Using ICTs to Improve Perception Skills in EFL Listening

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1. Introduction

Two areas in ESL/EFL listening in need of further research are successful perception activities and ways in which ICT can be used to teach L2 listening (Vandergrift, 2011). Listening is considered the most difficult skill to learn because of its temporal nature, the complexity of the listening processes and the special features of spoken language (Field 2008; Lynch, 2009; Ur 1984). Unfortunately, the limited class time and the difficulty of attending to learners' individual problems makes listening a skill that is mainly evaluated in the form of true/false, matching or multiple-choice but rarely taught in class. This traditional approach has lately been challenged by a *Process Approach* (Cauldwell, 2013; Field, 2008a; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Vandergrift, 2011). By progressively guiding ESL/EFL learners into the different skills, strategies and processes needed for different types of listening, L2 listeners can take a more active role and transfer that knowledge to future L2 listening situations (Vandergrift, 2011). The L2 listeners' decoding processes should be focused in the first stages. In fact, many listening comprehension problems are caused by decoding mistakes and that is why perception in non-native speakers "is a skill that is a pre-requisite for understanding" (Cauldwell, 2002, p.3). This contribution aims at showing how five listening sessions were designed on Moodle 2.3 based on the review of possible activities that aid perception skills and the way in which ICTs have been used to design online listening activities. This small-scale action research project was carried out with intermediate-

level students of English doing the first-year course English Language I at the School of Languages (U.N.C.) and the findings have shown that it is possible to design self-access successful perception activities with different ICT tools.

2. Key Issues in ESL/EFL Listening for Perception and ICT tools

Perception is the main aspect in bottom-up processing (Vandergrift, 2011). Skilled listeners are able to accurately and automatically perceive and decode speech (Field, 2008a). There are four main reasons why perception skills are important for ESL/EFL listeners. First, "the number of homophones and homonyms (…) in English is small, while the number of words which can be confused or misunderstood by inaccurate perception is relatively large" (Ur, 1984, p.12). Second, Field (2008a) strongly suggests that ELT teachers adopting a process approach to listening should focus on their learners' decoding processes in the first stages of their listening training as many listening comprehension problems are caused by decoding mistakes. Third, there are certain types of listening in which perception skills are essential (Field, 2008a). Finally, English learners of all levels need fast decoding skills to deal with the stream of speech that they may experience outside the classroom (Cauldwell, 2013; Field, 2008a; Flowerdew and Miller, 2005).

These are the most common perception problems faced, especially, by A1/A2 level ESL/EFL listeners:

- Mishearing: Ur (1984) interestingly states that L2 listeners sometimes do not perceive certain English sounds because they do not exist in their L1 or because they exist with some variation. Mishearing can also be caused because ESL/EFL listeners are not used to the stress, intonation and rhythm of the English system (*ibid*).

- Difficulty in recognizing known words: ESL/EFL listeners may not recognize the spoken form of a known word because of the irregular spelling system of English (Wilson, 2008), because they have probably learned the spoken form in isolation (Field, 2008a; Ur, 1984) or because they get confused with the features of natural speech (Field, 2008a; Wilson, 2008; Ur, 1984).

- Incorrect lexical segmentation: Word segmentation is the identification of word boundaries in connected speech, it is language specific and, thus, the main perceptual problem faced by ESL/EFL listeners (Field, 2008). One of the reasons is that L2 listeners cannot use physical marks to identify word boundaries as it is the case with reading (Lynch, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Word segmentation is also difficult as "smaller words are often embedded in larger ones" as it happens with "man" in "manager" (Field, 2008b, p.37). L2 listeners can also encounter segments that can be divided in different ways such as "a sister/assist her" (Field, 2008b, p.37). Moreover, lexical segmentation is also hindered by sound variations in connected speech due to redistribution, assimilation, elision and reduction (Field 2008a).

To help ESL/EFL listeners overcome these perception problems, different activities that focus on perception skills have been suggested:

- Minimal pairs: Using minimal pairs is a useful way to practice accurate aural perception (Ur, 1984). As L2 listeners have to tell if the sounds in a pair of words are the same or different, they focus their attention on the subtle differences between the sounds of the L2. Field (2008a) recommends designing minimal pair exercises with fairly frequent words and Flowerdew and Miller (2005) recommend using minimal-pair exercises in context to emulate what happens in real-life listening.

- Working with stressed words: Stressed words are important as, based on the given-new principle, new information is stressed while given or recoverable information is unstressed (Rost, 1990). Moreover, stress is used by native listeners of English for lexical segmentation: as stressed syllables are easier to perceive, native listeners rely heavily on stress to identify words in the stream of speech (Field, 2008a). Stress is also useful for comprehension as content words in connected speech are usually stressed (Field, 2008a; Flowerdew and Miller, 2005).

- Working with unstressed words: In connected speech, function words are usually unstressed and in their weak form (Field, 2008a). Perceiving function words is important for comprehension as they sometimes carry essential information (Cauldwell, 2002; Field, 2008a; Ur, 1984). Contractions are also unstressed and important for meaning building (Field, 2003).

- Dictation: Dictation has an important value for perception skills as it makes L2 listeners practice segmenting speech into words (Field, 2008b). Most importantly, gaps in dictation help students see and focus on their particular perception problems (Lynch, 2009).

- Using transcripts: Transcripts have a great value especially for perception skills as they help analyze the difference between the pronunciation and spelling of words (Wilson, 2008). Features of connected speech and word stress can be noticed with transcripts and L2 listeners can compare what they think they have heard with what has actually been said (*ibid*).

ICTs can aid listening comprehension (Cross, 2014, Guichon and McLornan, 2008; O'Brien & Hegelheimer, 2007) and it can be particularly useful for the development of perception skills. Self-access multimedia can be used to work on

perception as "cracking the code of connected speech may demand some intensive individual work on the part of the learner" (Field, 2008a, p.162). By controlling the audio, L2 learners can rehear problematic segments and, thus, overcome perception difficulties (Cauldwell, 2002; Field, 2008a). Specially designed software that focuses on the development of perception skills in ESL/EFL listening is beginning to become available. Hulstijn (2003) has come with *123 LISTEN* which allows listeners to choose the mode of listening to a video or audio. Cauldwell (2013) has introduced an iPad application, *Cool Speech,* which helps students improve their perception skills with different listening and pronunciation activities. However, how ICTs can be used to help ESL/EFL learners improve their perception skills has not been much explored yet (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005; Lynch, 2009; Vandergrift, 2011).

3. Methodology

As the literature suggests, there are some listening activities that can develop perception skills and ICTs can be used to design and implement them. Therefore, in 2013, a small-scale action-research project was done with 15 voluntary EFL students doing the first-year course English Language I at the School of Languages, U.N.C (Universidad Nacional de Córdoba), Argentina. The course is taught to students doing their 5-year degree in English Language Teaching, Translation or Research. Its goal is to develop the students' macro skills and help them reach a B1 CEFR of English. The participants had to complete five online listening sessions designed on Moodle 2.3 during their winter break in July.

Vandergrift (2007) recommends L2 listening researchers to use more than one method of data collection to get greater insights and add reliability and validity to the research. Therefore, personal journals after each session, the student's records of the

online activities, a final questionnaire and pre and post IELTS listening tests were analysed to evaluate and reflect upon the effects of the action. Students could write their journals in English or Spanish and the questionnaire was in Spanish. Inductive coding was used to analyse the journals and the open questions in the questionnaire.

4. Design and Implementation of L2 Listening for Perception Activities on Moodle 2.3

Except for session 5, all the sessions had the same structure:

1. A welcome greeting with revision of the previous session, objectives of the session and description of the activities,

2. Listening Activity 1 strategically designed to draw students' attention to the topic of the session,

3. Explanation of the topic with examples from the first activity,

4. Listening Activity 2 with practice of what was taught in the explanation,

5. Revision of the session and suggestions to further practice the topic at different difficulty level.

The type, source, content and delivery of the audios was essential to design appropriate and motivating perception activities (Table 1). The listening sessions 1-3 used graded/scripted audios as "students may learn best from listening to speech which, while not entirely authentic, is an approximation to the real thing, and is planned to take into account the learners' level of ability and particular difficulties" (Ur, 1984, p.23). Sessions 4 and 5 used authentic audios so that students could listen to speech at its normal rate of delivery and with its typical features of spoken discourse (Field 2008a, Lynch 2009, Wilson 2008). Since the listening sessions aimed at perception skills, the audios were quite short (1 to 3 minutes) and of very good sound quality. Except for the

quote which was read at quite fast speech for the purposes of "fast dictation", all the audios had a normal delivery and only 1 or 2 speakers participated in the audios. Speakers using standard British or American English were included. The tapescripts were included at the end of each activity.

LISTENING SESSION	TYPE	SOURCE	CONTENT	DELIVERY
1	scripted	ELLLO	phone message from Mark telling the listener to do some things in his house as he is away	normal speed American English
	scripted	BC LearnEnglish	joke about Sherlock Holmes and Mr Watson	normal speed British English
2	scripted	ELLLO	picture game based on what a hotel receptionist says at check-in	normal speed American English
	scripted	Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab	conversation between a taxi driver and a passenger visiting New York	normal speed American English
3	scripted	One Stop English	conversation between two friends at a clothes shop	normal speed British English
4	authentic	CNN	news report about Pope Francis' vist to Rio	normal speed American English
	authentic	BCC	interview with Prince Harry about the royal baby	normal speed British English
5	authentic	England TV from Visit Britain	short programme about Liverpool's highlights	normal speed British English
	authentic	Skype	short conversation between an English speaker and myself about the Beatles	normal speed British English
	authentic	Skype	John Lennon's famous quote read by a native speaker	quite fast speed British English
	authentic	YouTube	official video clip of The Beatles'	normal speed British English

Table 1. Audios for the listening sessions

The sessions were sequenced progressively according to their level of difficulty.

Listening session 1: Sounds often confused or difficult to perceive

The aim of this session was to make students aware of English sounds which are often confused or difficult to perceive by Spanish speakers and to teach students the compensatory strategies "predicting" and "guessing" which would help them overcome perception difficulties throughout the sessions. For Activity 1, students had to listen to the telephone message and choose between two minimal pairs that were selected based on the sound discrimination difficulty that Spanish speakers have and on possible words that collocate in the context (Figure 1). Students then read a short explanation of the English sounds often confused or wrongly perceived by Spanish speakers.

Figure 1. Listening Activity 1

The true/false quiz with the Sherlock Holmes' joke gave students the chance of practising what they had learned about confusing sounds and strategies. Students were then offered the tapescript and an explanation about the advantages of using tapescripts. The session finished with links to interactive exercises with minimal pairs confusing for Spanish speakers from the *American English Pronunciation Practice* site and online dictations of letters and numbers from the *Listen and Write* site.

Listening session 2: Stressed words

This session aimed at helping students realize the existence, function and importance for stressed words in English. Activity 1 was a listening game with pictures which could successfully be completed if attention was paid to stressed words. Students were then asked to listen to the conversation as many times as needed to complete the tapescript with all the stressed words missing (Figure 2). Next, students learned about stress words in English and practiced noticing stressed words with a multiple-choice with the taxi conversation. Finally, some further listening activities from the *ELLLO* and *Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab* sites were suggested where listening out for stressed words was essential.

Figure 2. Gap-filling with stressed words

Listening session 3: Unstressed words

This session tried to raise students' awareness of the existence, function and importance of unstressed words. The session started with a true/false quiz based on the unstressed words of the shop conversation (Figure 3). Students then read about unstressed words and listened to the shop conversation as many times as needed to fill in the gapped tapescript with unstressed words. The further practice section offered a link to a dictation with unstressed contractions from *SpellingCity.com.*

Maggie gets a bit angry with John because he does not want to look at the brand of the girls' jeans.

Select one:
○True ✔
○False

Check

Well done! She actually insults him in a low voice by saying "spoilsport" which means "someone who spoils other people's fun" (LDOCE) (Spanish: mala onda). You can listen to this at minute 00:32 in the audio.
The correct answer is 'True'.

John thought that Maggie was spending that day.

Select one:
○True ✗
○False

Check

Sorry, wrong answer! John says "Anyway, I thought you WEREN'T spending today." You can listen to it at 00:40 in the track.
The correct answer is 'False'.

Maggie has to write 800 words for Tuesday.

Select one:
○True
○False ✔

Check

Well done! Maggies says "I've got an eight hundred-word essay to write BEFORE Tuesday". You can listen to it again at 00:42
The correct answer is 'False'.

Figure 3. True/false with unstressed words

Listening session 4: Features of connected speech

This session aimed at helping students realize why recognizing words in fast connected speech can be troublesome and how they could use what they had learned in the sessions to deal with perception problems caused by fast speech. First, students had to watch the CNN news report about Pope Francis and complete the statements with words from the video. In all the cases, the missing word(s) was/were affected by a feature of connected speech (redistribution, assimilation, elision or reduction). In the feedback, students learned why the pronunciation of the words they were to complete was altered (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Gap-filling with features of connected speech

For Activity 2, students had to complete statements about the BBC interview with Prince Harry. Students were then encouraged to read the automatic YouTube subtitles and to compare them with the script to realise that recognizing words in fast speech is difficult even for computers. For further practice, students were offered links to the *Breaking News English* dictation site and the interactive dictations of Chanel N5 commercial and The Great Gatsby Trailer from the *Listen and Write* site.

Listening session 5: Consolidation

This final session aimed at helping students revise all the sessions with four listening activities. First, students had to do a multiple-choice activity with the

[Liverpool programme](#) from the *VisitBritain* site. Then, students listened to the Skype conversation about The Beatles between their teacher and an English friend to complete a true-false activity based on the exact words said by the native speaker. Activity 3 was a combination of *fast speed dictation* and *dictogloss*: students had to listen and write down a famous quote by John Lennon read quite fast by the native speaker of the Skype conversation. Finally, students had to complete the gaps with the lyrics of The Beatles' song *Here Comes the Sun.* The session ended with some final comments and a call for continuing practicing listening.

5. Results and Conclusion

Journals were the most effective way of getting the students' impressions of the sessions. Most of the participants completed their journals which reflected that:

- they liked learning about English sounds often confused or wrongly perceived by Spanish speakers as it helped them become aware of possible listening mistakes;

- they found filling in the gaps with stressed and unstressed words "fun", "dynamic" and "challenging";

- the transition from graded to authentic audios was hard; and

- the perception problems in the last session were easily tackled as they enjoyed the topic (The Beatles).

These reflections were mirrored in the average marks (Chart 1). As the level of difficulty of the listening activities increased with the sessions, the marks decreased gradually. The difficulty of session 4 caused a sudden drop and the students' motivation in the last session boosted the average mark.
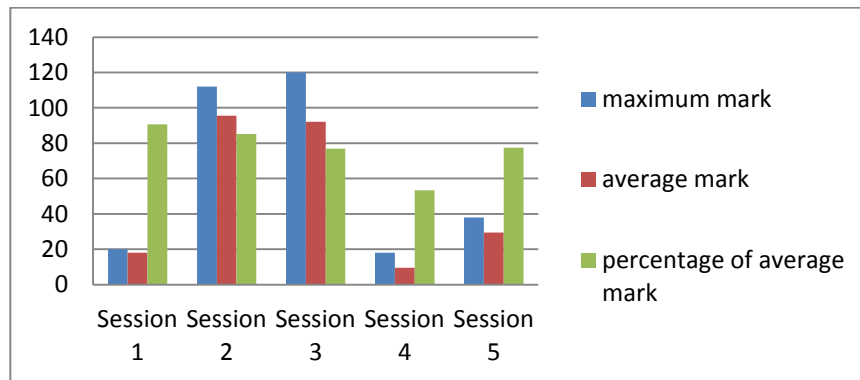
Chart 1. Students' average marks

In the final questionnaire, all the students stated that they liked the sessions and found them useful (Chart 2). Most felt that, thanks to the sessions, they could recognise words in an audio suitable for their level more easily and were better at identifying the missing words in a gap-filling. However, some students were neutral with the idea of being better listeners thanks to the sessions. This reflects what Field (2008a) anticipates: it is difficult to demonstrate progress in listening in a short period of time and perception is only one of the componential processes that skilled listeners need to master. The students seemed to have enjoyed the benefits of using ICTs to learn listening as they all stated that they liked doing the activities on Moodle. In the open questions, all the students answered that the listening sessions were worth their time and effort because they helped them improve their listening skills, they learned a lot and they enjoyed the activities.
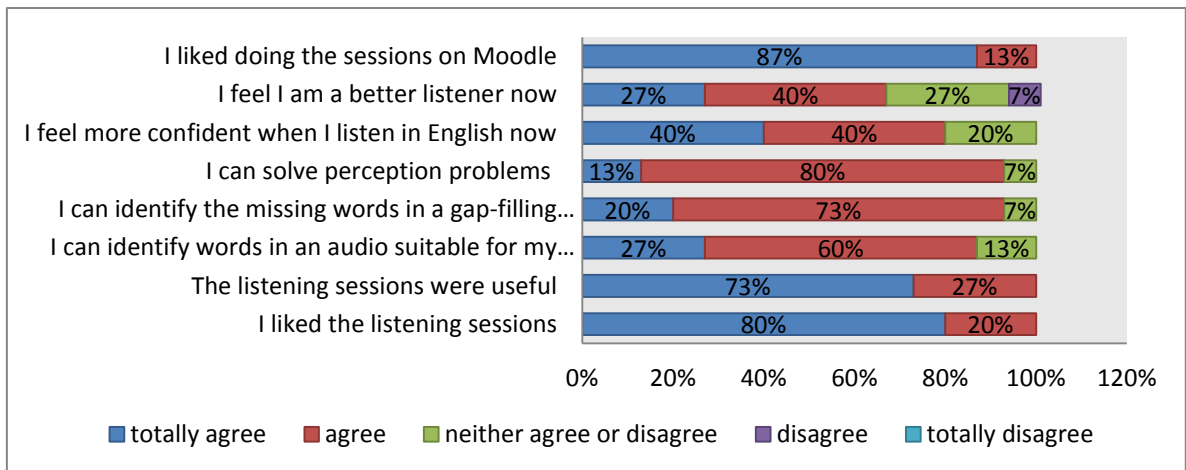
Chart 2. Results of the Likert-scale statements

Comparison of the average marks of the pre and post tests shows that there was a slight improvement in the students' performance (Chart 3).
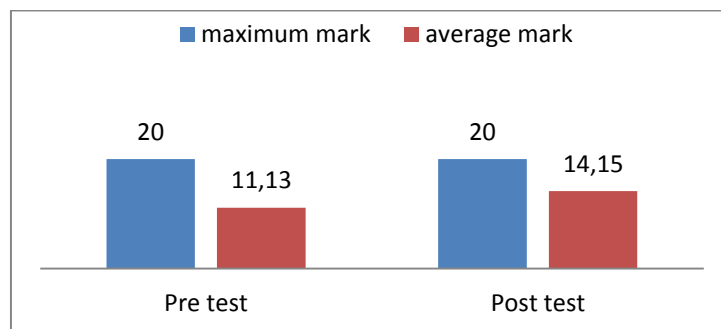

Chart 3. Pre and post test results

Based on the data collected, it seems that true-false, multiple-choice and gap-filling activities on Moodle that focus on specific words from motivating audios, offer immediate feedback and systematically teach students different aspects to improve perception are quite successful. Future sessions should also include activities that focus on syntactic parsing (Field 2008a), spoken language (Lynch 2009, Flowerdew and Miller 2005), meaning-building (Field 2008a) and useful cognitive and metacognitive listening strategies (Vangergrift, 2007). In fact, Field (2008a) states that a *Process Approach* to L2 listening should offer a staged programme where the listening

components are targeted systematically and progressively. Only in this way a listening course on Moodle will be complete as it will make students feel that they have learned the processes, skills and strategies necessary to decode automatically, become better listeners and get ready for the real world once the course is over.

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