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Improving Listening Skills By Reading Rather Than Listening

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Abstract: This study investigated the consequences of simultaneously reading and listening to the same materials when learning English as a foreign language. During acquisition, native Arabic-speaking university students were asked to learn some English words and sentences either by reading them or by simultaneously reading and listening to the same spoken material. Following acquisition students were given reading, writing, and listening tests. The findings from the three experiments indicated that participants exposed to reading alone performed better on listening tests than participants exposed to a reading and listening condition. No differences were found on the reading and writing tests. The results, discussed within a cognitive load theory framework, suggest that at least some categories of learners will enhance their listening skills more by reading the materials only rather than simultaneously reading and listening.

Keywords: Reading While Listening (RWL); reading fluency; randomized control trial audiobook

The debate over reading vs. listening is surfacing in business and educational settings, as many argue about which method is more effective at gaining and retaining knowledge. Several studies and articles on the topic assessed the effectiveness of both approaches. One or the other learning methods is often dependent on the individual, so it mainly comes down to personal preference. Here are some facts to consider in weighing the differences.

At one time, reading was a measure of how informed a person was. Then came multiple forms of media to compete for consumer attention. Futurists even forecasted that listening would eclipse reading as our preferred learning method. Today, professionals and educators are raising questions on whether reading vs. listening to books is a better approach for new employees to learn and comprehend new job skills and industry knowledge. After the rise of the internet and many other digital communication channels, it is interesting that libraries and books still exist.

While listening to an audiobook is more effortless and convenient for the average person, reading can be just as effective, depending on the person. Psychology professor Matthew Traxler of the University of California has found from his research that the brain processes information much the same way, whether the person is reading or listening. However, the complexity of the topic you are consuming does affect brain processes.

For entertainment news and other light topics, the brain does not work as hard to comprehend information. However, for more complex topics, the individual must put more effort into the process, which favors reading. A book allows you to quickly go back and read what you did not understand, whereas audio playback machinery requires more time by clicking rewind. For live streaming events or

scenarios in which the listener has less control of the audio, a person must take notes to review the information.

Scientists are still unclear whether people develop a learning preference between reading or listening at an early age. The data are mixed as to which learning method leads to a greater understanding of the material. Researchers, though, have analyzed how the sound of certain words stimulates different parts of the brain. They found little difference in how the brain responds to reading vs. listening.

They noticed that students do not always learn by sticking with their preferred method of learning new information. Another study by the University of California at Berkeley on MRI brain scans found that the brain is stimulated from reading and listening with a similar impact. While the audiobook vs. reading argument is balanced, reading might be a better way to deal with distractions, mostly if the audio cannot be played back.

Listening and reading both have challenges that require the individual to focus on the material. While listening to the audio, a person must use real-time comprehension skills that instantly include interpreting and comprehending information. Taking notes adds to this effort. Reading has visual challenges because images and videos are easier on the eyes than staring at just text.

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The pandemic has led to many college campuses shutting down and offering online courses. The advantage for students sitting in a physical classroom is that they can interact with the instructor to clarify the meaning of the reading material. The online experience offers more flexibility, though, for the person to use their preferred learning method.

Students studying in traditional and online classroom settings must primarily rely on their listening and writing ability while attending live classes, specifically if the lecture is not available on video. Virtual courses enable students to listen to the lecture online. Similar to a traditional setting, students can interact and participate in a virtual class as well. Recording and transcribing virtual classes enable students to read and listen to the lectures later to better comprehend and revise the topic at their own speed.

In either setting, educational institutions can collaborate with transcription services to help organize and present the information to students to promote better learning.

Some people might wonder whether reading or listening is a faster way to understand the material. Again, it depends on the individual and the complexity of the material. Researchers have found that reading generally is faster than listening. While the average adult can read 250 to 300 words per minute, the ideal talking speed for efficient comprehension is 150 to 160 words per minute.

When a speaker talks too fast, meaning can be lost in the mind of the listener. In those cases, a student or employee is better off reading a transcription to absorb the information. The main problem with just listening to audio is that words can be distorted, or the sound is inaudible when there's competing

background noise. Additionally, the speaker may have an accent or not speak clearly, making it hard to decipher the audio. In those situations, turning to a transcription to read is essential.

Reading an audio transcription of the content a person just heard can help improve listening skills. It puts the brain in a framework to pay attention to every word. When it comes to learning a foreign language, reading can be the more efficient method, as seeing text helps reinforce the purpose of its usage. Even though a person might prefer one method over the other, reading provides the potential for a faster way to gain knowledge.

Audiobooks provide an excellent bridge between decoding and comprehension for struggling readers. Children who are reluctant to read or who have particularly low rates of fluency benefit from hearing a text read aloud while following along in a print version. When they are able to hear the words and phrases, these children pick up on the speed and prosody (intonation) appropriate to the reading task and are able to accurately identify more words. The audiobook serves as a positive fluency model for the reader (K12 Reader). Blum et al., (1995) conducted a comparative study between students who participated in home-based repeated reading of books with those home reading while listening (RWL) to audiotaped books to see if RWL has any significant benefit. The study ran for a period of 19 weeks on five international children who had very limited linguistic knowledge. The study showed that compared to those students who did home-based repeated reading, those who participated in reading while listening to audiotaped books substantially benefited and exhibited a greater level of fluency. Chang (2013) also showed improved listening fluency among students who read while listening to audiobooks.

Similarly, Brown et al., (2008) compared learning vocabulary among Japanese students exposed into three reading modes: reading only (RO), reading while listening (RWL), and listening only (LO). They found that students learned most words and understood the story better in the RWL mode, followed by reading only and then LO. Similar findings were also reported and found that listening while reading the same text facilitated and helped improve reading fluency for third-grade students (Rasinski, 2013).

In addition, Shany and Biemiller (1995) found that listening while reading significantly improved the reading comprehension and fluency of at-risk third and fourth graders, as compared to a control group.

Additionally, they found that “listening while reading resulted in twice the amount of reading as the other [experimental] method [of teacher assisted reading] and led to higher scores on listening comprehension measures” (Shany and Biemiller, 1995, p. 382) Research suggests fluency and comprehension are two distinct processes (Woodall, 2010). A large body of research have shown that students' ability to fluently, automatically decode text is linked to higher levels of text comprehension (Wren, 2006). And students who develop good decoding skills at a young age are typically better at comprehending text in subsequent grades (Juel, 1994). Arguably, for most struggling readers, lack of fluency limits reading comprehension.

When word identification becomes sufficiently fluent and automatic, the child does not have to concentrate on the basic identification of words and can concentrate fully on the meaning of the text (Wren, 2006). Research to support the students listening to books at their instructional level, as we are trying to prove, that the audiobooks are a tool (like a teacher) to help increase fluency. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development offers a different explanation for the effects of simultaneous reading and listening observed in this study (Woodall, 2010). From this sociocultural perspective, the audio recording of the text may have acted like a more experienced or knowledgeable assistant, helping the reader decode to achieve a higher level of reading fluency than he or she would otherwise be capable of doing independently. A sociocultural perspective does not require rejecting either the dual route theory or amalgamation theory (Ehri, 1992). According to this perspective, all higher level thinking, which would include reading, begins on the social or intermental plane and moves to the intramental plane via the intervention of a more experienced “teacher” or collaborator. The audio

recording, even though it is a mechanical device, may have fulfilled this social role. Here, too, the Simultaneous Listening and Reading in ESL 197 assisted gains in reading fluency are presumed to facilitate reading comprehension.

According to the National Reading Panel Report, in order to develop reading fluency, it is more beneficial to have children read with guidance than to read silently without feedback (www.nationalreadingpanel.org). In addition, the panel concluded that “deliberate development of reading fluency” should be part of a well designed classroom instructional model.

The International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council, a consortium that accredits training programs for teachers, supports the following principle of instruction: teaching actively involves listening, speaking, reading and writing in order to enhance learning and memory; often visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic senses are engaged simultaneously to reinforce associations (Geisert, 1990).

Reading vs. listening is a compelling topic for businesses and educators to do more in-depth research. Overall, both reading and listening are good ways to absorb and understand new information. Adding reading as an option by using video and audio transcriptions allows for more clarity. Contact us at GMR Transcription to learn more about how transcriptions can help your business and education endeavors. We provide affordable, fast, and accurate transcriptions.

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