

Correlation between Students' English Listening Skills, Vocabulary Skills and Out-of-school Listening Exposure

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Abstract

The presented study aimed to investigate students' competence in English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency at elementary school level focusing on the correlation between students' listening skills, vocabulary proficiency and out-of-school exposure. A total of 123 students of the 9th grade participated in the study. Standardized listening and vocabulary tests were used to assess the students' listening and vocabulary skills followed by a questionnaire to find out the correlation between the students' listening skills, vocabulary proficiency and out-of-school exposure. Results show that out-of-classroom exposure to English in audio and audio-visual forms is positively related with levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency whereas there is no indication that playing video-games in any form in English may be related to levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.

Keywords: *developing listening skills, foreign language acquisition, 9th grade students, out-of-school exposure, vocabulary development*

Introduction

Research has revealed that learners' motivation and exposure to appropriate input are very important factors contributing to language acquisition (Ellis & Collins, 2009; Krashen, 2009; Moyer, 2009). Although researchers argue that listening is one of the most important skills to be mastered in order to learn a foreign lan-

guage, it has long been a neglected skill in foreign language acquisition, teaching and assessment (Goh, 2000; Vandergrift, 2003) and some researchers even call it the "Cinderella skill in second language learning" (Nunan, 1998: 1).

Listening exposure to the media technology, such as video, video games, audio and computer software, has progressively been used in foreign language classrooms, and several studies have indicated their significance as materials to be used in language learning (Kuppens, 2010; Lefever, 2010; Munoz & Lindgren, 2011; Ojima, 2011). Tunçdemir and Akbarov (2016: 17) argue that "an effective design and technological tool directs students' attitudes to the classroom dynamics because it can bring a challenge to facilitate a traditional classroom to be more a knowledge-constructed classroom." Another important learning method that has intensified in recent years is through digital games and "as boundaries between the digital and physical world continue to blur, it is difficult to predict the ways in which technological behaviors and tools will transform one another" (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014: 5). Researchers have noted the benefits of video games in vocabulary learning and conversational skills, suggesting that video games could be a more useful tool in vocabulary learning than using a traditional approach (Rankin, Gold & Gooch, 2006; Vahdat & Behbahani, 2013).

Vocabulary instruction has been defined as the core component of language proficiency and the basis for communication (Khoii & Sharififar, 2013). Rapa-port (2005) stated that contextual vocabulary learning is an active process, in which learners' cognitive skills combine with their prior knowledge to aid their vocabulary acquisition. Hogan, Adolf & Alonzo (2014) argue that listening comprehension is a complex skill entailing many cognitive and linguistic processes, i.e., vocabulary, background knowledge and inferencing, among others.

Methodology

Research question and hypotheses

The aim of this paper was to bring together as many different forms of out-of-classroom exposure to English as possible, influencing factors of both English listening skills and English vocabulary proficiency in primary school students. The main research question was: *Is there a connection between out-of-classroom exposure to English and levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency in primary school students?*

Mirroring the way of operationalization of the out-of-classroom forms of exposure to English in the questionnaire, we tested the following research hypotheses:

(1) Out-of-classroom exposure to English in audio-visual forms is positively related to levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency; (2) Out-of-classroom exposure to English in audio forms is positively related to levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency; (3) Playing video-games in English is positively related to levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.

Given the assumed differences in areas of interest, social habits and cultural choices (as determinants of the out-of-school exposure to English), gender was treated as a moderator variable. Hence, the major part of planned statistical calculations were computed for each of the two genders separately.

Instruments

In the presented study, data collection was performed with the use of three measuring tools:

A two-part standardized Listening Comprehension Test was the first one. Part one consisted of a closed-gap text, with 6 distractor words. Part two consisted of multiple choice questions (6 items, each presenting 4 options).

A standardized Vocabulary Test, which had two cloze tests, each containing six gaps. Each gap corresponded to a word, and the first letter of the missing word was given. Students were required to apply their knowledge of the structure of the language and understanding of the text in order to fill in the gaps.

An author-designed questionnaire, which covered the out-of-school exposure forms and their amount. A five-point Likert scale was employed in rating weight, with categories such as: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) undecided, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree.

Participants

The sample consisted of 123 students (65 males, 58 females) randomly selected from a larger number of respondents (assigned to participate in much broader research). They were recruited from two elementary public schools in Prishtina, Kosovo, 9th grade, aged 14 or 15. The students from this sample had been learning English since the 3rd grade with an average of three instructional classes per week. By the time of the study, the students had completed 623 hours of English as a foreign language at school.

Data analysis

The data matrix was dominated by variables of ordinal type (questionnaire, i.e., independent variables), with a few scale ones (listening and vocabulary tests, i.e., criterion variables). Taking into account the nature of the variables and the levels

of measurement mentioned above, the non-parametric Spearman rank-order correlation was being chosen as the main statistical tool for testing the research hypotheses. Other procedures (Pearson product moment correlation, independent t-test) as well as the usual set of descriptive parameters (frequencies, arithmetic means, standard deviations, etc.) were used occasionally, as supporting indicators throughout the data analysis.

Results

Results are presented in three sections according to the main research areas. The first section presents the descriptive data of the (a) audio-visual, (b) audio and (c) video games as out-of-school exposure to English. The second section shows the correlation between listening and vocabulary test results and out-of-school exposure. The third section shows the correlation between (a) audio-visual, (b) audio contents and (c) playing video games in English and listening and vocabulary tests results.

Table 1. Audio-visual out-of-school exposure to English: descriptive data (percentage) and gender

Amount of watching (weekly)	English without subtitles			English with Albanian subtitles		
	females	males	all	females	males	all
not at all	0.00	7.69	4.13	1.79	6.15	4.13
up to 1 hour	17.86	13.85	15.70	23.21	13.85	18.18
2 to 3 hours	28.57	16.92	22.31	28.57	24.62	26.45
4 to 6 hours	23.21	13.85	18.18	14.29	21.54	18.18
7 to 9 hours	5.36	26.15	16.53	17.86	12.31	14.88
10 to 12 hours	12.50	9.23	10.74	3.57	15.38	9.92
13 to 15 hours	7.14	7.69	7.44	7.14	3.08	4.96
over 16 hours	5.36	4.62	4.96	3.57	3.08	3.31

As can be seen (Table 1), on average one in five respondents was exposed to an audio-visual form of English (films, series, shows, documentaries, etc.) with no subtitles only 1 hour per week or less. The major part (more than half) were students who were exposed to English about 2–3 hours per week, while the remaining respondents (one in five, roughly) watched these contents 10 hours or more each

week. There are no major differences between the girls and boys in this form of out-of-school exposure. Quite similar descriptive figures emerge regarding the same contents, but subtitled in Albanian.

Table 2. Audio out-of-school exposure to English: descriptive data (percentage) and gender

Amount of listening (weekly)	Listening to English music			Listening to the radio in English		
	females	males	all	females	males	all
not at all	0.00	9.38	4.92	27.59	36.92	32.52
up to 1 hour	15.52	12.50	13.93	29.31	21.54	25.20
2 to 3 hours	12.07	14.06	13.11	25.86	18.46	21.95
4 to 6 hours	6.90	7.81	7.38	6.90	10.77	8.94
7 to 9 hours	10.34	21.88	16.39	5.17	7.69	6.50
10 to 12 hours	17.24	12.50	14.75	1.72	1.54	1.63
13 to 15 hours	3.45	6.25	4.92	0.00	1.54	0.81
over 16 hours	34.48	15.63	24.59	3.45	1.54	2.44

The data in Table 2 show that the students in this sample listened to music in English for a significant amount of time, the girls in particular (more than half of them listened to music in English 10 hours or more per week), while the boys emerged less interested (only one in three listened to English music 10 hours or more, but one in ten did not listen to music at all). Listening to English broadcasts on the radio, on the other hand, obviously suffers significant decline (general trend concerning the wider radio medium worldwide, likely due to proliferation of affordable personal digital media). Approximately one third of this sample of young people do not listen to English on the radio at all. This is in line with the results from another research done by Barbee (2013), showing that the most frequent kinds of exposure to English among learners were in music, online media and subtitled films.

In terms of gaming as out-of-school activity in English (Table 3), the boys proved to be much more active, one in three was active 10 hours or more per week, in computer gaming, PlayStation, Xbox and online gaming. On the other hand, almost half of the girls did not play video games at all (and one in six boys). Altogether, almost no differences in the amount of time involved in computer gaming versus online gaming were recorded.

Table 3. Video games as out-of-school exposure to English: descriptive data (percentage) and gender

Amount of gaming (weekly)	Home video games			Online video games		
	females	males	all	females	males	all
not at all	45.61	17.19	30.58	44.83	17.46	30.58
up to 1 hour	14.04	7.81	10.74	20.69	7.94	14.05
2 to 3 hours	15.79	12.50	14.05	20.69	12.70	16.53
4 to 6 hours	15.79	17.19	16.53	5.17	15.87	10.74
7 to 9 hours	5.26	15.63	10.74	3.45	12.70	8.26
10 to 12 hours	3.51	9.38	6.61	0.00	7.94	4.13
13 to 15 hours	0.00	3.13	1.65	3.45	11.11	7.43
over 16 hours	0.00	17.19	9.09	1.72	14.29	8.26

Table 4. Tests in English (scoring): descriptive data, Pearson correlation and gender

	Females (N=58)					Males (N=65)				
	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Pearson R	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Pearson R
Listening test	6.21	2.64	0.34	-0.80	.608**	5.12	2.61	0.73	0.07	.672**
Vocabulary test	6.03	3.74	-0.70	-1.19		5.23	3.77	0.26	-1.24	

Concluding the descriptive segment, we provide a short insight into the scoring on both English tests administered, i.e.. a listening test and a vocabulary test (Table 4). The maximum score for each test was 12 points. The girls performed better altogether, which proved statistically significant on the listening test ($t = 2.29$, $df = 121$, $Sig < .05$), but not on the vocabulary test ($t = 1.19$, $df = 121$, $Sig > .05$). Scoring on English tests also met the expectations regarding the correlation between the listening and the vocabulary performance, emerging significantly positive in both the females ($R = .608$, $Sig. < .01$) and males ($R = .672$, $Sig. < .01$).

As can be seen, a highly similar pattern appears in both the female (Table 5a) and male (Table 5b) respondents. Both listening and vocabulary English test scores show a significant positive correlation (Spearman rank-order) to the amount of exposure to audio-visual out-of-school contents in English without subtitles ($R = .316$ and $R = .401$ for the listening test in the girls and boys, respectively;

$R = .337$ and $R = .265$ for the vocabulary test in the girls and boys, respectively). No significant correlation, on the other hand, is recorded in the case of exposure to similar contents but with Albanian subtitles, again in both genders. Moreover, the correlations between the vocabulary test and the out-of-school exposure emerged negative in both genders, albeit not prominent enough to be statistically confirmed.

Table 5a. Correlations between audio-visual out-of-school exposure to English and tests in English (FEMALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Audio-visual English with no subtitles			
2. Audio-visual English with Albanian subtitles	.182		
3. Listening test	.316*	.017	
4. Vocabulary test	.337*	-.121	.608**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

Table 5b. Correlations between audio-visual out-of-school exposure to English and tests in English (MALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Audio-visual English with no subtitles			
2. Audio-visual English with Albanian subtitles	.161		
3. Listening test	.401**	-.016	
4. Vocabulary test	.265*	-.144	.672**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

Based on the study findings, we can say that out-of-classroom exposure to English in audio forms is positively related to the levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency. The results strongly resemble those of the previous segment. Highly similar patterns, as can be seen (Table 6a, females; Table 6b, males), appeared in both genders, again. The listening and vocabulary English test scores show a significant positive correlation (Spearman rank-order) to the amount of listening to music in English ($R = .319$ and $R = .340$ for the listening test in the girls and boys, respectively; $R = .379$ and $R = .366$ for the vocabulary test in the girls and boys, respectively). No significant correlation is recorded with the exposure to non-musical radio broadcasts, again in both genders.

Table 6a. Correlations between listening to audio contents in English out of school and tests in English (FEMALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Listening to music in English			
2. Listening to radio broadcasting in English	.175		
3. Listening test	.319*	.026	
4. Vocabulary test	.379**	.027	.608**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

Table 6b. Correlations between audio contents in English out of school and tests in English (MALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Listening to music in English			
2. Listening to radio broadcasting in English	.164		
3. Listening test	.340**	-.063	
4. Vocabulary test	.366**	-.181	.672**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

Table 7a. Correlations between playing video games and tests in English (FEMALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Playing home video games			
2. Playing online video games	.136		
3. Listening test	.132	.217	
4. Vocabulary test	.221	.143	.608**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

Table 7b. Correlations between playing video games and tests in English (MALES)

Measure	1	2	3
1. Playing home video games			
2. Playing online video games	.577**		
3. Listening test	.105	.064	
4. Vocabulary test	-.095	.051	.672**

* indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .01$

The final step in data analyses was to cross the scores on criterion variables (English tests) with the amount of playing video games (both home video games like PlayStation, Xbox, etc., and online games). The results show that playing video games, regardless of their type, is not related to proficiency in both English listening skills and vocabulary growth (Table 7a, females; Table 7b, males).

Discussion

The results of the presented study provide sufficient argumentation to partially confirm research hypothesis 1, in the segment related to non-subtitled contents: *Out-of-classroom exposure to English in audio-visual forms without subtitles in English may be positively related to the levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.* This mirrors the results from other studies showing that the amount of time of being exposed to authentic materials in the target language, to TV and radio news, directly affects the level of proficiency in a foreign language and improves listening comprehension significantly, (Safranjan, 2015; Bahrani & Sim, 2012), and also lexical proficiency (Bahrani & Sim, 2012; Coady & Huckin, 1999).

The results of the present study are in line with the results of Safranjan (2015), who explored the extent to which students enhance listening comprehension through movies with and without subtitles. This was done by testing the students' listening skills before and after the intervention. The results showed that using movies proved to be an effective way for students to improve their listening skills and acquire more vocabulary (Safranjan, 2015). A similar study exploring the use of TV news to improve listening proficiency was conducted by Poon (1992), who found that longer exposure to TV and radio news enhances listening comprehension significantly. Another study conducted by Bahrani and Sim (2012) focusing on the role of audio/visual mass media news in language learning yielded similar results to the above-mentioned studies, proving that long-term exposure to mass media news can improve speaking.

However, the results of this study contradict the result of the study conducted by Hajri et.al. (2010), who focused on the effectiveness of English subtitles on the EFL learner's vocabulary learning. This may be due to the fact that English subtitles usually prove to be more effective in improving listening skills and lexical proficiency than the subtitles in the students' mother tongue. Their study proved that the presence of English subtitles in videos enabled significant improvements in the level of students' vocabulary acquisition.

The results of the presented study provide sufficient argumentation to partially confirm research hypothesis 2, particularly in the segment of listening to music in English: *Out-of-classroom listening to music in English may be positively related to the levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.* The data from this study show that students' listening skills and vocabulary levels are significantly positively correlated to the amount of listening to music in English. However, there is no significant correlation recorded with exposure to non-musical radio broadcasting. This is in line with the previous research findings on the effect that music has on language acquisition and the natural stimulation of children. Research has revealed that music stimulates the brain and it is a creative and engaging way of advancing listening skills. Learning song lyrics also helps students to advance their vocabulary and singing phrases can lead to better vocabulary recall (Khaghaninejad & Fahandejsaadi, 2016). The findings of this study are in line with another study by Mohamadkhani et al. (2013), who investigated the effect of using audio sources on improving listening comprehension of secondary school students. The results showed that listening to audio materials benefited students' pronunciation, fluency and accuracy. It can be concluded that listening comprehension is positively affected by out-of-school exposure to audio and audio-visual sources.

One of the key concerns of this study was to investigate the role of playing video games as a form of out-of-school exposure in listening skill and lexical proficiency. The results offered sufficient argumentation to reject the third research hypothesis: *Playing video-games in English is positively related to levels of English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.* The results of this study show that there is no indication that playing video games in any form may be related to levels of English listening skills and lexical proficiency. Other studies indicate that online games are effective educational tools, which increase learners' motivation and vocabulary development (Ashraf et al., 2014; Yip & Kwan, 2006). In their study, Ashraf et al. (2014) explored the effectiveness of online games in vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL students. The findings indicated that online games proved to be more effective in learning English vocabulary than learning vocabulary through conventional methodology. A similar study by Yip and Kwan (2006) showed the positive effect that online games have on students' vocabulary acquisition. They argued that learners find it hard to be engaged in learning vocabulary in a traditional way, mainly due to the fact that it only consists of memorizing familiar words and spelling. The sample size and the low number of girls playing online games may be some of the reasons contributing to the results of this study. Furthermore, gaming is an all-encompassing term that lacks the specificity needed in drawing a different conclusion.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to explore students' competence in English listening skills and vocabulary proficiency at elementary school level focusing on the correlation between students' listening skills, vocabulary proficiency and out-of-school exposure. There was a significant positive correlation between the audio-video and audio forms of out-of-school exposure and the pupils' listening skills and vocabulary proficiency, but there was no effect of playing video games on the pupils' listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.

We recommend teachers to incorporate out-of-school elements into their teaching and to gather information about the websites that provide interesting activities for developing students' listening skills and vocabulary proficiency.

Nevertheless, considering the limitations of this study, further research is needed to investigate the relationship between exposure to English outside the school and learners' listening and English vocabulary skills on a larger scale. Furthermore, for a more in-depth analysis, students' and teachers' perspectives on the effect of out-of-school exposure (through, e.g., teachers' and students' interviews) are needed in future studies.

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