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ENHANCING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN B1-LEVEL LEARNERS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. This article examines how educational podcasts and structured peer interaction can be combined to develop listening comprehension and interactive communication among B1-level learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Drawing on the interaction and output hypotheses, metacognitive approaches to listening and principles of cooperative learning, the paper argues that podcasts are most useful when they serve as shared input for structured speaking tasks rather than as isolated listening exercises. The analysis is literature-based and does not report original empirical data. It critically discusses the strengths and limitations of both techniques and proposes a practical lesson sequence, peer-interaction formats and simple formative assessment tools. The paper concludes that a "listen–discuss–perform–reflect" cycle can give B1 learners repeated, meaningful practice in understanding and producing spoken English, provided that tasks are carefully scaffolded and podcast materials match the learners' level.

Keywords: oral communication, B1 level, EFL, educational podcasts, listening comprehension, peer interaction, communicative language teaching, metacognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral communication is a central goal of modern foreign language education. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages describes the B1 learner as an independent user who can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters and can enter, without preparation, into conversations on topics of personal interest [1]. In practice, however, many learners who formally reach this level remain passive in speaking lessons. They hesitate when they have to follow a fluent speaker at natural speed or respond quickly in a conversation. In many EFL contexts English is rarely used outside the classroom, so the lesson is often the only place where learners hear and use spoken English for real purposes.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) holds that language is learned most effectively when learners use it to exchange meaning [2]. Yet the label "communicative activity" is often given to tasks

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that are poorly prepared: learners are put into pairs and told to "discuss" a topic without enough input, language support or a clear outcome. As a result, stronger students dominate, weaker students switch to their first language, and the teacher has little evidence of learning. This gap between communicative principles and classroom reality is what makes the topic relevant for future teachers.

The purpose of this article is to analyse how two accessible resources, educational podcasts and structured peer interaction, can work together to improve B1 learners' listening comprehension and interactive speaking. The guiding research question is: how can these two techniques be combined in a communicative lesson sequence to develop both skills? Following the "who, what and how to teach" framework, the learners are B1 university or upper-secondary EFL students with limited exposure to spoken English outside class; the content is listening for gist and detail together with turn-taking, clarification, agreeing and disagreeing; and the method is a podcast-based communicative task cycle with structured peer roles. The paper is based on a review of scholarly literature and on the author's own proposals; it does not claim empirical results that were not collected.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Interaction, input and output

Several theories explain why listening and speaking should be developed together. Long's interaction hypothesis holds that conversational interaction, particularly the negotiation of meaning that occurs when speakers do not understand each other, makes input more comprehensible and draws learners' attention to language form [3]. Swain's output hypothesis adds that producing language is not only a result of learning but also a source of it: when learners try to speak, they notice gaps between what they want to say and what they can say, test their hypotheses about the language and receive feedback [4]. Together, these perspectives suggest that learners need both rich input and frequent opportunities to use it in interaction.

2.2. Listening as a process

Traditional listening lessons often follow a "comprehension approach": learners listen to a text, answer questions and the teacher checks the answers. Field argues that this procedure tests listening rather than teaches it, because it focuses on the product of listening and tells the teacher little about why learners failed to understand [5]. He recommends paying attention to the processes of listening, both decoding the speech stream and building meaning from it. Vandergrift and Goh similarly propose a metacognitive approach in which learners predict content, check their understanding with peers, listen again to verify it and reflect on the strategies they used [6]. Importantly for this article, peer discussion is built into this cycle: learners compare their interpretations with a partner between listenings.

2.3. Podcasts in language education

A podcast is a series of digital audio or video episodes that can be downloaded or streamed and listened to on demand. Stanley described podcasting as a valuable source of listening material for language teachers, noting that it gives access to a wide range of authentic and learner-oriented

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recordings and that learners can also create podcasts themselves [7]. Rosell-Aguilar reviewed the potential of podcasting for language learning and stressed that the technology alone does not guarantee learning; he called for a clear pedagogical framework for designing and using podcasts [8]. This warning is central to the present analysis: a podcast is a resource, not a method.

2.4. Structured peer interaction

Peer interaction draws on sociocultural theory, according to which learning first happens in social activity and is later internalised; with appropriate support, learners can perform beyond their independent level within the zone of proximal development [9]. However, simply grouping learners does not ensure cooperation. Johnson and Johnson identify the conditions under which cooperative learning works, including positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills and group processing [10]. In language teaching, Littlewood's distinction between pre-communicative activities, which prepare learners linguistically, and communicative activities, in which learners use language to convey meaning, offers a useful way to build interaction gradually [11].

3. MAIN ANALYSIS

3.1. Why B1 learners need both podcasts and peers

At B1 level, learners have enough language to discuss familiar topics but often lack automaticity. Goh and Burns argue that speaking should be taught holistically, combining language knowledge, core speaking skills such as turn-taking and managing a conversation, and communication strategies [12]. Podcasts can supply the first element: models of natural spoken language, including fillers, hesitation, reformulation and turn-taking. Structured peer interaction supplies the other two: repeated chances to practise these features in real time and to use strategies such as asking for clarification. A podcast alone is one-way input; peer discussion alone may lack content and language models. Combined, the podcast gives learners something worth talking about and language to talk about it with, while the peer task gives them a reason to listen carefully.

3.2. Podcasts for listening comprehension: strengths and limits

Educational podcast episodes are short, often organised by topic and sometimes available in versions designed for learners, and many include transcripts. Learners can replay difficult sections, which supports the process-oriented listening recommended by Field [5].

Nevertheless, a critical view is necessary. First, podcasts produced for native speakers are often too fast, idiomatic or culturally dense for B1 learners and may cause anxiety rather than progress. Second, transcripts can encourage learners to read instead of listen. Third, listening at home depends on motivation, internet access and devices, which cannot be assumed for every group. Finally, as Rosell-Aguilar noted, the attractiveness of the medium can hide weak pedagogy [8]. For these reasons, the teacher's role in selecting episodes, setting clear listening purposes and holding back transcripts until the final stage remains decisive. A practical selection rule is that an episode should deal with a

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familiar topic, last no longer than five to eight minutes (or be cut into segments), be spoken clearly and contain a point of view or problem that learners can respond to.

3.3. Structured peer interaction: strengths and limits

Peer interaction greatly increases each learner's speaking time compared with teacher-fronted questioning. It also creates genuine needs for negotiation of meaning, which, according to the interaction hypothesis, supports acquisition [3]. Structure is essential: without assigned roles and a clear outcome, pair work can shrink into a short exchange of opinions in which one learner speaks and the other waits. Following the principles of cooperative learning [10], the teacher can build positive interdependence through information-gap tasks, in which each partner hears a different part of an episode; individual accountability through roles such as "summariser", "questioner" and "language monitor"; and group processing through a short reflection on how the discussion went.

Limitations must also be acknowledged. Learners may reinforce each other's errors, fall back on their first language or feel uncomfortable correcting peers. These problems do not argue against peer interaction; rather, they show the need for language support, monitored task time and focused teacher feedback after the task, as recommended in task-based frameworks [13].

3.4. Integrating the two: a listen–discuss–perform–reflect cycle

On the basis of the theories reviewed, the author proposes a four-stage cycle. In the Listen stage, learners predict the content of an episode, listen for gist, compare ideas with a partner and listen again for specific information, following the metacognitive sequence [6]. In the Discuss stage, pairs or small groups complete a structured task based on the episode, such as an information gap or a problem-solving discussion, with assigned roles. In the Perform stage, groups report their conclusions or record a short podcast-style dialogue, which gives a purpose for planned and more accurate output [4], [13]. In the Reflect stage, learners evaluate their listening strategies and interaction, and the teacher gives feedback on recurring language problems. This cycle connects input, interaction and output and reflects the move from pre-communicative to communicative activity [11].

4. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. A sample lesson

The following outline shows how the cycle can be used in an 80-minute lesson for B1 learners on the topic "Work–life balance".

- **Warm-up and prediction (10 min)**: learners look at the episode title and three key words and, in pairs, predict what the speakers will say.
- **First listening for gist (10 min)**: learners listen to a five-minute segment of a learner-oriented podcast, note each speaker's main opinion and compare notes with a partner.
- **Second listening for detail (10 min)**: Partner A notes the arguments for flexible working, Partner B the arguments against, using a short note-taking grid.

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- **Information-gap exchange (15 min)**: partners explain their information without showing their notes; the listener must ask at least two clarification questions, e.g. "Could you give an example?" or "Do you mean that…?".
- **Structured group discussion (15 min)**: in groups of four with rotating roles (chair, summariser, questioner, language monitor), learners agree on three recommendations for a company.
- **Performance, feedback and homework (20 min)**: each group presents its recommendations in two minutes or records them as a short audio clip; the teacher gives feedback on common language points; learners complete an exit ticket and, for homework, record a 90-second voice message responding to another episode on the topic.

4.2. Supporting language and strategies

B1 learners benefit from explicit teaching of interactional language. Thornbury emphasises that fluency develops through practice under real-time conditions and through the use of communication strategies and conversational routines [14]. A short phrase bank displayed during discussion, with expressions for asking for clarification, checking understanding, interrupting politely and summarising, gives learners the tools to keep the interaction going without abandoning English.

4.3. Formative assessment

Assessment should collect evidence of both listening and interaction. Useful tools include the note-taking grid as evidence of comprehension; an observation checklist for the language monitor (for example, "asked for clarification", "responded to a partner's idea", "used English throughout"); and an exit ticket in which learners name one strategy that helped them understand and one phrase they used in discussion. The CEFR descriptors for B1 listening and spoken interaction [1] can be adapted into "can do" statements for self-assessment.

4.4. Differentiation and limited resources

For weaker learners, the teacher can provide a partial transcript for the second listening, slow down playback or pre-teach key vocabulary. Stronger learners can listen to a less adapted episode or act as discussion chairs. Where internet access is unreliable, episodes can be downloaded in advance and played through one speaker.

5. CONCLUSION

This literature-based analysis has argued that the oral communication difficulties of many B1 learners stem from two connected problems: too little experience of processing natural spoken English and too little structured practice in real-time interaction. Educational podcasts and structured peer interaction address these problems from different sides, and their combination is more powerful than either technique alone.

Several independent conclusions follow. First, the effectiveness of podcasts depends less on the technology than on how the teacher selects episodes and sets listening purposes. Second, peer interaction becomes productive only when it includes clear roles, interdependence, language support and a tangible outcome. Third, listening and speaking should be planned as a single cycle in which

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learners listen, discuss, perform and reflect. Finally, the proposed lesson sequence is a pedagogical proposal grounded in theory rather than a tested intervention. Its value should be examined in future classroom research, for example through action research comparing learners' participation and comprehension before and after a series of podcast-based lessons.

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