A Guide to Internet Based Learning Resources for EFL Focusing on the Receptive Skills

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Abstract

The Internet is increasingly being used for the delivery of educational material and it has also promoted self-learning. Internet-based learning allows students to learn at their own pace, access the information at a time that is convenient to them, and provides education to remote students who otherwise would not be able to travel to a classroom. "Technology is not a panacea that can replace language teachers and face-to-face classrooms; it is something that can be used to enhance language learning" (Sharma & Barrett, 2007). For the learners of English, there is a plethora of learning material available through CDs, VCDs etc. The internet is also one of the biggest sources harboring a vast amount of learning material that can be accessed absolutely 'free' of cost. Learning with computer assisted technologies involves an integration of the skills like listening, reading and visualizing [pictures/animations]. Thus the learning is more effective as more senses are involved. There is uniformity in the learning. This paper is an attempt to ascertain the efficacy of computer assisted learning materials in the learning of English language skills with emphasis on listening skills. This paper also provides a comprehensive listing of such resources available on the internet which promote reading with listening.

Key Words: Internet, Language Learning, Receptive Skills, Productive Skills, Computer Assisted Language Learning

1. Introduction

Language educators have, for long, used the concept of the four basic language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. These four basic skills are related to each other by two parameters:
i) The mode of communication: oral or written
ii) The direction of communication: receiving or producing the message.
A variety of terminologies is used to classify the four basic language skills. On the basis of the direction of communication the four skills are classified as follows.

A. **Receptive skills** (listening and reading): These two skills are also termed as passive or recognition skills, as in both these processes we only recognize and understand the meanings of words used by someone else. These are the skills of comprehension.
B. **Productive skills** (speaking and writing). These are also termed as active or production skills. These are skills of expression.

Learning takes place with a proper interaction of both the productive and the receptive skills. Spolsky (1989: 46) points out that receptive skills are stronger than productive skills. Receptive skills (understanding speech and written text) usually develop before productive skills (speaking and writing) and also to a higher level. "The better a learner can discriminate the sounds of the language and recognize the constituent parts, the more successful his or her learning of speaking

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and understanding the second language will be." Chastain (1971:160) says, "A solid foundation in the receptive skills serves as the basis for building productive skills. We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak."

Listening is defined by Underwood (1989:1) as: "The activity of paying attention and trying to get meaning from something we hear."

Listening is an integral part of the reading process. It helps to build vocabulary, increase fluency and acts as an aid in comprehension. Supporting reading through listening enables students to build skills and access curriculum at their grade level.

Listening skills in language teaching have been neglected and shifted to a secondary position even though being the skill that is most often used in communication. About forty percent of our daily communication happens through listening, thirty-five percent through speaking, sixteen percent through reading, and only nine percent through writing. Yet, in spite of its critical role in communication and language acquisition, listening comprehension remains one of the least understood processes in language learning. By now language practitioners have accepted that listening skills have to be taught like any other language skills.

Although once labeled as a passive skill, listening is an active and demanding process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. One of the most difficult tasks for any teacher is to teach the skills of listening, because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice (Rivers, 1992). Learning listening skills is frustrating for students because there are no written rules as in grammar teaching. Listening skills are difficult to quantify. One of the largest inhibitors for students is often mental block. While listening, students suddenly decide they do not understand. At this point, many students just tune out – some students convince themselves they are not able to understand spoken English well and create problems for themselves. This problem can be tackled by using resources that support listening and reading.

Students can listen on a higher language level than they can read, so listening provides a way to improve students' language skills, making complex ideas more accessible to students and exposing them to vocabulary and language patterns that are not part of their everyday speech (Fountas and Pinnell 1996). Listening can be used to develop these essential language skills with students of all reading abilities. These language skills can then influence and enhance their reading comprehension.

2. Listening-Reading with Computer Technology

According to Gough (1997 as in Shayea, 2005:52), people have different preferences in learning i.e. they differ in their styles and their needs. Some of them prefer to learn by observing and reflecting and others prefer to learn by doing and experiencing. A preference for one way of learning may indicate when a learner may make sense of what is being learned and in which learning cycle s/he can be located. Therefore, language teachers and material producers should employ these kinds of learning differences and try to develop materials that suit different learners and situations.

Computer assisted Listening-Reading helps the learner to learn and practice independently at his/her own pace. The learner can listen-read a particular text as many times as s/he wants to with the additional benefit of pausing easily where required and replaying the parts that have not been clearly understood. The learner enjoys the activity and becomes self-motivated in his/her learning. Another important aspect is that using computer technology helps in the integration of the skills.

2.1.Text to Speech (TTS)
Innumerable online texts are available on the World Wide Web. With access to an internet-connected computer, students can find a wide variety of free online reading materials, including books, plays, short stories, magazines and reference materials. These texts can be converted to speech (audio files) by using text to speech software as explained below:

2.1.1. **Browsealoud**: It is software that enables supported websites to be read aloud to users, helping to improve accessibility. The software is designed by Text help Systems, a Northern-Ireland based company (Wikipedia). The software reads online text aloud and highlights the words or sentences as they are spoken; due to this feature comprehension can be substantially increased as it involves two skills simultaneously: reading and listening plus as the words are highlighted, the pronunciation of the words becomes clear especially in the cases where the learner does not know the correct pronunciation of the words. The learner does not have to depend on anyone to read the text and gains confidence in speaking through repeated listening of different texts. It is a beneficial tool for those who learn English as as a second language and face trouble in reading. Browsealoud allows you to "listen" to the contents of the web page you are viewing. Browsealoud is free to use. All you have to do is simply install the free Browsealoud software from the Browse aloud site.

Browsealoud helps those with reading difficulties, literacy problems, mild vision difficulties and where English is not their first language. Simply by scrolling your mouse over the text that you want to be read to you, Browsealoud will read and speak what you require, helping you navigate on the enabled websites more easily. Browsealoud features include:

- Free to download.
- Easy to use.
- Control of voice, pitch and speed.
- User defined hot keys to activate and deactivate speech.
- A pronunciation engine to add words and define how a word is pronounced.
- User has the option to add voices to those already on the computer.
- User has the option to have the program start when the computer starts.

Once installed, it can be customized to allow one to choose a male or female voice and change the speed, pitch and volume of the reader. If one desires, it can also read an entire page. . Other features include a Text Magnification Display option and a Talking Dictionary. If a website is Browsealoud enabled, the icon has a red tick and the mouse pointer enlarges, changes color to yellow and has a small blue circle next to it. [http://www.browsealoud.com/]

2.1.2. TextAloud: It reads text from email, web pages, reports etc. , aloud on your PC. TextAloud can also save your daily reading to MP3 or Windows Media files ready for playback on your iPod, Pocket PC. If one has not heard computer speech lately, one would be amazed at how human-like the latest voices really are.[www.nextup.com].

2.1.3. NewsAloud: It is a personal news agent from NextUp.com.
[www.nextup.com/NewsAloud/]. It finds the stories one wants, and then reads them aloud in a natural, human sounding voice.

2.1.4. Free Natural Reader 6.6: Natural Reader software is a professional text to speech program that converts any text into spoken words. It lets you listen to the text instead of only reading on the screen.

Just one click and one can have one's computer speak any text aloud in a clear, natural sounding human voice. It's never been so easy to use a text-to-speech program. As long as the software is running, just press Control plus F9, and you can have the computer speak any selected text on

the computer screen. One can choose to copy and paste text to the reading area of the software, or more conveniently, with the add-in tool bars in the Internet Explorer, Microsoft Office Word, Power Point and Outlook programs, one can listen to any online news, web information, Word documents, Presentation files and emails without copy and paste. The software also allows you to convert text into an MP3 or WAV audio file, so that you can listen to it later on iPod or burn it into a CD.

The internet is a storehouse of information with innumerable possibilities for the intelligent user. There is so much material that it is like you ask for it and it is there. Thus there is immense scope to experiment and find new and better ways to teach and learn. All kinds of reading material are there on the net which, with the help of the text to speech software can be converted into listening texts. An example of this would be the Panchatantra Tales. Everyone enjoys reading these stories and almost each and every Indian has been brought up listening to these amazing stories which are fables based mostly on animals and they always end with a moral. These stories would be an excellent extra listening-reading activity for youngsters. So let us presume that we have a class. The teacher as part of the listening activity should guide the students and show them how to open the site for these Panchatantra tales (using the search engine google.com). There are innumerable stories here with picture illustrations that would immediately catch the attention of the young and old alike. Now with the help of the TTS software, the stories can be listened to and read on the computer screen. The parents of the little ones can be shown how to use this technique with which the student can listen-read as many stories as s/he wants at his own pace and repeat hearing as many times as s/he would like to hear. The teacher then can ask the students to listen-read the stories at home and narrate them in the class. So the speaking skill is also covered which is usually a difficult skill but the repeated listening will foster confidence in the child who will be able to narrate the story quite easily. Similarly for more grown up learners, the students can be assigned short stories, poems, detective stories, biographies, news articles, conversations, which can be easily accessed on the internet as shownin the various technologies above. Let us take the example of short stories: Innumerable short stories of all the famous writers are available; the entire texts are available and can be accessed totally free of cost. This is totally remarkable, it is as if you had to buy all these books it would cost you as well as consider other resources like space, paper and when you travel you have to carry the extra load. But these online texts canbe seen anywhere as long as you have a computer and internet access(which is a very common thing in the world today.). Also the variety of material available and the presentation of the same is mindboggling; all with the click of a few keys. So now a person can very easily practice listening independently as s/he does not have to depend on anyone else. In addition, the listening can be done at the person's convenience at any time of the day or night as internet access is 24/7.

3. Computer Assisted Learning Material on the Internet: Sites for Listening-Reading
3.1. Online Talking Dictionaries:

A] www.dictionary.com: This is an internet site for accessing a dictionary. Other examples of online dictionaries are as follows.

B] Online Talking Dictionary 9.0.0

Description: It is a speech enabled encyclopedic dictionary and thesaurus, uses built in speech or existing screen reader, Contains 250,000 word entries and is fully browsable. Its database includes place names, historical figures, slang and jargon. It has been updated with over 8500 new words. It can be used with other programs or as a standalone program. It is designed for computers running Microsoft Windows 95 onwards and has been optimized for Windows Vista and Windows XP. It can now be used from within other Windows programs, such as Microsoft Word and Microsoft

Notepad, etc. Spell checker rewritten and improved, It can search for words when letters are missing from the input. For partially sighted users, the text size can easily be adjusted. Word list is browsable like an electronic book. Annotations can be made to any word entry. The dictionary is available for download free of cost from its site (http://www.download3000.com/download-talking-dictionary-count-reg-6527.html).

C] Webster Dictionary with Pronunciation and Sound. Online Webster's dictionary with audible pronunciation and relevant quotes from books is fast, talking and cross linked. It is designed to help you become a better English speaker. It uses Webster, Wiktionary, and Wikipedia.

D] CoolDictionary.com: Helps one not only find words in the Webster dictionary, but also gives the examples of how they are used in classical books. It is fully cross linked, so that you can follow it from one word to another. The sound icon lets you hear the pronunciation of individual words or even the entire classical literature quotes.

E] Encarta World English Dictionary. Is another example of a talking dictionary, one has to click to hear the pronunciation of the word.

[http://www.thefreedictionary.com]

When one consults a normal dictionary, one has to look up the word according to alphabetical order and can understand the pronunciation of the word only if s/he knows how to read the phonetic script. But with online dictionaries one just has to type the word in the browser search bar and the word is located. One can see the meaning of the word and listen to the correct pronunciation of the word by clicking on the speech icon which is there next to the word. One can keep on clicking on the icon repeatedly till one gets the correct pronunciation of the word. These resources are 'free' to access and require no subscription.

1. English, Baby! – [http://www.englishbaby.com/]. This is a commercial site, but presently it is free. It includes five new lessons per week, 3-4 of which are typically listening based, with text, quiz, and glossary. The new lessons replace those from the previous week, but institutions can purchase access to their extensive archives. Authentic, entertaining material geared toward teens and twenties. It is great for advanced students but can be daunting for lower levels. It requires RealPlayer.

2. California Distance Learning Project – [http://www.cdlponline.org.]: It is a free resource of listening materials, lessons and supportive instructional activities related to news stories, created by California Department of Education; includes both transcripts and support exercises and is a good source for lower level learners. It requires RealPlayer.

3. ESL-LAB.COM: Since 1998, Randall Davis has been developing free multimedia Websites for ESL/EFL students. In addition to http://www.esl-lab.com, Randall has created several others including http://www.dailyesl.com and http://www.ezslang.com. Randall has also given presentations on educational technology, specifically helping teachers learn how to use technology in pedagogically-sound ways.

Purpose for Setting up this Site:

For Students: Provides a free online self-access center to help learners improve their English listening comprehension skills.

For Teachers: Develops a resource of listening material which can be used to supplement and reinforce skills taught in the classroom.

Over 125 original learning quizzes and activities covering both functional language topics (e.g., making invitations, checking into a hotel, buying a used car, etc.) as well as interviews, news broadcasts, and simulated TV and radio programs The use of

streaming audio and video technology for delivering multimedia content on the Internet which provides an array of multisensory learning experiences.

4. You tube: It contains video clips of different subjects. The main feature is that as one watches and listens to the video, one can pause it or replay the sentence just heard as one follows the text. This exercises reading and listening skills at the same time, and the video material helps one's comprehension. It is a very low-stress and enjoyable way to learn. One can even download the full transcription of the video in .PDF format for vocabulary work. You tube is a powerful tool that can be used for listening to stories, songs and animated videos in English.

5. Ohio University ESL Listening Resources: It contains lists of links for listening resources, activities and suggestions for improving the listening-reading skill. It includes most of the sites presented above and others.

6. Audiobooks: An audio book is a recording of a book being read aloud. There are tens of thousands of audiobooks available in the world, in various languages, covering topics from education to entertainment. Audiobooks, sometimes known as books on tape, are professionally recorded, unabridged versions of fiction or nonfiction books. When used in conjunction with written texts, audiobooks help improve children's reading skills. Children can listen to the audio version of a book and follow along silently with the written version. [www.ncrel.org].

7. Electronic Books and Online Texts: Electronic books also known as e-books are electronic texts that are presented visually. Whether available on CD-ROM, the internet, or special disks, electronic books always provide the text in a visual component.

   The term electronic talking book has been coined by some researchers to refer to electronic texts that also provide embedded speech. The speech component offers a digitized reading of general sections as well as pronunciations of specific words within the text. it supports and coaches students as they read the text of the story (Leu, 2000; McKenna, 1998). Although research is ongoing about the effectiveness of electronic talking books, there already is much to be said in their favor (for a review, see Leu, 2000; McKenna, 1998).

There are also some useful online softwares and websites, which are nowadays used by teachers as well as learners to develop proficiency in English language. These include:

I. LISTEN AND READ ENGLISH
www.anglickynazivo.szm.sk/
A comprehensive site giving complete details of all the sites available for listening-reading activities in English and the information is divided as per your level- beginner, medium, advanced and kids.

II. Audio for ESL/EFL: Listen and Read Along (Flash/MP3)
www.manythings.org/listen/
Listening Practice for English as a Second Language Learners. VOA Special English Words Color-Coded. Reading (with MP3). Listen and Read Along · Jokes ...
Importance of Hand Washing - How Loneliness Can Infect ... - Frank Lloyd Wright

III. Listen & Watch | Learn English | British Council
learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/listen-and-watch
Listen and read stories and poems by writers as famous as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tagore and Yeats, as well as stories by our own writers and readers.

IV. Listen & Read | Spotlight
spotlightradio.net/listen/

Listen & Read. 5141 Gleaning for Good. Ryan Geertsma and Christy VanArragon describe one way to save and share food from farms and markets.

V. Free English Study, speaking, listening, grammar lessons, reading ...

www.free-english-study.com/

Listening. Need some help with listening? Free-English-Study.com highly recommends Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab.

VI. ESL LISTENING AND READING - Intermediate & Advanced ESL ...

esl-bits.net/

English language learners. Two listening speeds. Intermediate Listen & Read Archive Audio with text for high-level. Intermediate English language learners ...

VIII. Listening & Speaking - English as a Second Language

www.rong-chang.com/listen.htm

Hundreds of easy conversations, short and interesting, for you to read and listen. Talk English. Over 500 Business English lessons for people with office jobs.

IX.Listen and Read Stories - Learn English Adventure

www.learn-english-adventure.com/listen-and-read.html

X. Listen and Read Stories with Video, Audio and Text.

   Listening and Reading - Autoenglish

www.autoenglish.org/listenings.htm

4. Conclusion

To conclude we can say that using computer assisted computer technologies provides authentic listening-reading material. This is particularly important in situations where the learner does not get enough exposure to good English listening material. By using the internet resources the learner can access a variety of accents and listening materials which is constantly upgraded. When you subscribe to e- resources like 'The American Storyteller', you receive one story every week which has text + listening. Thus the learner can listen-read new and varied material which is available free of cost as long as one has an internet connection. This would enable the learner to procure learning material other than that which is there in the traditional learning materials and make the learner self-dependent with easy access to learning material available 24/7/365. In this way computer assisted technologies can play an important pedagogical role and help to enhance the acquisition/learning of English language skills especially the listening and reading skills.

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Google

www.google.co.in/

http://www.learningthroughlistening.org

http://www.thefreedictionary.com

www.youtube.

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