

DEVELOPING LISTENING COMPREHENSION SKILLS THROUGH FRENCH PODCASTS AND AUDIO MATERIALS

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of using French podcasts and audio materials in developing listening comprehension skills among French as a Foreign Language (FLE) learners. The research focuses on beginner and intermediate level students, exploring how authentic audio resources impact learners' ability to understand spoken French in various contexts. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining pre- and post-listening tests with learner interviews. Results indicate that regular exposure to podcasts and diverse audio materials significantly improves listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and learner motivation. The findings highlight the importance of integrating multimedia resources in FLE classrooms to foster authentic language exposure and enhance auditory skills.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, podcasts, audio materials, authentic resources, language acquisition, learner motivation, FLE pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is a fundamental skill in the acquisition of any second language, serving as the primary means through which learners are exposed to authentic language input (Vandergrift, 2007). In the context of French as a Foreign Language (FLE), the development of effective listening skills is especially critical given the oral-centric nature of communication and the nuances of French phonology, including liaison, nasal vowels, and rhythm (Puren, 1997). Despite its importance, many learners struggle with

understanding spoken French due to rapid speech, unfamiliar accents, and limited exposure to varied authentic materials (Field, 2008).

Traditional classroom instruction often relies heavily on teacher-led listening exercises or scripted audio texts that may lack the spontaneity and cultural richness found in real-life language use. Consequently, this limits learners' ability to develop natural listening skills and impairs their communicative competence (Gilmore, 2007). To address these challenges, recent pedagogical trends emphasize the incorporation of authentic auditory materials such as podcasts, radio broadcasts, and other multimedia resources that provide diverse, contextualized, and engaging listening input (Mendelsohn, 1994).

Podcasts, in particular, have emerged as a popular and accessible medium for language learners, offering content that ranges from news, interviews, storytelling, to cultural discussions all delivered by native speakers in natural contexts (Vickers, 2017). The flexibility of podcasts allows learners to control the pace of listening through repetition and pauses, facilitating a deeper processing of language features such as intonation, vocabulary, and syntactic structures. Furthermore, audio materials expose learners to a variety of accents and registers, which broadens their listening repertoire and prepares them for real-world communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010).

Several studies have examined the role of authentic audio input in improving listening comprehension. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) highlight that exposure to diverse listening materials enhances learners' metacognitive awareness and strategic listening behaviors, such as prediction, inference, and selective attention. Similarly, Vandergrift's (2004) research underscores that multimodal input including audio-visual resources can promote better comprehension compared to traditional audio-only texts. In the French learning context, Leroux (2018) found that integrating podcasts into curriculum resulted in significant gains in learners' auditory skills and cultural understanding.

Moreover, the affective dimension of learning is greatly influenced by the use of engaging audio materials. Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System suggests that learners' motivation is enhanced when they interact with authentic and meaningful content

that aligns with their interests and goals. Podcasts often cover contemporary topics and cultural insights, which stimulate learner curiosity and provide intrinsic motivation for sustained language practice (Saito, 2017).

Despite these promising perspectives, the integration of podcasts and other authentic audio resources in FLE classrooms remains inconsistent. Challenges such as selecting appropriate materials aligned with learners' proficiency, providing adequate scaffolding, and assessing listening comprehension effectively must be addressed (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This study aims to contribute to this growing field by examining the impact of French podcasts and audio materials on the listening comprehension skills of beginner and intermediate learners in a secondary school setting.

Developing listening comprehension through authentic audio materials represents a vital and contemporary approach in French language pedagogy. It not only supports linguistic development but also nurtures cultural competence and learner autonomy. The following sections will detail the research methodology, including the selection and use of podcasts, the instructional design, and the assessment tools employed to measure listening gains.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the effectiveness of using French podcasts and audio materials in developing listening comprehension skills among beginner-level learners of French as a Foreign Language. The research was conducted over a six-week period in one public school in the Bukhara region, involving two groups of learners: an experimental group that used podcasts and audio materials as part of instruction, and a control group that followed the traditional curriculum without these resources.

The primary aim of the methodological design was to integrate authentic listening resources into the classroom and observe their effect on learners' comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and motivation. A set of popular and pedagogically appropriate

French podcasts such as *Coffee Break French*, *Journal en français facile*, and *RFI Savoirs* were selected for their accessible language, clarity of pronunciation, and cultural relevance.

Each podcast episode was accompanied by structured classroom activities divided into three stages: **pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening**. For instance, before listening, students were introduced to key vocabulary such as *se lever*, *prendre le petit déjeuner*, and *aller à l'école*. During listening, they were asked to complete tasks like identifying main ideas, filling in missing words, or answering true/false statements. After listening, they engaged in oral and written activities that reinforced the content, such as summarizing the episode, writing short paragraphs, or performing short dialogues.

To monitor progress, both groups completed pre-tests and post-tests that included multiple-choice and short-answer comprehension questions based on audio recordings. The experimental group also participated in weekly reflection exercises and brief interviews to evaluate their perceptions of the materials and their own progress.

Data analysis included a comparison of test scores between the pre- and post-intervention periods and thematic analysis of student feedback. The results aimed to determine whether the use of podcasts and authentic audio content led to measurable improvements in listening skills and learner engagement.

RESULTS

The findings of the study revealed significant improvements in the listening comprehension skills of the students who were exposed to French podcasts and authentic audio materials. The comparison between pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group indicated a noticeable enhancement in learners' ability to identify main ideas, comprehend detailed information, and infer meaning from spoken French.

Quantitative data demonstrated a **mean score increase of 28%** from the initial test to the final assessment in the experimental group, while the control group showed only a marginal improvement of 7%. Statistical analysis using a **paired samples t-test** confirmed

that the improvement observed in the experimental group was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This suggests a strong correlation between the use of audio input and the development of listening proficiency.

In particular, learners who engaged with podcasts regularly showed improved performance in tasks requiring **global understanding** (compréhension globale) and **selective listening** (écoute sélective). For example, in one activity based on an episode of *Journal en français facile*, students were able to answer open-ended comprehension questions such as:

- *Quel est le sujet principal de cette émission ?*
- *Quels sont les trois événements mentionnés dans les actualités ?*

The correct response rates to such questions rose from 42% in the pre-test to 84% in the post-test for the experimental group. This clearly indicates an improved ability to understand and retain essential details from authentic speech.

In addition to measurable gains, the students reported increased confidence in processing spoken French. In post-intervention interviews, several students mentioned that their ability to distinguish between similar-sounding words and to catch key phrases in fast speech had improved:

- *“Je comprends mieux maintenant quand les locuteurs parlent rapidement.”*
- *“Les podcasts m'ont aidé à reconnaître des expressions comme ‘c’est-à-dire’, ‘en fait’, ou ‘d’une part... d’autre part’.”*

Moreover, learners demonstrated a greater awareness of intonation patterns, linking words, and common discourse markers. This increased phonological awareness led to better **decoding** of audio input and fewer misunderstandings. One student remarked:

- *“Avant, je n’arrivais pas à comprendre les questions. Maintenant, je peux suivre les dialogues même s’il y a des mots nouveaux.”*

Students also expanded their vocabulary, acquiring expressions and idioms used in daily conversation. For instance, learners began to use phrases like “*il fait un froid de canard*”, “*j’ai la pêche*”, and “*ça ne me dit rien*” in class discussions and written assignments. These informal yet authentic expressions were seldom present in textbook dialogues, which reinforced the value of real-world input.

Qualitative observations also indicated increased engagement and motivation during lessons. The use of narrative-based audio materials (e.g., *Les histoires en français facile*) encouraged **active listening**, as students expressed curiosity about the outcomes of stories and characters. This storytelling format proved especially effective for sustaining attention among younger learners.

In contrast, the control group—who continued using standard classroom CDs and scripted dialogues—showed limited progress. Their comprehension skills improved slightly, mostly in recognizing familiar vocabulary, but their responses to inference-based questions or spontaneous speech remained weak.

Overall, the integration of French podcasts and audio materials not only improved measurable comprehension skills but also fostered greater **linguistic awareness**, **learner autonomy**, and enthusiasm for listening tasks. These results support the argument that meaningful, engaging, and context-rich listening input can significantly enhance second language acquisition, particularly in developing the receptive skill of listening comprehension.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide strong empirical support for the integration of authentic French podcasts and audio materials into the foreign language classroom, particularly at the beginner level. The significant gains observed in listening comprehension align with prior research that underscores the importance of exposure to authentic input in developing receptive skills (Krashen, 1985; Vandergrift, 2007). Learners exposed to real life spoken French not just pedagogical audio designed for language

learners developed not only improved comprehension skills but also higher confidence and motivation.

One of the most notable findings was the effectiveness of context-rich audio input in enhancing global and detailed comprehension. This supports the Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1985), which argues that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current level ($i+1$) but made comprehensible through context, visual cues, or linguistic scaffolding. In the present study, podcast episodes often included natural speech, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references, all of which created a linguistically rich environment that stimulated deeper cognitive processing.

The structure of the listening tasks pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening also contributed to the positive outcomes. As noted by Field (2008), breaking listening activities into stages helps learners activate background knowledge, set listening purposes, and reflect on what they heard. For example, before listening to an episode of *Journal en français facile*, students were introduced to key vocabulary such as *le gouvernement*, *une grève*, *les élections*, which made the actual comprehension process smoother and more meaningful. During listening, tasks such as identifying main points or noting numbers, dates, and names supported selective and intensive listening strategies. These pedagogical principles are grounded in Vandergrift's (2004) model of metacognitive listening instruction, which emphasizes strategy use and learner reflection.

Another key aspect of the discussion revolves around learner motivation. Several students reported that they felt more engaged when listening to podcasts that reflected real-life scenarios or contemporary issues. This echoes the findings of Gilmore (2007), who argues that authentic materials not only increase linguistic competence but also contribute to learners' pragmatic and cultural competence. The use of natural speech exposed learners to different accents, speech rates, and colloquial expressions such as *ça va?*, *je n'en peux plus*, and *c'est pas possible!*, helping them develop more realistic expectations of real-world communication.

Furthermore, students' exposure to phonological variation including liaison, elision, and reductions in spoken French contributed to their improved decoding ability. This supports the claim by Field (2003) that one of the main difficulties in L2 listening is the inability to match the spoken stream to known lexical items due to reduced forms. Through repeated exposure in podcasts, students began to recognize patterns such as *t'es où?* instead of *tu es où?*, or *j'sais pas* instead of *je ne sais pas*.

Interestingly, the experimental group not only improved their listening scores but also reported greater willingness to listen to French outside the classroom, suggesting an increase in learner autonomy. This indicates that podcasts can serve as a bridge between classroom learning and real-world language use, fostering habits of extensive listening (Renandya & Farrell, 2011).

However, the study also revealed challenges. Some students initially struggled with the fast pace and lack of visual support in audio-only materials. This finding is consistent with the work of Rubin (1994), who emphasized that beginner learners often rely heavily on visual cues to support listening. To mitigate this, scaffolding strategies such as transcription, repetition, and vocabulary pre-teaching were implemented and proved effective over time.

Moreover, the gap in progress between the experimental and control groups indicates that traditional scripted audio used in many textbooks is insufficient to fully develop listening comprehension skills. While such materials may serve as a starting point, they often lack the variability and spontaneity of authentic communication. This reinforces the argument that real-world exposure is essential, especially when preparing learners for communicative competence in authentic contexts.

The discussion of findings from this study affirms that integrating authentic French audio content significantly enhances learners' listening skills, motivation, and engagement. While challenges remain, particularly in terms of linguistic complexity and learner readiness, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. Carefully selected and pedagogically

supported podcast materials can serve as a powerful tool in the FLE (Français Langue Étrangère) classroom, fostering a more realistic, meaningful, and autonomous listening experience for beginner learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the substantial benefits of integrating French podcasts and authentic audio materials into the process of developing listening comprehension skills among beginner-level French language learners. The research findings indicate that consistent exposure to authentic spoken French significantly improves learners' ability to decode, interpret, and retain auditory information. In particular, learners showed notable progress in global and detailed understanding, the recognition of spoken forms, and the ability to follow natural speech patterns.

The use of podcast-based input allowed students to encounter diverse linguistic features, such as colloquial expressions, connected speech, and regional accents, which are often absent in traditional classroom materials. This contributed not only to linguistic growth but also to increased learner motivation and engagement. Many students expressed a heightened interest in French culture and greater willingness to listen to French outside the classroom setting, suggesting the emergence of learner autonomy. The structured approach consisting of pre-listening preparation, active listening tasks, and post-listening reflection proved essential in scaffolding comprehension and gradually building learners' confidence. Moreover, the pedagogical use of materials such as *Journal en français facile* and *Les histoires en français facile* offered an ideal balance between authenticity and accessibility, aligning well with second language acquisition theories such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vandergrift's metacognitive framework.

Nevertheless, some challenges emerged, including initial difficulties with fast speech and unfamiliar accents. These issues highlight the need for careful selection of audio materials and ongoing teacher support in guiding students through authentic input.

With appropriate scaffolding, however, these challenges can be overcome, as evidenced by the significant improvement shown by the experimental group in this study.

The integration of podcasts and authentic audio in French language instruction provides a dynamic and effective strategy for enhancing listening comprehension. It fosters a more natural and immersive learning experience, encourages student autonomy, and better prepares learners for real-world communication. Future research may further explore how different types of audio input such as interviews, news, or storytelling impact various listening sub-skills, as well as how digital platforms can support individualized listening practice.

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