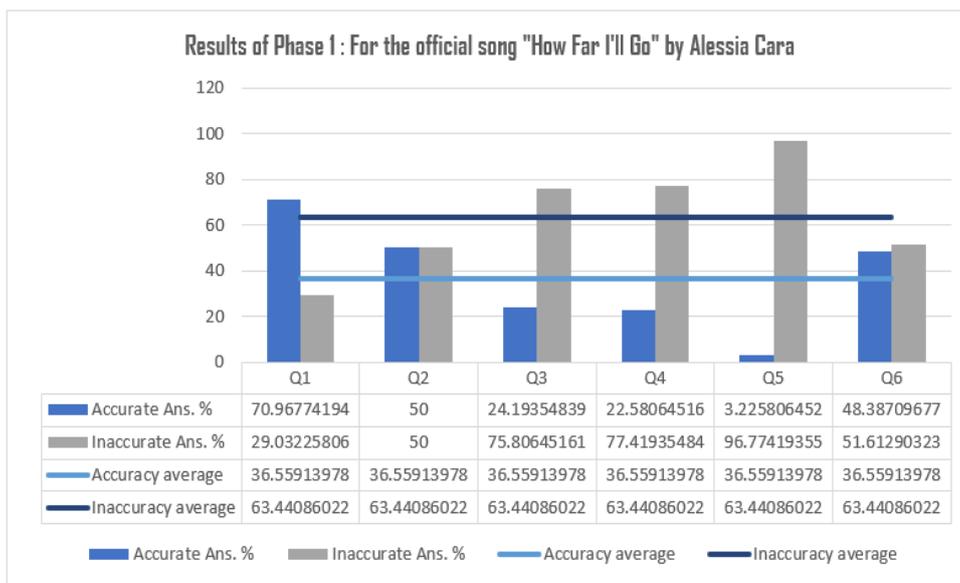


Table 1: Graphical representation of the percentage of accurate and inaccurate answers and their averages of the overall research population after listening to the song "How Far I'll Go", by Alessia Cara.

With the official video of the song "How Far I'll Go" (how far I'll go, 2015) sung by Alessia Cara as listening material, on average only 36.55% of the total 62 research population could be accurate at accomplishing the listening goals and 63.44% failed to show their ability to listen effectively, to understand appropriately, to restore the listened content in memory for long and represent their listening on the given worksheet.

Result summary of Phase 2: Research population listening to the animated version of the song "How Far I'll Go" (how far I'll go, 2016) by American actress and singer Auli'i Cravalho.

Here is the graphical representation of the percentage of accurate and inaccurate answers and their averages of the overall 62 research population on the animated version of the song "How Far I'll Go" (How Far I'll Go, 2016) by an American actress and singer Auli'i Cravalho.

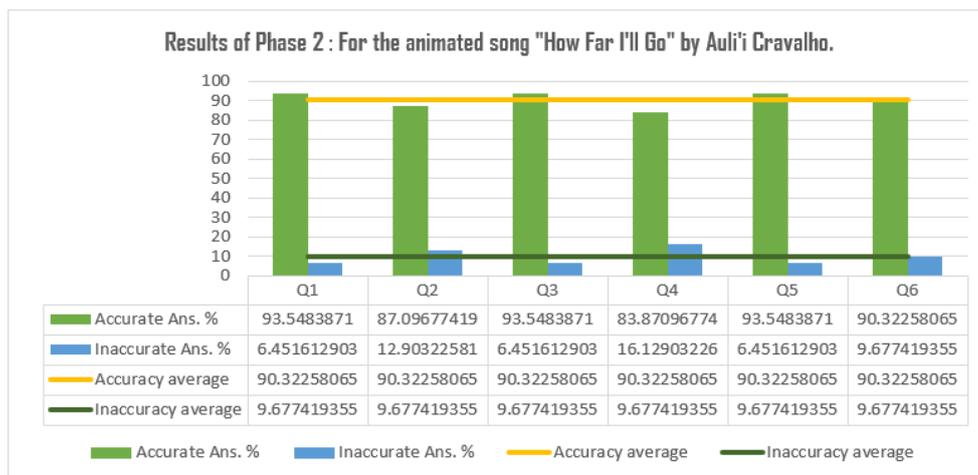


Table 2: Graphical representation of the percentage of accurate and inaccurate answers and their averages of the overall research population after listening to the animated song “How Far I’ll Go”, by Auli’i Cravalho.

With the animated version of the song “How Far I’ll Go” (how far I'll go, 2016) by American actress and singer Auli’i Cravalho as listening material, on average, a huge 90.32% of the total 62 research population could be accurate at accomplishing the listening goals successfully and only 9.67% failed to show their ability to listen effectively, to understand appropriately, to restore the listened content in memory for long and represent their listening on the given worksheet.

Considering the means (average) of both the experiment results and the average of the standard deviation (as the standard deviation for both is 15.90 and 2.52 respectively; so, average 8.81), the Cohen d effect size is also calculated. And the Effect size came out to be quite high (3.7).

DISCUSSION

Listening as a language skill is a basic skill where we attentively receive auditory as well as visual stimuli through eyes and ears, comprehend the information and the intention received, restore them, and then make an appropriate response.

Teaching listening skills to any type of English language learners (irrespective of Native, ESL / EFL learners) would include training them to be motivated to listen; be attentive and focused on the content; avoid the distraction of any kind; receive the aural as well as visual stimuli through ears and eyes without any prejudice or biases; try comprehending the information and the intention of the received content with serious consideration; restore the message and the emotion attached to it and finally to give away appropriate response.

Yes, there are debates in cognitive neurosciences concerning the effect of music on verbal learning and memory, but researchers like Laura Ferreri and Laura Verga have findings that ensure that music boosts cognitive functions, verbal memory, and learning (Ferreri & Verga, 2016). Music increases stimulation and mood, therefore affecting and benefiting the attention process (Nurhasanah & Suryaman, 2022). Listening to music has been shown to improve memory functioning, increase the rate of healing, improve workouts, and more (Edwards, n.d.).

But from the experiment, it is clear that not all English songs could be used as authentic material for listening tasks for advanced adult ESL/ EFL learners whose orientation towards listening to the English language, in general, is almost nil since their primary level of education.

With the official video of the song "*How Far I'll Go*" (how far I'll go, 2015) sung by Alessia Cara, on average only 36.55% of the total 62 research population could be accurate at accomplishing the listening goals; whereas with the animated version of the song "*How Far I'll Go*" (how far I'll go, 2016) by an American actress and singer Auli'i Cravalho, on an average, a huge 90.32% of the total 62 research population could be accurate at accomplishing the listening goals.

Keeping all the external factors affecting effective listening to a minimum, with animated English songs learners could concentrate better on the content of the song. They remain mentally and emotionally motivated and ready to listen to the words as well as the expressions of the animated character.

Perhaps cartoon characters captured their attention as they usually had done in their childhood days. The use of colorful contour and form, and the slow pace of action sequences impose very little or no distractions on the concentrated minds of the learners. The prominent expressions of the characters always provide useful insight into the listener's mind.

In the feedback form, most of the participants complained about the following issues while listening to the official version of Alessia Cara's song –

- The actions are fast-paced compared to animated songs; facts received are mostly fragmented
- The American accent in pronunciation made it difficult to grab the content words and verbal clues.
- Alessia Care is less expressive than the animated character

And unsurprisingly, 82.3% of the total research population favored the animated version of the English song as interesting, motivating, and appropriate listening material.

The animated song is relevant too. In English classrooms or laboratories our primary motive is to make the ESL / EFL learners listen effectively, and facilitate them with content they find encouraging and have expressions that may help them to identify emotions and expressions indispensable in a communication process. And considering all of them, we believe, animated songs in English serve all the purposes.

Moreover, the content does have the potential of 'transferability' or 'applicability' too. An animated English song is not only a listening content, it also has visible emotional expression of the characters mirroring real-life experiences. Learners could always use them in their future professional life.

Last, but not least, it appeals equally to the heterogeneous class of ESL/EFL learners.

Conclusion

Listening as a language skill is a basic skill where we attentively receive auditory as well as visual stimuli through eyes and ears, comprehend the information and the intention received, restore them, and then make an appropriate response. Though teaching listening skills especially to ESL / EFL learners may be a complicated task, yet, the use of animated songs in

English as listening material successfully develops effective listening skills among advanced ESL/ EFL learners.

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