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Using BBC Learning English Podcasts to develop university students' listening skills

Abstract

The emergence of podcasts in an English foreign language (EFL) setting is seen as a helpful aid to foreign language learning. Using podcasts might help improve language learning efficiency. This research addresses how podcasts can be an alternative means of improving English listening comprehension for university students. The study was carried out at Nizhyn Gogol State University, Ukraine, using quantitative and qualitative methods of analyzing data. To collect the data, research tools such as a questionnaire, initial and final testing, and observation were used. The procedure was introduced for a group of first-year students and implemented for six weeks. Special BBC Learning English podcast activities were designed and offered to the students. The main stages have been specified in the process of developing students' listening skills. In the pre-listening stage, students do preparation activities to prepare for the podcast using their background knowledge. The while-listening stage is aimed at listening for gist, listening for details, making inferences, and summarizing. In the post-listening stage, the listeners are taken beyond the podcast content and set tasks which contribute to integrating other language skills. Samples of activities which correspond to these three stages are provided. A balanced approach to choosing top-down or bottom-up processing within the stages improves the process of forming competencies in listening of first-year students. Hence, based on the positive results of this study, BBC Learning English podcasts with meaningful, appropriate, and interesting activities attract the students' attention, increase their motivation, and improve their listening comprehension.

Keywords: podcast, taxonomy, listening comprehension, bottom-up processing, top-down processing, prior knowledge, background information

Introduction

Nowadays, the global demand for English creates an enormous spectrum of teaching and learning resources, among which is podcasting. Teachers and English foreign language (EFL) students can make use of a wide range of podcasts, which play an essential role in facilitating teaching and learning processes. In the EFL learning environment, it has completely transformed classroom communication methods, modified teaching and learning the English language, and contributed to interaction and collaboration.

The word 'podcast' originates from two words: iPod and broadcast (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007, p. 473). Podcasts are audio files on the Internet which are usually uploaded at regular intervals. Podcasts can either be pure audio podcasts, video podcasts or enhanced podcasts; i.e. pictures, slideshows, PowerPoint, etc. Podcasting is also considered to be a part of m-Learning, as Tynan and Colbarn (2006) identify m-Learning as 'a different form of eLearning, as it takes the learner away from a fixed point and 'respects that a user would like to interact with educational resources whilst away from a normal place of learning classroom or computer' (p. 826). The idea is that podcasting creates a borderless classroom. By extending the classroom, making it mobile, educators are able to increase the time students allocate to studying. Nowadays, however, podcasting in education is more than an extension of the classroom; it enhances the potential learning outcomes of modern students who are exceedingly technologically advanced.

The research has been done on BBC Learning English podcasts to better understanding their effectiveness in developing students' listening skills, and particularly improving

EFL audio-visual comprehension. Basically, the investigation of listening skills in language learning has been performed through the analysis of podcasts, specially designed activities, modes of interaction, and the influence of bottom-up and top-down processing of podcasts on the process of English listening comprehension in EFL learners.

The research is based on Action Research, which aims at investigating the impact of regular practice of listening to podcasts on the development of listening skills in EFL students. By providing appropriate techniques, teaching media can play an essential role in the teaching and learning process (Smaldino et al., 2008). This paper examines in particular whether the use of podcasts is useful in both listening and speaking, as it can also provide plenty of classroom activities (Sze, 2006, p. 118). Therefore, as one of the core skills, listening assumes the learners to be not only skilful listeners, but also active ones. Needless to say, it requires plenty of practice to fully develop the effective habits of a good listener. Students have to be provided with opportunities to listen meaningfully; teachers also need to give them the tools to do it effectively. Yet, more notably, students should be guided and regularly reminded that they need to exercise the skills of a good listener, and they should reflect on their own skills in this area.

Podcasting has opened up new opportunities for L2 teachers as they can be used for practising both intensive and extensive listening. However, EFL podcasts are particularly suited for extensive listening, for the purpose of motivating student interest in listening to English, and providing them with exposure to native speakers' speech (Rost, 1991).

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is university students' attitude to using podcasts, regarding listening comprehension?
2. Do the activities in the 'Pre-Listening' stage facilitate listening comprehension of BBC Learning English podcasts in first-year students?
3. Can specially designed podcast comprehension activities help EFL first-year students improve their listening?

The study will examine the following hypothesis: regular use of BBC Learning English podcasts will improve first-year students' listening skills.

Literature review

In a language learning context, the idea of using podcasts is certainly considered beneficial for L2 students, and this is reflected in the literature review aiming at emphasizing the importance of podcasting technology in developing university students' listening skills.

The literature analysis reveals that the technology of podcasting is widely used. Many scientists consider podcasting as a powerful technological tool in teaching almost all language skills (Davydenko & Ponomarenko, 2018; Gachago, 2016; Lazzari, 2009; Naidionova & Po-

nomarenko, 2018; Richard, 2008 and others). Nevertheless, among the other language skills, such as speaking, reading and writing, Graham and Santos (2015) claim that listening is still the least researched, probably due to its temporal nature; the spontaneity of speech; the inability of the listener to go back and review what was said; pronunciation features. According to the studies of the leading methodologists, bottom-up and top-down processing can be crucial for successful listening, and combining them is a really strategic method to help students build better listening skills based on the process rather than the product approach (Newton & Nation, 2020; Wallace, 2012). The way in which top-down and bottom-up skills interact is variable, depending on the task, context, and listener (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Wu, 1998). According to McBride and Vandergrift, listening comprehension is accomplished through an orchestration of strategies, using those that best match a given task (McBride, 2009; Vandergrift, 2003). Vandergrift points out that learners benefit from training in metacognitive awareness about listening comprehension and in top-down processes such as using background information to form hypotheses about the spoken message (Vandergrift, 2003). McBride states that teaching these bottom-up skills ought to be approached from two sides: through focused listening activities which direct the learner's attention to specific features of the aural input, and through extensive exposure to authentic speech (McBride, 2009). In turn, top-down listening skills can largely compensate for incomplete bottom-up processing when there is a good match between the listener's expectations and what is said, but when this is not the case, skilled bottom-up processing is what distinguishes more skilled listeners from less successful ones (Tsui & Fullilove, 1998).

The classification and taxonomy of podcasts are considered in great detail by many scientists (Carvalho et al., 2009a; Koppelman, 2013; Naidionova & Ponomarenko, 2018). Firstly, we consider it of great importance to highlight the podcast taxonomy which can help teachers select or even create their own podcasts. The taxonomy offered by Carvalho et al. is classified according to six criteria: the type of podcast, method of presentation, duration, author, style and purpose (Carvalho et al., 2009a, pp. 133–134). As far as the type is concerned, podcasts are divided into informative podcasts, feedback and commentary podcasts, guidelines, and authentic materials. Some scientists assert that a podcast taxonomy has six variables such as type, medium, length, author, style and purpose (Naidionova & Ponomarenko, 2018, p. 179). In turn, these four types of podcasts include informative podcasts which demonstrate concepts, analysis, synthesis, description of tools or equipment, reading of excerpts/poems, etc.; feedback/comments to students' assignments and group work; guidelines; recommendations that may concern studying, reflective learning, etc. and authentic materials, i.e. materials created for the public and not for a specific course or students, such as interviews, news, radio programming, etc. Researchers prove that integration

of podcasts into EFL teaching achieves specific educational goals, such as developing the four language learning skills, improving pronunciation, expanding and enriching vocabulary, and forming grammatical competence (Ducate & Lomicka 2009; Idrissova et al., 2015). Stanley states that podcasting is one example of how technology can be used to support pronunciation, in and out of the classroom (Stanley, 2013, p. 171). In particular, he approves the efficiency of being an active listener using special equipment such as headsets, stand-alone microphones, podcasting websites, voice recognition software, etc.

Moreover, it is acknowledged by methodologists that authentic materials that are regularly used in the classroom influence learners' listening comprehension significantly (Constantine, 2007; Kardashova, 2015; Naidionova & Ponomarenko, 2018; Ramli & Kurniawan, 2017). Encouraging language learners to listen to podcasts outside the classroom also gives them the exposure to comprehensible input as they are involved in authentic listening. Furthermore, some complex analysis of using podcasts as means of increasing students' motivation to foreign language learning is made by some educators as well (Dale, 2007; Hubackova & Golkova, 2014, p. 144; Rosell-Aguilar, 2013, p. 76). McMinn assures us that podcasts can be used to increase the time a student allocates to language learning and 'provide a meaningful experience that is motivating, stimulating and useful for a language learner' (Asoodar et al., 2014; McMinn, 2008).

Some researchers address the effect of podcasting as a tool for becoming an effective autonomous learner in the future (Stanley, 2013, p. 82). Most podcasts have not been created primarily with learners in mind, so they have an access to a repository and can choose topics they are particularly interested in. Besides, listening can be repeated at will, and the audio can also be slowed down, using various audio editors such as Audacity. What is more, the use of podcasts in language teaching enhances not only learner autonomy, but also intercultural awareness and information competence (Hrytsyk, 2015; McBride, 2009; Shekhavtsova & Protopopova, 2019).

Thus, literature review shows that podcasting is as widely applicable in learning environment today as other internet resources, however the practical aspect of the problem of improving listening skills at the tertiary level in Ukraine requires more detailed study.

Methodology and procedure

Tools and action research stages

The research is based on action research which involved two cycles, consisting of posing a problem, devising a strategy, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and sharing results. The result of one cycle is used to determine the need for the following cycle, until the problems get solved by the strategy (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992). This was both a quantitative and

qualitative study of data collection over a total of six weeks. It is a type of mixed method approach that builds on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009).

The first stage of our study was defining a problem area. Before the intervention, it was noticed that there was not enough emphasis on developing listening skills in many students of the group. We intended to tackle this issue by implementing podcasts from BBC Learning English into regular classes and check the research hypothesis.

The second stage involved selecting and evaluating tools. To get answers to the research questions, and accept or reject the hypothesis, it was necessary to select research tools. We used the following tools, such as questionnaires, testing and observation. Earlier it was stated that there were two types of data which had to be collected: qualitative and quantitative. As for quantitative data, questionnaires and testing allowed us to get valid data for investigate how many learners were interested in the activities, and to follow the level of productivity in general. On the other hand, qualitative data could be collected by observation in the most successful way, too. The following data-collecting tools will be described below in a more detailed way:

Questionnaire

The first data collecting tool was a questionnaire. We considered it reasonable to conduct two questionnaires: before and after the intervention. It was rational at the initial stage to find out if the learners would agree to be exposed to any actions, and on the basis on the results of the second questionnaire we hoped to draw some conclusions about this study effectiveness. The pre-intervention questionnaire with three close-ended questions was offered to the students in order to determine the participants' attitude to listening as a skill in general, to find out about any difficulties they had in this area and their desire to be exposed to BBC Learning English podcasts to improve their listening skills. The main goal of obtaining the data in the post-intervention questionnaire was to confirm or reject the validity of our action research. The analysis of the post-intervention questionnaire can be viewed in the findings.

Testing

One more important data-collecting tool which was extremely rewarding for understanding the overall knowledge of the topic was testing. It consisted of two phases: pre-testing and post-testing. Directly before the intervention, the students were given a pre-test to evaluate their performance before starting the process (Taran, 2019, pp. 127–128). The pre-test contained 12 true-false sentences focusing on listening comprehension that could be answered with one correct answer. There were several high performers, while other students faced some listening obstacles, so this was evidence for further intervention based on fostering listening skills in

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first-year students through podcasting technology studying the topic 'Meals'. The post-test was planned in a similar format and also contained 12 true-false sentences focusing on listening to a 6 Minute podcast 'Photo-friendly food'. The post-test aimed at indicating to what extent podcasting could enhance students' level of listening.

Observation

The last method for data collection was observation. This was done on a regular basis by the teacher for six weeks. It helped to determine the level of students' involvement during the intervention, attitude of all the participants to using BBC Learning English podcasts, and their improvement in EFL. This tool was a meaningful way to collect the information and played an important role in answering the research questions and drawing conclusions in terms of the suggested hypothesis.

The third stage was selecting materials and designing activities. During this stage, a there was significant emphasis on preparing for the intervention. Some podcasts from BBC Learning English were selected and activities for boosting listening skills were designed. Furthermore, the students were set various objectives, so they listened for different purposes: listening for gist; listening for specific information, and listening for detailed understanding. In our research, we employed a three-stage arrangement: pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening. Each of these stages had its own purpose and corresponding set of activities, which were offered to the learners over a period of six weeks and gave us an opportunity to achieve the goal of the research. A sample activity can be viewed below (Figure 1).

Stage 1: Pre-Listening

The aim of this stage is to introduce students to the context of the podcast, activate background knowledge on the topic, eliminate possible language difficulties, facilitate understanding of the podcast, and interpret it. We suggest some activities at this stage, for instance predicting the content of the podcast using the keywords; speculating about the

title or pictures of the podcast; discussing students' experiences, expressing their own point of view on the problem raised in the podcast, etc. Here are some of them:

1. Work with a partner. You are going to listen to a podcast about foodies. Look at the photo and discuss with your fellow-student why it might be relevant to the podcast.
2. Work with a partner. Look at the title and the picture of the podcast. Express your suppositions what it is going to be about.

Thus, the presented podcast activities at the 'Pre-Listening' stage are essential and undeniably have to be integrated into the process of developing listening skills in EFL students, as it helps them develop a language conjecture and shapes their ability to anticipate the content of the podcast. Pair work and working in small groups are the most common students' groupings at this stage.

Stage 2: Listening

The 'Listening' stage is actually listening to the podcast in order to obtain general and detailed information. It is advisable to play podcasts twice. During the first listening, students try to understand the general meaning and check the predictions made at the 'Pre-Listening' stage. The following exercises can be suggested to students:

- Listen to the podcast and check the ideas you expressed in the 'Pre-Listening'.
- Rob and Neil, the programme presenters, have Angela Hartnett, Britain's top chef, in their studio. Find out what they are discussing. Were your predictions correct?

During the second listening, students listen to find specific information, answer the questions; say whether statements true or false; provide missing parts of statements; read the transcript of the podcast and find any missing details; make a plan or give an outline of the podcast, etc.

1. Listen to the podcast again and decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F).
2. Listen to the podcast again and answer the questions.

Figure 1

Sample activities for the podcast 'Are you a foodie?'

Source: BBC learning English. (2018, November 29). 6 Minute English. Are you a foodie? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/6-minute-english/ep-180412>

6 Minute English

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Are you a foodie?

EPIISODE 180412 / 12 APR 2018



3. Listen again and then read the transcript of the podcast. Find the details you failed to comprehend.
4. Listen to the podcast again and make a plan of it.
5. Listen to the podcast again. Give an outline of the podcast.

The main objective of the activities at this stage is to teach the students to use their background knowledge to predict the content of the podcast; check their predictions; distinguish between specific and general information; point out the details of the content; think logically; analyse the content of the podcast etc.

Stage 3: After-Listening

At this stage, planning involves the incorporation of listening and speaking. Students interpret the material they have just listened to, evaluate it, and employ it in further interaction:

1. Work in pairs. A 'Foodie' is someone who is very interested in all aspects of food. Interview your desk fellow student and ask if he/she considers himself/herself a foodie. Be ready to give reasons.
2. Work in groups of 3-4 and write a list of a foodie's characteristics. Then merge with other groups and share your lists. Work out the criteria according to which foodies can be defined.

Consequently, the activities of 'After-Listening' stage are communicative and the aim was to integrate knowledge gained by students while listening to the podcast into interaction. Incorporating role-playing into the classroom is desirable at this stage, as it adds variety, a change of pace, and opportunities for a lot of language production.

The fourth stage was an intervention when we collected the evidence by offering the students questionnaires and tests and observing the class to check the hypothesis and answer the research questions. This stage gives an overview of implementation of podcast technology as a meaningful technique for increasing proficiency in English. The results will be observed further in the paper.

The fifth stage consisted of reporting and sharing. This stage reveals the results of the investigation and they are made public. After analyzing, evaluating and counting the results, tables and pie charts were designed. During this stage, answers to the research questions were given and conclusions and recommendations were summed up on the validity of the hypothesis.

The research participants

This action research took place in Nizhyn Gogol State University, at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, in the second semester of the 2020–2021 academic year (with the following study formats combined – three weeks online in Zoom Video Conferencing and three weeks face-to-face). These were twelve first-year students aged 17–19 with different language learning backgrounds, levels and learning styles. The research was carried out in a multilevel group with mixed-abil-

ity students studying EFL in 80-minute tutorials 5–6 times a week for six weeks. According to their module grades, test results, teacher's observation and Placement Test, their English proficiency level was B1-B2. Regarding their learning styles, there were students of visual and auditory styles. This meant that the use of audio materials in the classroom was met with a positive response from the students.

Ethical issues

The Faculty of Foreign Languages and the students were informed about all actions taken by the researcher. The participants were aware of the right to withdraw from the research at any time and that their data would be destroyed. Consent was sought from them before data collection.

Overview of BBC Learning English podcasts

The podcasts employed in the study are taken from BBC Learning English, namely 6 Minute English (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/>). Firstly, we suggest giving a short overview of 6 Minute English podcasts, which is a long-running series of discussions on various topics, conveyed to listeners by BBC Learning English presenters. This resource is intermediate level English podcasts, which can be easily downloaded and correspond to the language level of first-year students. Secondly, we consider it essential to emphasize the variety of BBC Learning English podcasts in terms of podcast taxonomy that supplies the learners with a great choice of materials; informativeness, which assumes providing students with useful and present-day information; authenticity of podcasts recorded by native speakers; proficiency conveying a real-life message. Due to their nature, 6 Minute English podcasts are informative as presenters acquaint the listeners with the current news, events, discoveries, etc. These podcasts are structurally presented in the form of a conversation containing feedback and studio host comment, who could be well-known scientists, politicians, or celebrities. According to the basic criteria of Carvalho & Aguiar's taxonomy, the duration of 6 Minute English is 6 minutes and is of medium duration (6–15 minutes) (Carvalho et al., 2009a, pp. 133–134). According to the style of speech, 6 Minute English presenters (Neil, Rob) always communicate in an informal style, using humor and enlisting the wide support of the audience. Finally, the goal of these resources is to inform the listeners about exciting news and discussions on a global scale, enhance motivation for learning English and, certainly, improve language skills. Thus, the usage of podcasts in the classroom at the tertiary level could be justified due to the above-mentioned didactic characteristics, factors and podcast taxonomy.

Findings

The data were collected using different tools from a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Firstly, quantitative data were gathered using questionnaires

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to gauge the participants' attitudes, opinions and willingness to use BBC Learning English podcasts in developing listening skills. Before the intervention, the students were given the initial questionnaire with three close-ended questions, the answers to which can be viewed in Table 1, which indicate that 7 first-year students out of 12 have difficulties in EFL comprehension and 11 students out of 12 would not be against being exposed to a new listening experience.

At the end of the intervention, the participants were offered the other questionnaire, which consisted of five close-ended questions concerning the process of podcast activities the students went through in order to evaluate any improvement in their listening. The results are illustrated in Table 2 below.

The answers to the first question 'Do the prior knowledge and background information affect English listening comprehension using podcasts?' are as follows: 11 out of 12 participants indicated that the prior knowledge and background information affected their English listening comprehension in a positive way. Hence, this helped the learners to develop a linguistic guess and built their ability to anticipate the content of the audio material.

The answers to the second question 'Was the use of podcasts a delightful and stimulating experience for the students?' show that 10 participants out of 12 stated they had found the podcasting technique challenging, though at the same time stimulating and motivating. 2 students showed no interest in it and were rather discontented.

The answers to the third question 'Has it become easier for the students to comprehend 6 Minute English after the intervention?' demonstrate positive results. 10 participants out of 12 answered it had become easier for them to comprehend 6 Minute English and they gradually listened to more and more complicated audio materials. 1 found no differences and 1 noticed slight changes.

The fourth question confirmed that the majority of first-year students (11 out of 12) agreed that 6 Minute English is enjoyable, entertaining and raised intercultural topics.

Students' answers to the fifth question 'Can specially designed podcast comprehension activities help EFL learners improve their listening?' 11 students out of 12 said they were sure that such activities within the main listening stages definitely contributed to the improvement of their listening skills.

Table 1
Pre-Intervention Questionnaire

	Students' answers (number of students)	
	Yes	No
Question 1 Is your attitude to listening as a skill positive?	10	2
Question 2 Do you have any difficulties in EFL listening?	8	4
Question 3 Would you like to be exposed to listening to BBC Learning English podcasts to improve your listening skills?	11	1

Source: author's own work.

Table 2
Post-Intervention Questionnaire

	Students' answers (number of students)		
	Yes	No	Slight changes
Question 1 Do the prior knowledge and background information affect English listening comprehension using podcasts?	11	1	
Question 2 Was the use of podcasts delightful and stimulating experience for the students?	10	2	
Question 3 Has it become easier for the students to comprehend 6 Minute English podcasts after the intervention?	10	1	1
Question 4 Can 6 Minute English be one of the main sources of intercultural issues and useful information in the context of learning?	11	1	
Question 5 Can specially designed podcast comprehension activities help EFL learners improve their listening?	11	1	

Source: author's own work.

The data received from the fifth question helps us answer our second research question and support the hypothesis.

Pre- and Post-Intervention Testing

Learners’ test results are one of the ways to evaluate learning, so we started our research with a pre-testing phase in order to define a starting point. Moreover, we used pre- and post-testing as a tool in order to obtain reliable and sufficient results in our action research. As Dimitrov and Rumrill state, the measurement of change provides a vehicle for assessing the impact of interventions (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003, p. 159). For that reason, our study suggests that introduction of a pre- and post-test tool supported achievement of the learning objectives with a better understanding and this helps students start to focus on the key issues that will be covered. Before the intervention, an initial test was offered to the students (Taran, 2019, pp. 127–128). It was a part of the radio programme ‘Student Exchange Programmes’ during which the presenter and the guest were talking about the prospect of students’ exchange programmes. The pre-test contained 12 true-false sentences focusing on listening comprehension that could be answered with one correct answer. For each correct statement, the learner could get 1 point. Then we performed an intervention for a period of six weeks, during which each learner was aided by designed activities especially at the pre-listening and while-listening stages, the aim of which was mainly to improve learning and teaching. Consequently, we carried out a post-testing phase at the end of the sixth week. The 6 Minute podcast ‘Photo-friendly food’ was selected for this purpose and was designed in a similar format as a pre-test, with 12 true-false sentences (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/features/6-minute-english/ep-181129>). Therefore pre- and post-tests were designed in the same formats, both as radioprogrammes and of similar task type, with the same number of questions in order to demonstrate meaningful results.

First, the results of pre- and post-tests were analysed to determine the mean scores. The mean score of post-test was 8.08 which a difference of 1.33 compared to the pre-test mean score. Table 3 demonstrates that the outcomes of pre- and post-intervention testing are different (percentage). We can immediately see that the ultimate progressive change occurred in the number of low-level students. This approach demonstrates that the selected intervention method turned out to be effective, even though there

Table 3
Students’ Pre- and Post-test Scores (percentage)

Criteria	Scores	Pre- Intervention Testing	Post- Intervention Testing
Listening to BBC Learning English podcasts	%	12 mixed-ability first-year students	12 mixed-ability first-year students
	high performers (10–12)	2 (17%)	3 (25%)
	moderate performers (5–9)	7 (58%)	8 (67%)
	low performers (1–4)	3 (25%)	1 (8%)

Source: author’s own work.

was a slight increase in the number of intermediate and strong students. Pre-test and post-test improvement was to a large extent due to the content of the BBC Learning English podcasts and due to activating background knowledge of the students.

Second, to verify the validity of our research findings we employed a Sign Test to either accept or reject the hypothesis. Descriptions of the Sign Test can be viewed below:

Formulation of the hypothesis:

H0: There is no shift in the formation of listening skills by means of BBC Learning English podcasts.

H1: There is a shift in the formation of listening skills by means of BBC Learning English podcasts.

A statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data acquired from the pre- and post-tests. $p < 0.05$ was considered as significant (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4
Students’ Pre- and Post-test improvement (Sign Test)

Frequencies		
		N
Post-test results- -Pre-test results	Negative differences ^a	0
	Positive differences ^b	9
	Ties	3
	Total	12

Note. a. Post-test results < Pre-test results;

b. Post-test results > Pre-test results

Source: author’s own work.

Table 5
Test Statistics^a

	Post-test results – Pre-test results
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	0.004 ^b

Note. a. Sign Test; b. Binomial distribution used. The exact p-value is computed based on the binomial distribution because there are 25 or fewer cases.

Source: author’s own work.

Total post-test correct responses were highly significant ($p < 0.05$) compared to pre-test responses, and therefore hypothesis H0 can be rejected and hypothesis H1 is accepted. Thus the findings suggest that the improvement was not accidental (Table 6).

Table 6

Hypothesis Test Summary

Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^{a,b}	Decision
The median of differences between Pre and Post equals 0	Related samples Sign Test	0.004 ^c	Reject the null hypothesis

Note. a. The significance level is 0.050; b. Asymptotic significance is displayed; c. Exact significance is displayed for this test

Source: author's own work.

Observation

Observation is a basic method for obtaining data in qualitative research. The qualitative researcher's goal is a complete description of behaviour in a specific setting. Qualitative observations rely on narrative or words to describe the setting, the behaviours, and the interactions. There are some specialized approaches to observation, such as interaction analysis (Ary et al., 2010). Observational data can also show change over time within the context of the procedure of the implemented tasks. Observations usually result in reflection and reflections initiate minor or major changes in action research (Crookes, 1993).

In our context, a special observation sheet was designed with some definite criteria (*the level of involvement; participation; feedback on the podcast*) focusing on students' performance and interactions in the classroom and how they responded to a podcast as an integral part of a learning process. The new podcast experience seemed to be a bit complicated for low-level students and fascinating for intermediate and strong students. The main advantage of the observation for our action research was that specific, detailed information about the students' involvement could be collected and then analysed. It was discovered that before and at the beginning of the intervention the learners were less active, and asked a lot of questions concerning the instructions to the listening activities. Some low-level participants had no experience in predicting the title of the podcast, for instance. Furthermore, they were afraid of making mistakes. In fact, activating background information turned out to be effective for all participants as they were learning some necessary techniques for improving listening skills such as predicting the content of the podcast based on keywords; speculating about the title; sharing their own experiences, etc. Gradually, both the weak and less strong students started to understand the tasks much more easily and clearly, and they did not ask as many questions as before the intervention. The low-level students were involved in the process of pre-listening, listening and post-listening more actively during the intervention phase. The weak students acknowledged that they used bottom-up processing inefficiently and inappropriately before the intervention. They mainly focused on understanding new words and could hardly understand the whole podcast. Additionally, the reason for the students' more active engagement and collaborative performance in the classroom could be thought-provoking topics raised in the podcasts as well. Overall,

the data obtained from the observation showed positive results and that classroom observation as a research tool was beneficial for me as a teacher to get a deeper understanding of the intervention. This is in accordance with the study of Johnson et al. (2020), who confirmed the validity of observation for measuring participants' engagement.

To sum up, based on the reflections from the questionnaires and results of pre- and post-tests and observation, first-year students had successfully improved their achievement in terms of listening comprehension so employing BBC Learning English podcasts in the learning process can be justified.

Discussion

The major objective of this paper was to determine whether BBC Learning English podcasts affect Ukrainian participants' listening comprehension. The findings reveal positive results. Therefore, this study supports the concept that regular practice using podcasts can make a positive and significant difference to listening comprehension for EFL undergraduate students. Past research indicates that podcasting has proved to be a valuable tool for both teachers and students, as it increases the chances of students feeling involved and motivated in terms of the authenticity, student-student interaction and their autonomy. It was observed during the study that the collaborative setting enforced team building skills and the students' sense of teamwork. Lastly, podcasting was valued more highly by a large number of learners than traditional media.

After analyzing the collected data and pointing out the findings, we can answer our research questions. Concerning the first research question of the study '*What is university students' attitude to using podcasts, regarding listening comprehension?*' the answers in the pre-intervention questionnaire, the results of the post-test scores, and students' observation show that the students take a positive attitude towards using BBC Learning English podcasts. Although the prevailing view among the learners in this study was generally positive, one student expressed concern over the length or topic of the podcasts in some cases; thus, teachers must ensure that their choice of podcasts allows their students the best opportunity to take advantage of the medium's overwhelming benefits. Moreover, podcasts as authentic material were perceived to increase students' motivation. Overall, data obtained from this paper demonstrate that Ukrainian

students had positive perceptions of the quality and usefulness of their podcast intervention and a positive attitude towards podcast-based learning. These results are in line with the studies by Brookes (2010), who announced that students' attitudes towards the use of podcasts were positive. The current study also corresponds to the findings of Carvalho et al. (2009b), who stated that students' attitudes towards the use of podcasts were favourable.

In order to answer the second research question '*Do the activities in the 'Pre-Listening' stage facilitate listening comprehension of BBC Learning English podcasts in first-year students?*', the results from the pre-test and post-test scores, students' questionnaires, and observation were analysed. The study confirmed that using bottom-up processing, when students previewed certain key words from the content and speculated on the title, helped them to predict the information from the podcast. This encouraged them greatly to listen to the podcasts in a meaningful way. The prediction process also helps to activate the learners' background knowledge related to the topic. This is in line with the findings of Khuziakmetov and Porchesku (2016), who state that the bottom-up approach to teaching listening comprehension has proven to be effective in developing listening strategies and it is supported by psycholinguistic findings and experiments.

Regarding the third research question, whether *specifically designed podcasts comprehension activities help EFL learners improve their listening*, such activities certainly help to enhance first-year students' listening skills. The current study highlights BBC Learning English podcasts as a powerful technological tool and a useful supplementary means of teaching, and that they have a great positive effect on Ukrainian students' performance. Also, the role of the teacher as a facilitator plays a crucial part in achieving the desired results. The teacher has to focus on the pedagogical design of the podcasts and consider the educational level of his/her students to maximize effectiveness. These results are reinforced with other studies, which found significant changes in student performance when students were exposed to podcasts for listening comprehension (Lu, 2007, p. 88). This research is reinforced by Popova & Edirisingha's study (2010), stressing teaching and learning validity of podcasts as educational technology. The reasons for these positive findings include the fact that podcasts provide an attractive opportunity to expose students to authentic conversations that can help to increase their listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, participants gained confidence in their abilities to comprehend English overall, as Lu (2007) also mentioned.

The statistical analysis of the obtained data indicates that the students not only improved their listening skills but also had a positive attitude towards the implementation of 6 Minute English podcasts. Therefore, our research hypothesis concerning regular use of BBC Learning English podcasts to develop first-year students' listening skills can be accepted.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there are some recommendations for English teachers, students, and other researchers who are interested in conducting similar research. English teachers are advised to incorporate podcasting as an alternative web-based technique in teaching listening to EFL students within the topics in the curriculum. Applying podcasts in the teaching and learning process gives the students a new learning experience, increases their motivation, and enables the students to access various authentic materials of interest. In addition, it is also suggested that teachers be selective when choosing podcasts, by considering the students' interests, needs, styles, learning objectives, and also the duration of podcasts, so that the teaching and learning process proceeds well. Moreover, students should practice listening to BBC Learning English podcasts using both bottom-up and top-down processing alongside various listening strategies and techniques on a regular basis that they are taught and that they experienced in the class in their own style of learning in order to improve when listening to simple and subsequently more complicated materials. The findings of the current study might provide further insights into the effects of podcast instructions on other EFL courses such as reading or speaking. Moreover, the relationship between learners' learning style and podcasts can be investigated, too.

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