

Glad to Hear It: Using Podcasts to Encourage Listening Practice



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Listening in a second language is hard. More than any other skill area—reading, writing, speaking—students tend to come to me outside of class to ask how they can improve their *listening* skills. I always give them the same answer: practice. Without fail, this answer causes their faces to drop as they imagine themselves hunched over their computers listening to long, boring lectures and fighting to stay focused for main ideas and details. What I’m picturing for them is much different. I see them going about their daily lives—commuting, working out, cooking—all while strengthening their listening skills. If your students are like mine, they already have their earbuds in most of the time, but now I’m envisioning them using those earbuds to listen to English speech they find interesting, compelling, maybe even heartbreaking or funny. I am picturing them immersed in the ever-expanding world of podcasts.

We all know the feeling of trying to listen to something that we are just not interested in. It takes a massive amount of energy and focus, and it is not fun. When my students practice listening outside of class, I want them to listen to speech that appeals to them. In fact, I want it to be so engaging that students forget they are listening for any purpose other than pure enjoyment. I have found myself so completely gripped what I hear in podcasts, that it is not uncommon for me to listen to four or five episodes in a day. A few years ago, I realized that my students might feel as captivated by this medium as I do. I decided to introduce podcasts in my classes in the hopes that students would be encouraged to practice listening to English more—and I’m happy to report that it is working!

For any who are unfamiliar with what a podcast is, the word *podcast* itself is a portmanteau of the words ‘iPod’ and ‘broadcast’. Podcasts made their debut in 2004, shortly after the advent of the iPod. A podcast episode is a digital audio file that is available for streaming or download—and, importantly, available for free. Episodes are typically part of a regular series that centers on a particular theme or topic. Unlike a radio broadcast, which airs at a particular time, podcasts can be accessed at the convenience of the listener. Podcasts are available on a variety of mobile applications and websites. Most smartphones today even come with an app for podcasts already installed. (Other popular apps are Stitcher, Spotify, and NPR One, just to name a few.) All of the podcast apps I have tried are free and user-friendly, and all offer the same basic functions such as skipping back (to repeat what was said) and even slowing the rate of speech—excellent tools for language learners. Students can use a smartphone, tablet, or iPod to download podcast episodes and listen to them on-the-go—without Wi-Fi. This all helps to make listening practice more effortless for our students.

As mentioned, the world of podcasts is steadily growing. Hundreds of thousands of podcasts exist, and on an impressive variety of subjects. You can find podcasts on any topic from Bigfoot to relationship advice, from

celebrity interviews to synthetic genomes. Students can find their niche. With podcasts, students can listen to people discuss topics that they, themselves, feel passionate about. Additionally, when your students listen to podcasts, they will more often than not be listening to informal, authentic speech. Due to the fact that anyone with a microphone and an internet connection can create a podcast, most podcast hosts are not professionally trained speakers—they talk like the rest of us. When students listen to podcasts, they will be exposed to all the linking, reduction, and slang that native speakers naturally use. If your students are at more of a beginning level, and not ready for the challenges presented by authentic speech, you can guide them towards the hundreds of podcasts that have been designed specifically for learners of English, such as *Espresso English* or *6-Minute English*. These deliberately contain slow, carefully articulated, repetitive speech, and often center on grammar, vocabulary, and cultural lessons. There is truly a podcast for everyone!

Regardless of level, I encourage my students to listen to podcasts in their free time as much as possible. In fact, on the very first day of speaking and listening class, I go over podcast basics—how to find interesting podcasts, how to download them, etc. I also rely heavily on podcasts for class assignments. Every week, I choose a podcast episode related to the content theme we have been studying in class. (Podcasts like the *TED Radio Hour* and *This American Life* often feature episodes that align with popular themes from ESL textbooks.) I create the typical exercises for these episodes that we all do with any listening homework assignment: activities focused on identifying main ideas, details, inferences, and so on. Perhaps more importantly, though, I also make sure to include

assignments that allow students to choose their own listening material. I call these “Podcast Journals,” and, basically, they mirror book reports. I ask the students to choose any podcast episode they like. (I usually include a minimum length—10 minutes is a good minimum for intermediate students.) I ask the students to summarize the episode, identify new vocabulary, and provide a reflection on the content. When students come to class, they share ideas from their journals with classmates as part of lively small-group discussions, where they express opinions, summarize content, exchange views on cultural information, and work towards a number of other learning outcomes. Podcasts are also a great springboard for lessons on grammar, pronunciation, and other important language and communication skills. It is not hard to find creative ways to use podcasts with your class.

I could happily go on and on about the usefulness of exposing students to podcasts in their second language, but the bottom line is that podcasts help our students to improve their skills by giving them a convenient way to listen outside of class—and to listen to spoken material that they care about. When my students come to class with their earbuds in, I have the habit of asking them what they’re listening to. About half of the time I ask, my students report that they have been listening to podcasts while commuting to class. If students have an interest in what they are hearing, it motivates them to keep listening, to keep practicing, and as we all know, practice makes perfect. So, if you haven’t yet, I encourage you to utilize this great, growing resource with your students.