

Virtual vs. Traditional Environments and Their Influence on Students' Listening Performance in a Foreign Language – A Case Study in Albania

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Abstract

The essential role of the listening competence in Second Language Teaching, and the new rhythm of advancement in the new Internet epoch call for a paradigmatic reform of teachers' roles, contents and functions in teaching listening skill in order to guarantee a successful forward-looking process. Considering this context, this study highlights an innovative academic experience in Albania consisting of a special class website integrated in teaching English listening skills to Albanian university students as well as creating and implementing a demanding listening curriculum at an FCE level; this project and the analysis of its results follow a comparative approach at all stages. This paper aims at examining the efficiency of website compared with traditional means of teaching listening in English, by analyzing and assessing the difference between the level of the experimental group's performance and that of the control group during the listening practice. The actual comparison of results, which involves the assessment of their scores in two special tests, one taken before the project and one after its completion, shows that both learning environments have their merits in helping them progress with their listening competence. However, the amount of progress made by the students of the two groups is not identical, as there is a significant difference in favour of the experimental group, which, as our statistical analysis carried out by the help of the SPSS program shows, is ample proof of the advantage that the use of websites brings to the process of developing one's listening competence in a foreign language.

Keywords: listening competence, control group, experimental group, website, performance.

Introduction

Studies have shown that we spend 50% of our communication time listening. ¹ Listening is, as a matter of plain fact, one of the most basic and important abilities that we make use of in the course of our lifetime (a great part of its importance derives from the fact that listening precedes and stands as a necessary foundation for other communication skills and abilities). While listening we manage not only to understand each-other, but also to broaden the horizons of our experience.

Long regarded as a complex and difficult process, the development of listening abilities by learners of foreign languages has largely been ignored by academic studies. Traditional listening materials used in foreign language classes have, likewise, proved rather inadequate for the aims they are meant to serve. With the ever-increasing penetration of digital technology into the field of education it seems only natural to suppose that the immense resources of the internet could serve as a great facilitator for the necessarily long learning process whereby foreign language students acquire and perfect their listening abilities. ²

¹ See R. A. Gilman and L. M. Moody, "What practitioners say about listening: Research implications for the classroom", *Foreign Language Annals*, 17, 1984, pp. 331-334.

² See J. C. Richards, "Beyond the text book: The role of commercial materials in language teaching", *RELC Journal*, 24/1, 1993, pp. 1-14.

Following this assumption, the present study seeks to present and analyse some of the results of an experimental teaching project involving, among other things, the employment of websites in the teaching of English as a foreign language, with a particular view to enhancing the development of the students' listening abilities. The presentation of the results follows the comparative approach of the project itself, which involved the actual assessment and comparison of the listening achievements of two groups of students – those working in a traditional learning environment and those that worked in and through the digital medium of the website.

In more concrete terms, the following presentation and analysis can be interpreted as constituting a detailed answer to the principal question of our project: do the results of the students listening performance, measured by a set of tests taken both before and after the completion of the project, suggest any difference between the influence of traditional and digital learning environments in advancing the listening abilities of foreign language students?

The participants in the project and their demographical context

"English for the Net Generation", the teaching project that formed the basis of the present study, involved the voluntary participation of 24 Albanian first-year students of English at "Fan S. Noli" University, Korça. For a 10 week period, as part of their 2013 course in Communication and American Civilisation, the students took part in an intensive program intended to promote their listening skills to the advanced "First Certificate" level. The students were divided into two groups of 12 members each – one group was assigned to work through the medium of the website¹, the other in an essentially traditional learning environment. The division of the students into these groups was made after subjecting them to a preliminary standard listening test, so as to ensure that there would not be any significant overall differences in their original listening competences.

In the course of this study we will be using the term **experimental group** in order to refer to the students that worked on the website. The 12 students of the experimental group made constant use of our special website not only during the course of their ordinary classroom sessions, but also while they were physically away from the school environment, all in an effort to develop and consolidate their listening, reading and cultural competences of English. The term **control group**, on the other hand, will be used to refer to the 12 students that worked in the traditional classroom environment.

Method and procedure

The method used in this study makes use of well-established statistic principles commonly employed in comparative analyses of a similar nature. The quantitative results that were used in order to give an answer to our principal question were arrived at after a series of tests and comparisons: the students of each group were tested with regards to their level of listening competence both before and after the project. The resulting scores of the control and the experimental group were then compared with each-other in order to bring out any significant differences in their achievements. The tests that were used for both groups, both before and after the project, were identical and in full accordance with the standards of the level of English aimed at by our project.²

More concretely, our procedure involved calculating the difference in results between the mean scores of the tests (the test before and the test after the project) taken by the students of each group. The results of this initial comparison were then subjected to the special statistical comparative analysis offered by the SPSS program (the *paired t-test* method)³ which

¹ The name chosen for our special teaching website was the same as that by which we have referred to the whole project – "English for the Net Generation".

² See N. Kenny and L. Luque-Mortimer, *First Certificate Practice Tests*, Longman, 2000, pp. 129-149.

³ On this method of statistical analysis see <http://www.statisticssolution.com>, <http://www.academic.udayton.edu>; see also http://www.gla.ac.uk/sums/users/jdbmcdonald/PrePost_TTest/pairedt1.html

drew out the various differences in mean scores between the two groups. The decision whether such differences can be viewed as statistically significant, and, thus, as mirroring a true difference in the progress of the listening competence of the students of the two groups, or whether we are to regard them as merely accidental or negligible, was not left to subjective considerations, but was established mathematically, as a way of further guaranteeing the reliability of the conclusions of our study.

Analysis of the results

As already mentioned in the previous section of this study, our first step in the complex procedure of finding out whether the use of websites enhances the development of the listening competence of foreign language students was to give a preliminary test (T1) to the students of both the control and the experimental group (the test was also used as a means of making sure that the student's original level of listening competence was, on the average, essentially the same in both groups). More precisely, the mean scores of the students in the preliminary test were $M_{w1} = 64.16$ for those who would work on the website (the lowest score in the experimental group was 40%, while the highest 70%) and $M_{k1} = 61.42\%$ for those who would follow the traditional approach (the lowest score in the control group was 45%, while the highest 78%). The comparison of these figures by using the *Paired Samples T-test* in the *SPSS* program showed the resulting 2.74% difference between the mean scores of the two groups to be statistically insignificant. Our assessment of the students' scores also showed that none of them actually failed the test. The same was true with the final test (T2) taken by the students of both groups after the completion of the project, a fact which shows that this parameter – the percentage of students passing the tests – can't be used to indicate anything about any possible differences between the progress made by the students working on the website and those working in the traditional environment with their listening competences.

The following tables contain detailed information about the scores of every student in the two groups:

Table 1. 1.: Results of the two tests for the experimental group

Group members	Preliminary test (%)	Final test (%)
S1	60	80
S2	78	92
S3	70	85
S4	73	90
S5	68	88
S6	62	80
S7	45	60
S8	58	62
S9	75	88
S10	48	60
S11	73	90
S12	60	78
Mean scores	64.16	79.41

Table 1. 2.: Results of the two tests for the control group

Group members	Preliminary test (%)	Final test (%)
S1	68	80
S2	70	82
S3	68	82
S4	60	70
S5	65	78
S6	65	75
S7	40	47
S8	62	70

S9	60	68
S10	62	68
S11	60	70
S12	57	66
Mean scores	61.42	71.33

As can be seen in the table above, the mean scores of the final test were $M_{w2} = 79.41\%$ for the students of the experimental group (the lowest score was 60%, the highest was 92%) and $M_{k2} = 71.33\%$ for those of the control group (the lowest score was 47%, the highest was 82%). Given these figures and those already presented for the preliminary test, the crucial question that needs to be answered is: What do they show about the students' achievements by the end of the project and about the influence of the two learning environments on their results?

A simple comparison of the scores of the students of the experimental group in the two tests shows that, by the end of the project, they have gone up by 15.25% ($79.46\% - 64.16\% = 15.25\%$). An improvement in the students listening performance is also shown by comparing the scores of the two tests for the control group. This time, however, the resulting difference of 9.91% ($71.33\% - 61.42\% = 9.91\%$), while clearly an indicator of the value of traditional methods of teaching in helping the students develop their listening competence, is obviously inferior to the respective figures for the experimental group. More precisely, a simple calculation shows that the progress made by the students who worked on the website is 5.34% greater than that of the students who spent the ten weeks of the project working in the traditional foreign language classroom ($15.25\% - 9.91\% = 5.34\%$).

The results presented above can be viewed schematically in the following table and graph.

Table 1. 3.: The progress in students' scores – a comparison of the *preliminary test* with the *final test*.

	Preliminary test	Final test	Progress
Listening in the <i>website</i>	64.16%	79.41%	15.25%
Listening in the traditional classroom	61.42%	71.33%	9.91%
Difference	2.74%		5.34%

Statistical analysis of test results

The charts shown above can be viewed as constituting a graphic representation not only of the progress that the students of both groups have made with their listening skills during the course of our project, but also of the advantage that websites bring to this process. In order to increase the reliability of our interpretation of the results of the tests, we have decided, however, to read them through the lens of statistical analysis. The aim of such statistical analysis of the data is to provide a well-founded answer to the question whether the progress in scores achieved between the two tests by the students of both groups is statistically significant. Likewise, it will also be decided whether the difference between the amount of progress made by the students of the experimental group and that made by the students of the control group is significant, or whether it can be considered as simply accidental or negligible.

Firstly, thus, using the SPSS program we have applied the method of statistical analysis to give an answer to the question: is the improvement in students' scores from the preliminary test (T1) to the final one (T2) significant?

The *Paired Samples T-test* in the SPSS program is initially applied to the test results of the students of the control group. For these students who worked in the traditional learning environment the mean scores were 71.33% for the final test and 61.42% for the preliminary one. The resulting difference of 9.91% between the mean scores of the two tests marks in

quantitative terms the amount of progress made by the students of the control group with regards to their listening competence. Now, the value of our coefficient for significance – p -value $=0<0.05$ – clearly shows that the measure of the improvement in scores made by the control group students from T1 to T2 is statistically significant. In other words, the traditional methodology employed in helping students develop their listening competence in a foreign language brings positive results which are far from being negligible.

The same procedure was followed with the test results of the students who worked with the website. Their mean scores were 64.17% and 79.42% for T1 and T2 respectively. The amount of progress made by the students of the experimental group – the 15.25% difference between the mean scores of T2 and T1 – is once again shown by the application of the *Paired Samples T-test* (p -value $=0<0.05$) to be statistically significant, a clear indicator this of the value of websites in fostering the development of the listening competence of foreign language students.

The next step in our statistical analysis involves determining whether the difference of 5.34% between the amount of progress made by the students of the experimental group and the amount of progress made by the students of the control group is itself statistically significant. In this case too, the figures for our p -value (<0.05) point out clearly enough to the significance of the difference in question. The progress made by the students who worked with the website is thus proved to be significantly greater than the progress made by the students who followed the traditional approach to developing their listening competence. In other words, it has been shown that using websites is not only a valuable practice in helping students develop their listening competence, but also that it is significantly superior in achieving its intended results to the more traditional approaches followed while teaching a foreign language.

Conclusions

The importance of finding the right methods to help foreign language students develop their listening competence cannot be overestimated, since it is one of the most basic and essential requirements of communication in a foreign language. The ever-increasing role of digital information and communication technology in the field of education calls for a new and more active engagement on the part of foreign language teachers and specialists, who should make full use these resources in order to help their students develop their listening competence. It was in accordance with this general context and with the need of Albanian students to keep up with the latest developments in the field of education in more developed countries that we decided to embark on a project that involved building a special teaching website and analysing whether and to what extent it contributed to the development of the listening competence of Albanian students of English. The project and the analysis of its results followed a comparative approach as the listening achievements of the students who worked on the website (the experimental group of our project) were systematically compared with those of other students who worked in the traditional foreign language classroom (the control group).

The actual comparison of the results achieved by the students of the two groups, which involved the assessment of their scores in two special tests, one taken before the project and one after its completion, shows that both learning environments – the traditional and the digital one – have their merits in helping them progress with their listening competence. However, the amount of progress made by the students of the two groups is not identical, as there is a 5.34% difference in favour of the experimental group, which, as our statistical analysis carried out by the help of the SPSS program shows, is ample proof of the advantage that the use of websites brings to the process of developing one's listening competence in a foreign language.

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