



**The Effect of Listening to Audio Stories on Pronunciation of EFL Learners by *Seyed Jalal Abdolmanafi-Rokni***

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**Abstract**

The present study attempted to investigate the effectiveness of listening to audio-stories on fostering EFL learners' pronunciation. Two intact classes at Novin institute in Gorgan, Iran were randomly selected and assigned into two different groups, experimental and control. The experimental group received training through listening to audio-stories as a strategy to improve the pronunciation for eight sessions, while the students in the control group received a placebo. A pronunciation test was administered to both groups as pre-test before receiving the treatment and as post-test after the treatment to find out the effectiveness of the program in developing the pronunciation of the learners. T-test was used to determine the means of pronunciation performance in the two groups in the pre-test and post-test. The obtained results showed that there was a significant difference between the means of the experimental group and the control group and an improvement was observed in the overall pronunciation proficiency of the learners in the posttest. The finding also displayed that the program designed on the basis of audio-stories was effective in enhancing learners' motivation in improving pronunciation.

**Key words:** *audio-stories, pronunciation, listening skill, motivation*

**Introduction**

Listening is one of the most important language skills. Feyten (1991) maintains that more than 45% of communication is spent on listening. It is evident that children listen and respond to language before they learn to talk. When it is time for children to learn to read, they still have to listen so that they gain knowledge and information to follow directions. In the classroom, students have to listen carefully and attentively to lectures and discussions in order to understand



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and to retain the information for later recall. Listening is one of the most important language skills in other words the “Cinderella skill” in second language learning (Nunan, 1997, P.47). Listening is considered to be a critical dimension of learning pronunciation. According to Chastain (1988), listening was viewed a passive process but today we recognize it an active one.

In Iran there is not much emphasis on accurate pronunciation as a foreign language and students have little knowledge about it. Many teachers do not pay enough attention to pronunciation instruction. One of the possible difficulties may be the fact that using educational multimedia environment at intermediate levels in Iran is so rare. The institutes are mostly book-based and the universities are teacher-centered in Iran, and unfortunately in both of these learning environments using multimodality is not common. Moreover, the inadequate knowledge of some teachers of English may confuse their students with different pronunciations. Further, since English is treated as a foreign language in Iran, the students do not use English outside the classroom and due to the presence of a large number of students in the classroom the teacher cannot control the class and check their pronunciation carefully.

Iranian EFL students are studying English in their home country where English is not the dominant native language. Students who are from environments where English is not the language of the country have very few opportunities to hear the real pronunciation; these students therefore are not accustomed to hearing the language as it is produced by native speakers for native speakers. Authentic materials which refer to oral and written language materials used in daily situations by native speakers of the language (Rogers & Medly, 1988) are rarely used in Iran.

As some researchers believe, audio stories play a significant role for students to learn pronunciation. They can support the development of learners` ability in listening and speaking as well as pronunciation. Modern language instruction relies on the use of technology in order to convey ideas and messages with the help of sounds, symbols, and images.

According to Celce-Murcia (2001), the use of authentic audio-taped materials should be the basis of in-class activities. Listening to the audio-taped materials can be enjoyable for



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students and can provide them with authentic practice in listening to native speaker speech. They find it motivating when they can extract information from an ungraded passage (Nunan, 1997). As reported by Patterson (2008), the intermediate learner needs to be exposed to authentic texts and a variety of voices. Clearly, audio-taped materials can be used to help achieve these goals. Moreover, Morley (2001) reported that listening is now acknowledged as an important facet of language learning and during the 1980s special attention to listening was incorporated into new instructional frameworks. Further, Nunan (1998) claims that listening is the basic skill in language learning and without listening skill learners will never learn to communicate effectively. Video files, Audio files, DVD players, and some other elements improve pronunciation. Audio tales and stories are effective listening materials not only for children but also for adults to develop their pronunciation.

Brett (1997) noted that the new pedagogical approach to the listening comprehension holds that learners are interested in developing listening skill by audio and video authentic materials. Audio-taped stories, which are the recorded performances of the learners, could be effective sources of information and output leading to the conscious development of the second language and help improve various language skills and components.

Bowen (1972) mentioned one way to improve is to investigate pronunciation instruction with other elements of instruction. Using different situations related to real life or to the students' experience, the teacher can present a pronunciation problem through different techniques. According to Counihan (1998), one way to achieve this purpose is by sensitizing students to the conversational tactics they use naturally when talking in their native tongue: Turn-taking, supporting, challenging, questioning, and expanding on students, and so on.

Robertson (2003) mentioned that what is clear from this paper and others is that the teaching of pronunciation programs must be included in the students' training. Yet, the training must be country specific, and materials and research must now stop focusing on the 'general' and start considering the 'specific'.



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Brown (1990) demonstrated the importance of developing oracy (the ability to listen and speak) as well as literacy in a school. Learners need to spend a great deal of time in listening and pronunciation; therefore the present researcher conducted this study with the aim of searching for the effect of audio stories on pronunciation. Considering the potential benefits and possible challenges, the researcher set to examine the effects of listening audio stories on learners' pronunciation passages in intermediate classes.

**Background**

English has some goal for human communication. The language itself has important task as a tool of communication (Brown, 1988). Communication can be in the form of spoken or written. Yuzawa (2007) stated that understanding English pronunciation is a fundamental and vital skill needed for those who want to use English language as means of communication. The mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority for many second or foreign language students. A student often measures his success in the process of language learning as well as the effectiveness of his English course on the foundation of how well he feels his spoken language skill is developed (Richards, 2008).

Anyone speaking another language knows that it can be so hard to create certain sounds that he does not use in his native language. Many foreign language learners are concerned about speaking and believe that their pronunciation of the sounds of English is an obstacle to communicate with the others. They think that pronunciation is essential for speaking. Yates (2001) noted that pronunciation relates to the generation of sounds that are used to form meaning. It includes noticing the specific sounds of a language as well as aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, stress, timing rhythm, and how the voice is designed. Pronunciation is a teaching and learning procedure. It is also an integral section of language learning. Pronunciation is significant as it is a section of successful oral production or communicative competence (Hismanoglu, 2006).

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the main skills we need to communicate in any language. Each skill is related to other skills. Thus, listening can have effects on speaking,



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reading, writing, and grammar. Before the learners can speak they need to be able to listen. Pronunciation and listening comprehension are closely interrelated by a unified system within which individual sounds are regularly related. Pronunciation teaching and language learning strategy may develop students' competence (Varasarin, 2007).

As Bradley-Bennett (2007) maintains, the key to develop students' pronunciation is listening, but listening should be presented in a context that is both comprehensible to the learners and relates to their lives beyond the classroom. Learners should be exposed to various voices and through different style of delivery. Using techniques from the audio-lingual method such as listen and repeat will be an efficient way to improve learners' pronunciation.

Hismanoglu (2006) noted that pronunciation teaching is so significance for overcoming oral communication to accomplish since it is a vital part of the communicative competence. Although the role of pronunciation is so significant in speaking, many teachers do not focus on this important part. The problem of teaching pronunciation is reflected in the works of some researchers. Morley (1991), for instance, reported that it is essential to teach English pronunciation in ESL, EFL classroom, nevertheless, this important part of English language is ignored at many English classrooms and universities around the world.

According to Gilbert (2008), teaching pronunciation includes different challenges. Some teachers also think they do not have enough time in their classes to focus on this section of language. Moreover, many studies concluded that there is little relationship between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and achieving proficiency in pronunciation.

As PourhuseinGilakjani (2012) stipulated, pronunciation can be one of the most difficult areas of a language for EFL learners to master and one of the least favorite subjects for teachers to do in EFL classroom. Further, Morley (1991) noted that intelligible pronunciation is a vital section of communication competence. In addition, without perfect pronunciation skills the learner's ability to communicate is so limited. Despite these facts and the fact the achieving pronunciation is so hard in many ESL/EFL classrooms, teaching pronunciation is less focused.



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Gilbert (2008) believes the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciations are linked together. If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language. If they cannot be understood easily, they are cut off from the conversation with other speakers. Everybody knows that good pronunciation helps our speaking.

PourhusseinGilakjani (2012) also claimed that pronunciation instruction is an important element in foreign language teaching. Since sounds play a significant role in communication, foreign language teachers must pay attention to teaching pronunciation in their classes. Most foreign language teachers try to teach the necessary grammar, vocabulary, culture, and four skills practice into their classes without noticing integrating pronunciation into their teaching (Hismanoglu&Hismanoglu, 2011).

Thus, teaching pronunciation is necessary for all English learners. But, English pronunciation is ignored in many classrooms, especially in Iran. It has no position in our country either. Therefore, Iranian teachers should attempt to plan the strategies to improve the learners' pronunciation. The teachers should plan some activities that should be interesting and should get students' attention, especially, in the young students' classroom. These activities generally consist of poem, drama, stories, and etc. These interesting activities can be useful ways to learn for young learners (Deesri, 2002).

Regarding the application of the behaviorist theory of language learning in relation to the use of technology in informal language learning environment, Rogers (2004) maintains that the behaviorists have worked well in explicit teaching and computer-assisted instruction but it would not be suitable for learning informally from exposure to audio/visual mass media. Many multimedia experts believe that using multimedia technologies in language setting has great advantages. Thus, students are advised to listen and repeat words of short stories in order that they should learn pronunciation accurately, correctly, and authentically. Tape recorders, CDs, Video players, Computers, DVD players, and the like seem to be of great use and help in learning pronunciation especially in early intermediate classes.



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Scarcella and Oxford (1992) argue that interesting and relevant tasks produce motivation and positive attitudes. Interest can be granted through the subject if the tasks are imaginative and familiar to the learners. Storytelling in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is often used by teachers to share cultural and personal knowledge. Storytelling has been developed as a useful strategy to teach the English language to non-native speakers. Story is an effective way to comprehend input that facilitates language acquisition (Hendrickson, 1992).

Pedersen (1995) explains that stories can provide an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication for EFL/ESL learners. He also stated that students have chance to develop their oral expression and cultivate creativity through storytelling. Thus, story allows learners to build confidence. It allows teachers to create a learner-centered classroom, the learners are more activity. They share feelings in a comfortable atmosphere through shared folktales and legends.

Language teaching methods have a deep root in the history. For almost two hundred years, one method has replaced another by introducing new approaches. Sometimes the focus was on grammar and translation, and sometimes on oral based skills. Language teaching has been a subject of debate for decades. These debates also relate to new ways of pronunciation teaching as well as teaching of other skills. However, the debates on teaching pronunciation of second language are still continued.

The changes in language teaching methodology also affect pronunciation teaching methods. For example, Hismanoglu (2006) stated that in the grammar translation approach the role of pronunciation was unnecessary. In direct method, pronunciation has played a significant role. In the audio-lingual method, the role of pronunciation is so important. This method focuses on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drill, and short conversations (Celce-Murcia and Goodwin, 1991). With the advent of communicative approach pronunciation has been considered within the frame of natural communication. This approach suggests that oral communication is the elementary use of language and therefore should be central to the style of instruction (Hismanoglu, 2006).



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Some researchers agree with listening effects on pronunciation. For example, Morely (1991) consents with a focus on the linkage between listening and pronunciation and a need to develop the nature and the range of pronunciation oriented listening activities. Attention to pronunciation-oriented listening instruction was an important section of traditional pronunciation teaching with a primary focus on sound difference.

Second language learners benefit by listening activities both inside and outside the classroom. Then they find out that listening activities are easier to understand the speech of native speakers. At the same time, their progress awareness of English pronunciation may help them in their own output (Burns, 1992).

The efficient way of learning pronunciation is to listen carefully and to imitate; some learners understand that listening activities are effective tools to be able to analyze how a sound is made, or to see how it may be distinct from a similar sound in their own language (Yates, 2001). Listening to stories can affect other sections of English language. The learners begin to build confidence in their speaking skills as result of the storytelling. In fact, storytelling helps learners to create oral language complication and may be an effective technique to help English language learners (Coski, Trudel, & Vohs, 2010).

On the other hand, stories may support English language learners to develop their language skills. Listen to stories usually apply spoken narrative and students understand how the sounds are pronounced. They are able to record and listen to it as many times as they wish (Miller, 2009). Storytelling is a teaching method in the language class to improve communicative teaching. In developing writing skills, not only does storytelling make the writing procedure motivational, educative, challenging, and creative but it also supports students to know their strength and weaknesses, which in turn aids the teacher to give proper helping students to attain their potential as learners of English language (Karlsson, 2012).

Stories transfer cultural heritage relating the present time and the past time. Students become aware of dreams, sufferings, joys, and the life of their predecessors when they hear stories. Stories are the bridge that take today's learners to past and describe as a type of historical





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teaching through tales and an image of the past is opened to the listeners (Daemi, &Farnia, 2013).Stories can be so helpful way to illustrate and express complex, multi-dimensional ideas, emotion, and information. Telling stories can transfer the competencies and commitments of oneself to others (Sole and Wilson, 2009). Bouache (2010) stated that stories hold interests alive in the classroom and motivate students building a comfortable atmosphere and enjoyment environment.

To sum up, using stories in the classroom can result in better language comprehension and higher interest. This technique can promote learning of cultural aspects and develop learners' motivation. There is little research on this topic, so the present study investigated the effect of the audio-stories on fostering learners' pronunciation and enhancing their motivation in learning pronunciation.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the following questions:

1. Does listening to audio-stories help EFL learners improve pronunciation?
2. Do audio-stories enhance learners' motivation to learn pronunciation?

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

In this study a total number of 46 students aged 11-13 during spring term in 2013 participated in the research project. All of the participants were female and at intermediate level. Two intact classes learning English as a foreign language at Novin institute in Gorgan, in the north of Iran were randomly selected and divided into two groups of experimental and control. Their native language was Persian.

### ***Instruments***

The present study included a pronunciation test designed and administered by the researcher to measure pronunciation skill of the learners in the two groups. The 14 item test was used aspretest and posttest. The test involved two stories from which some words were chosen. Then each student had to pronounce the words. A digital recorder was used for recording students' voices. The correct pronunciation was determined for pretest and posttest.



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***Treatment***

The training sessions were held for eight sessions. Each session was about 60 minutes twice a week. The participants in experimental group received half an hour of instruction on pronunciation activities, such as phonetic symbols, sound, and spelling exercises. Then the students in the experimental group listened to audio stories for the next half an hour. Eight stories from “IntermediateSteps to Understanding” (Hill, 1980) were selected. The students were assigned to have a pocket dictionary each session. The phonetic symbols were taught by CD playereach session. The researcher explained each phonetic symbol to the students and then some examples were given for each of them. Next, they were asked to repeat. The students needed to look up certain words from the story and checked their pronunciation in their dictionary in the following sessions. After teaching all phonetic symbols, the students listened to the audio stories again in order to improve their pronunciation. Afterwards, the students were asked to pronounce each word to realize that they pronounce the words correct. On the other hand, the control group did not receive any training. They only listened to audio stories.

***Procedure***

In this study, the participants were randomly selected atNovin institute. They were equal in number and proficiency. The pretest was administered to each group on the first day. All participants listened to the story and then the researcher pointed to the selected word by either writing on the board or showing via flashcards. The participants are asked to pronounce each of the words. Then for duration of eight sessions the learners in the experimental group received treatment, while the control group received a placebo. Next,the posttest was conducted to examine the progress that participants had made during the treatment.

**Results**

Based on the result presented in the table, this study claims that certain development took place with regard to the experimental group students’ pronunciation skills. This was reflected in the difference in the mean score of the whole group in the pre-test and the posttest.



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SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows was used to calculate descriptive and inferential statistics and to perform reliability analyses. In order to assign whether the audio-stories significantly affected the students' pronunciation, t-test was used to investigate the data. The data was collected in the light of students' performance in the pretest and posttest. The result of a t-test used to compare the differences between the two groups indicated that the mean score of the experimental group (M=2.00) was almost the same as the mean score of the control group (M=1.956) (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics related to both groups' performances on the pretest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Experimental	23	2.0000	.95346	0.882	0.149
Control	23	1.9565	1.02151		

As Table 2 displays, the mean score of the experimental group (M=10.26) was significantly higher than the mean score of the control group (M=4.65). The finding of the study showed that the treatment had a significant effect on students' pronunciation. Or it indicates that the students of experimental group improve their pronunciation through listening to audio-stories in the posttest.

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics related to both groups' performances on the posttest

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Sig	t
Experimental	23	10.2609	1.19121	0.000	13.794
Control	23	4.6522	1.54383		

It is important to note that there still were areas in which experimental group students improved significantly more than students in the control group. The results showed that audio-stories help students learn a great deal about English pronunciation, learning to speak well, and feel that people can understand their speech more easily.

## **Discussion**



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With respect to the first question, “Does listening to audio-stories help EFL learners improve pronunciation?”, the result of the study proved that using audio-stories as a tool was effective in fostering the experimental group students' pronunciation. There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pronunciation pre-test and post-test in pronunciation proficiency in favor of the post-test scores. The students who were engaged in their learning recognize that their pronunciation improved after treatment. In fact, at first, the learners did not know the pronunciation of most of the words, but by listening to stories they compared how they pronounced the words before to what they listened to the pronunciation of words. As Burns (1992) stated that practicing listening activities improves student' pronunciation inside and outside the classroom. According to Hismanoglu (2006), pronunciation is needed to merge with communicative activities. The students have opportunities to improve their pronunciation through listening and speaking skills.

With respect to the second question, “Do audio-stories enhance learners' motivation to learn pronunciation?”, the findings from the interview showed that the learners enjoyed listening to the stories during the treatment. As the notes from the interview with the learners in the experimental group spoke for itself the learners' motivation was enhanced. Since the stories provided a relaxed atmosphere for the learners, the output of their learning increased. As Bouache (2010) claims, by using stories as a technique of teaching the learners feel more relaxed in their learning environment having an effect on their learning. Further, they comprehend the culture of the language they are learning.

Audio-stories can generate sound, characters, pictures, and even music which exist in the stories. Learners can learn the cultural knowledge of the English language through listening to story. Students can experience events of the cultures through video clips, culture production or personal statements represented by listening to stories (Tsou, Wang, & Tzeng, 2006).

The finding of the present study is congruent with the benefits that Pedersen (1995) found in telling ESL children stories saying that listening skills through stories. Listening to stories



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produce language input. The importance of story structure in second language comprehension also helps the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy.

**Pedagogical Implications**

This research study raised awareness of the importance of training in pronunciation and confidence. Confidence in pronunciation leads to confidence in speaking. It is hoped that the result of this small-scale enquiry would serve as a template for further research into pronunciation training in Iran and encourages the Iranian teachers to work on their students' pronunciation to improve their speaking.

In addition, classroom teachers could upgrade their knowledge about language teaching and expose themselves to the most current pedagogical developments and new teaching materials. Teachers could be encouraged to complement their textbooks with additional materials that they consider beneficial to their students.

Listening has been neglected in research and practice until quite recently. Even now we cannot say it. This is why some researchers call listening “Cinderella skill” in language learning (Nunan, 1997, p.47). However, it is true that listening is vital in language learning in that it provides input for learner.

The findings of the present study revealed that audio-taped stories could prove effective in the development of pronunciation of the EFL students at the intermediate level. That is to say, audio-taped stories surely had significant and positive effects on the improvement of the pronunciation knowledge of the Iranian EFL learners.

In sum, audio-taped materials have some clear advantages for the teaching of pronunciation. Listening, compared with speaking, reading, and writing is the most frequently used language skill in both the classroom and daily communication (Nunan, 1997).

**Conclusion**

The results of the analysis from the post-test administration indicated that the experimental group who received treatment had a better performance than the control group who did not receive it. The knowledge of using the dictionary as a reference to check correctness led them to self-



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directed learning. Students felt their pronunciation had improved. Using audio-stories can help learners improve their pronunciation and speaking skill. Students had more confidence to pronounce the words. This technique can also be useful for teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. In classes where this technique is employed, they help to reduce the stress that accompanies oral production in a foreign language.

Probably the greatest benefit to using audio-stories in the classroom is that they are enjoyable. They understand culture of English language by listening to stories. Listening to stories can provide a relaxed atmosphere for learning. The learners enjoy their lessons. The learners also enhance their listening skill by using this technique. Using audio-stories as tasks might be one way of helping transfer words from stories into use and maximize the potential of stories as teaching and learning tools. Thus, this gives the teachers more opportunity to use audio-stories in their teaching context. They can encourage them to practice their speaking skill as much as possible in and outside the class.

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