# THE EFFECT OF AUDIOBOOK USE ON EFL STUDENTS' FLUENCY DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** This article uncovered an empirical study of audiobook - a form of podcasting media. The subjects were two classes of 30 learners of English, fifteen of whom (one class) were randomly assigned to a meaning-focused input group using audiobooks and the other class to a non-audiobook group. There were two separated groups which were randomly assigned to a meaning-focused input group applying audiobooks and the other class to a non-audiobook group. This study implemented pretest and posttest research design. During one complete semester the subjects of experimental class accomplished fourteen pedagogical audiobook sessions while the control group were provided with another learning media. Data collected consisted of orally in-pairs test performed by the subjects in both groups. Audiobooks appeared to be successful in this study in that they led to considerable improvement in fluency and vocabulary size consistency during oral performance.

**Keywords:** *Audiobooks, Meaning-focused input, L2, Output, Fluency, learning media*

The use of learning media that facilitate the improvement and development of language skills have long been recognized to audiobook, a recording technology text being read. Audiobook cassette tape format which contains narrative version of a book was originally used to help the handicapped blind to enjoy and understand books. At its development audiobook format turned into MP3 files commonly known as podcast which is more compact, cheaper, mobile and widespread. With the ease of information technology, audiobook can be downloaded even free from various websites on the internet (*https://www.shapingenglish.ning.co*; https://www.englishtips.org). In this research I would like to see its impact on the teaching of speaking in a specified EFL classroom. Facts prove that numbers of learners of English in Indonesia have difficulty mastering this popular language. English language acquisition still possessed challenges (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Musthafa, 2001; Nur, 2004 and Yuwono, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2007 and Sun, 2004).

There are two factors, internal and external, that influence second language learning (Wikins, 1972). Exposure is part of the external factors in the learner which includes the time and the frequency available to the targeted language. It is one of the conditions for L1 acquisition equally holds true for second language (L2) learning. Wilkins further stated that if learner is exposed to the L2 in the same way as he/she is exposed to the L1, greater success will be achieved. Because this is in the 'natural' L2 learning situation, the pressure to acquire the IL in order to control the environment is indeed tremendous. However, according to Ravem (1974), the learner is very often not '... exposed to "primary linguistic data" in the sense that an L1 learner is, but rather to carefully graded language items presented in small doses for a few hours a week '(ibid.:

132). Amount of exposure L2 learners get in the classroom is limited, and even less than the amount they receive in acquiring the L1 outside the classroom. The limited amount of exposure time to the L2 and how the time is spent does matter (Kennedy, 1973). Ismail Jamali (1991) detected difference between L1 acquisition conditions and L2 learning where the amount received by those learning the L2 is far more limited than that received by children acquiring the L1. Instead of having a rich linguistic environment, the L2 learner is often exposed to selected usually phonological, syntactical, lexical, and thematic items.

Linguistically *Bahasa Indonesia* and English possess abundant of diversity that include the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and other linguistic aspects. Indonesian learners of English often use the concept of *bahasa Indonesia* when expressing ideas in English. Especially in verbal interaction, a language learner may take time to connect with the intention of meaning in English. He spoke slowly, many stops, full of fillers which can interfere with the smooth communication. This distract fluency, factor in a broad sense refers to the error-free grammar, a large number of vocabulary and / or smooth pronunciation. Fluency in the broad sense is equivalent to overall speaking proficiency (Chambers, 1997). Instead, fluency in a narrow sense is part of the assessment component of speaking. Lennon (1990) defines fluency in this sense as an 'impression on the listener's part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and smoothly'. Fillmore's (1979) identifies four abilities that might be subsumed under the term fluency, the first is the ability to talk at length with few pauses. The three other abilities include talking in coherent, reasoned, and "semantically dense sentences", the ability to have appropriate of things to say in a wide range of contexts, and finally the ability to be creative and imaginative in language use (p . 93). Thus, one of the most difficult challenges in L2 teaching is finding ways to overcome oral fluency. This is especially true in countries where learners share a common mother tongue and have little or no exposure to the L2 outside the classroom. Regardless of the reason, one thing is clear that L2 teachers should place greater emphasis on finding media that incorporate fluency-enhancing activities into their classroom teaching. To reach this stage, one must first recognize the mechanisms surrounding fluency.

In this research, the operational definition of oral fluency is a measure of how well and how easily a learner can communicate his / her ideas in speech clearly. Lennon (1990) define the temporal aspect of fluency, "often it has been assumed that the goal in language learning consists in producing speech at the tempo of native speakers, unimpeded by silent pauses and hesitations, filled pauses, ... "(p. 390). To be able to distinguish the words, phrases, clauses, and whole sentences, including stress, rhythm, and intonation uttered a learner must be used to hearing English utterances. Asher (1969) expands that "in order to handle a simple conversation, an individual must have a much broader competency in listening comprehension than in speaking; this is especially the case when conversing in a foreign language with a native speaker of that language. A series of studies have shown that the combination of listening, reading, and speaking proven to improve Fluency. Asher (1969) elaborated that "the stress of trying to pronounce the alien utterance may retard fluency listening ... The optimal strategy may be serial learning in which one achieves listening just before attempting to speak." Ley and Locascio (1972) added that attempting to speak before listening comprehension is acquired may bring about the detrimental effect of task overload (of stress and anxiety) on language learning. As Gaier (1952, p.11) has expressed it: "It leads to impairment in the ability to improvise in an unstructured and / or new situation. This results in stereotyped, habitual, and familiar approaches that may be maladaptive in the situation.

Next step was to repeat listening until what is read is familiarized by ears. Yuki Yoshimura and Brian MacWhinney's study indicate that repeated oral practice fluency significantly increases. They argue that there is a link between automatic processing and fluency. Researchers in the field of skill acquisition hold that, with practice, a skill moves from controlled to automatic processing. It indicated that higher working memory capacity brings advantages in fluency. Regardless of individual working-memory capacity, the automatic processing of language frees up capacity for other information, results in fluent use of language. At the same time, higher working-memory capacity to process larger speakers allows pieces of information fluently.

The research on audiobook has shown success in reading fluency development. The results of Kuhn and Stahl's study (2000) concluded tape-assisted reading strategies produce significant gains for students (Kuhn and Stahl, 2000). Students become more fluent readers when provided with models of fluent reading (Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn, 2001). Casbergue & Harris's (1996) focuses on children's fluency growth found that:

As they listen to a variety of books read aloud, youngsters' understanding of story structure, written language conventions, vocabulary, and aspects of their own and exotic cultures increases. As this knowledge base grows, more challenging stories become comprehensible to them, leading in turn to higher levels of understanding of structure, conventions, vocabulary and general.

This reading-while-listening assists learners' transitions to fluency (Dowhower, 1987 and Rasinski, 1990, cited in Kuhn and Stahl, 2000) which eradicates confusion of pronunciation during listening. Kuhn and Stahl conclude that seeing the text as whole, students can begin to use context clues to decipher meaning from new words, and are more easily able to incorporate these words into their daily conversation. This leads to increased fluency and confidence because L2 learners need explicit instruction and experiences that specifically targets fluency (Pinnell et al, 1995, cited in Worthy and Broaddus, 2002). Fluency is an ideal candidate for treatment using audiobooks. Therefore, the research questions investigated in this study were the following:

1. Do learners who have received comprehensible input using audiobooks on their L2 output have a greater ability to uphold fluency in their L2 speech?
2. Do learners who have received repeated comprehensible input using audiobooks show higher density words during their speech?

In this study, the definition of the word density is the number of words spoken in a given time duration, 1 minute.

## METHOD

The subjects were 19 to 23 years old male and female, all of whom were L2 learners of English enrolled in study programs in English education study program in STAIN Palangkaraya, Indonesia. They have been studying English since several years ago with their heterogeneous proficiency levels. All reported a high level of motivation for learning English.

The study employed a pretest, and posttest design, with two groups of 15 subjects. The audiobook group, to which fifteen subjects were randomly assigned, received treatment using audiobook. The nonaudiobook group, to which the other fifteen subjects were randomly assigned, received no audiobook task, and therefore served as a contrast for any effect observed in the audiobook group. In total, the subjects participated in 14 sessions over a period of about one semester. The pretest consisting of an in-pairs oral interview task was administered to all the subjects, the aim being (a) to gauge the subjects' ability to uphold verbal communication in producing L2 output and (b) to enable a comparison with the posttests. The instruction period was conducted separately for the audiobook group and the nonaudiobook

group. The subjects performed the same task, during which only the audiobook group received audiobook treatment. A posttest, again in the form of an orally in-pairs task, was administered to both groups to see if any noticeable changes occurred in the performance of the audiobook group.

Data were elicited using cartoon strips. All the pictures depicted stories about the adventure of Tom Sawyer, and the subjects' familiarity with the story boosted their interest in the tasks. The database comprises oral remarks produced by the audiobook group and the nonaudiobook group during the 14 sessions. Typically, in each session the subjects and a researcher sat in a circle, similar to the way a group activity is conducted in a classroom. Each subject received a reading passage for each session, entitled *Adventures* of *Tom Sawyer by Mark Twain* and the following instructions: "read the story and then find out unknown vocabularies or phrases that impede your understanding. Play and listen the audiobook with the passage closed. When you are finished, retell the story to your friend next to you in ten minutes. During the moment take turns with your partner to be the story teller while other asking questions based on the storyline". The subjects then identified and clarified the difficult vocabularies with partner. This brief searching phase was meant to identify building blocks of meaning and pave the way for the internalization of those words. In audiobook group, prior to in-pairs conversation phase subjects had to listen to audiobook played through their MP3-facilitated cellular phones. The subjects were allowed to play the audio five times at least. Their understanding to the story was then confirmed. Next, the subjects took turns relating their story.

During the test each conversation was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The pedagogical focus for the audiobook group during the instruction period was the use of audiobook assisted to comprehend the story being read. Being at the upper elementary level, the subjects were judged developmentally ready for this linguistic treatment. During the instruction sessions, the subjects in audiobook group consistently listened to audiobooks which was transferred into their cellular phones.

In addition, off-class instruction was also given for more familiarization of meaningful inputs. The subjects in audiobook group were asked to frequently listen to the audiobooks in their spent time while the subjects in the non-audiobook group were asked to frequently make use of the given reading passages. The purpose of off-class instruction was set up to maintain their consistent use of each, podcasting and reading media.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The verbal in-pairs conversations are transcribed and analyzed separately for each group. Words spoken in every 1 minute were counted. Pronunciation aspects were not analyzed because this required different treatment (the limitation of this research) and that the focus of pronunciation accuracy was beyond the narrow sense of fluency. The subject needed to increase the smooth the pronunciation rasio out of this study. I scored pretest and posttest to ensure coding lexical density per minute; interrater agreement reached 77%.

I estimate the speech learners' by calculating the average proportion of oral speech and a separately for audiobook and nonaudiobook group on two occasions (ie, pretest and posttest). Standard deviation is calculated to reveal the variation in the group. I then obtained a single index of fluency by subtracting the mean for the less lexical density from the mean for the most used on each of the tests .6. The resulting 'fluency development ' theoretical value can range from 0, indicating no development of fluency (as would happen if learners make less use of new words 50% of the duration of 1 minute (.50 .50 _ = 0), to 1.00, indicating the use of new words encountered more than 100% of the time . In the oral pretest, each audiobooks nonaudiobook group showed a bit of a preference for one temporal frame over the other: The

audiobook group preferred most encountered words spoken in their daily conversation (M = .63) while the nonaudiobook group tended to use similarly the words of daily interaction (M = .64). In addition, variation among members of the audiobook is relatively larger than the contrast group members. At posttest, the audiobook group showed significant growth in the use of lexical density (pretest, M = .63,. posttest, M = 75) while the nonaudiobook group showed a slight increase in the use of lexical density (pretest, M = .64,. posttest, M = .67) Overall, the results revealed a growing number of used words and a decrease in the variation to the audiobooks and more stable number of words that are used throughout the test for the contrast group.

To estimate the level of vocabulary and phrases that are achieved from time to time by each group on the two tests, I get a gap between the use of words on each test for each group by subtracting the average score in proportion to the number of words commonly used to obtain a score between 0 and 1. The audiobook group and the nonaudiobook group both started with the same degree of fluency score (.28, indicating relatively small number of words used). However, this commonality diminished on the posttest (audiobook group, .73; nonaudiobook group, .67). Thus, judging from comparisons of the mean proportion scores for both groups, audiobooks appear on the whole to have had a positive impact on the subjects in the audiobook group, who seemed to have developed a much better control over fluency than their counterparts in the nonaudiobook group. The views presented so far provide a quantitative summary of the overall changes in the fluency development, but offers little insight into how audiobooks works and how they contribute to the development of the subject 'of L2 fluency.

This study revealed evidence indicating that audiobooks helped learners improve fluency development in their L2 conversation and heightened their lexical density. The audiobook group outperformed the contrast group following a number of instruction sessions with intensive provision of audiobooks. Moreover, during instruction, subjects in the audiobook group displayed a relatively greater ability to maintain number of needed words when expressing meanings than their counterparts in the nonaudiobook group did. Over the period, fluency speech improved systematically in the setup conversation of the subjects in the audiobook group but not of those in the nonaudiobook group. This result indicates that the audiobooks, which were consistently provided on the comprehensible input, led familiarization of repeated words. Enhanced fluency on the part of the subjects in the audiobook group was also evident from the fact that the audiobook group's attempts focused mainly on rehearsed comprehensible inputs. Some conditions appear to have affected the outcomes of this small scale study: (a) intensive listening, (b) consistent focus, (c) repeated comprehensible input, and (d) and awareness of effective media. A discussion of each may be useful in applying the positive findings from this study in other settings. First, the study, carried out in and out of class of which subjects were exposed to spoken English. As a result, each subject received intensive listening individualized from audiobook. Second, the instruction had a consistent focus on one aspect of effective interaction—namely, comprehension. This focus may have facilitated the learners' oral production of the pedagogical instruction. The linguistic ease targeted by the instruction was one of which the subjects had experienced and one that they were in the process of developing an ability to express meaning smoothly. The role of the audiobook, then, was used to familiarize subjects with L2 exposure of spoken English. In other words, the learners were developmentally ready to benefit from meaning-focused activities.

The last condition is the intensity of the instruction to raise awareness of effective media. The study contained eight instruction sessions

conducted over a period of one semester, in which audiobooks were the only learning media. The intensive, instruction may have forced the change in behavior and ensuing preservation of that change. Intensity is related to frequency, which in turn leads to saliency. Frequency and saliency have also been identified as important for audiobooks to be effective. However, that the reliability rather than the frequency of audiobooks is crucial, reliability in this context being seen as synonymous with consistent focus. Had the audiobooks been only frequent and not focused, their reliability may have been reduced, and the audiobooks probably would not have led to the degree of uptake seen in the audiobook group's output. This occurred with unmotivated subjects in the audiobook group. These four actors—intensive listening, consistent focus, repeated comprehensible input, and (d) and awareness of effective media-constitute a set of interdependent conditions under which the audiobooks proved to be successful. In this study, they seem to have compensated well for the intrinsic lack of elaboration in audiobook; essentially, they jointly created *salience* (i.e., making the target linguistic feature noticeable), *relevance* (i.e., making the target linguistic feature meaningful for immediate incorporation in the L2 output), and *reinforcement* (i.e., reinforcing change in awareness and behavior). None of these conditions would seem easily replicable in real classrooms, however. In real classrooms, students get bored easily if the activities feels monotonous for them. Moreover, the effectiveness of this learning media seems to be dependent on learning motivation to improve English speaking proficiency. In my study case, little warning

about test content did work to encourage them to listen intensively on their own spare time. Despite the positive results obtained and the speculation about factors affecting success, the study focused on only one feature of L2 output of speaking. The positive outcome observed cannot be assumed to transfer to other tasks, nor can one assume that audiobook would have an equally positive impact on students with low motivation of learning. Indeed, at the core of an understanding of the role of audiobook are two questions: Under which conditions and on which aspects of L2 development would audiobook have a positive effect? As for the question of which aspects of L2 development would benefit most from audiobooks, L1 research has generated some evidence showing that reading fluency is susceptible to the influence of audiobooks (Worthy and Broaddus, 2002; Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn, 2001; Kuhn and Stahl, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

This study has offered some suggestions about the factors affecting the success of using audiobook. If intensive listening, consistent focus, repeated comprehensible input, and awareness of effective media are indeed what it takes for audiobook to ensure change in behavior, still to be explored are such issues as how much attention should be paid to individual students, how consistent the focus should be, and how effective audiobook should be for low motivation students. Further empirical studies will be useful to improve use of audiobook as spoken fluency supporting media excluded reading passages.

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