





*The use of podcasts in improving 9th-grade students' listening skills at a private high school in Milagro City*

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## **Abstract**

In Ecuador, EFL learners perceive listening as one of the most complex skills to master. Due to the challenges that mastering this skill brings with it, the necessity to find effective solutions has been identified. Integrating technological tools such as podcasts is an effective way to enhance listening skills since they are highly motivating and engaging resources and they can be selected according to the EFL learners' interests, levels, and age. Therefore, the present research, conducted at a private high school in Milagro City, Guayas, Ecuador, aimed to discover how effective the use of podcasts is in improving ninth-grade EFL students' listening skills. During the study, a quantitative approach was employed and the participants were 20 ninth-grade students whose ages ranged from 12 to 13 years old and were at an A1 proficiency level. According to the findings, during the pre-test, most participants obtained 'fair' and 'poor' scores; conversely, in the post-test, the majority upgraded to 'fair' and 'good' scores. Hence, it was concluded that there was a significant enhancement in the participants' listening abilities after receiving listening lessons employing podcasts as the main teaching resource.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language, listening skills, podcasts, technological tools

## Resumen

En Ecuador, los estudiantes perciben la destreza de listening como una de las habilidades más complejas de dominar. Debido a los desafíos que trae el dominar esta habilidad, se ha identificado la necesidad de encontrar soluciones efectivas. La integración de herramientas tecnológicas como los pódcast es una forma eficaz de mejorar las habilidades de escucha, ya que son recursos motivadores y atractivos y pueden seleccionarse según los intereses, niveles y edad de los estudiantes. Por consiguiente, la presente investigación llevada a cabo en un colegio privado en la ciudad de Milagro, Guayas, Ecuador, tuvo como objetivo descubrir cuán efectivo es el uso de pódcast para mejorar las habilidades de listening de los estudiantes de noveno año. Durante este estudio, se empleó un enfoque cuantitativo y los participantes fueron 20 estudiantes de noveno año de edades entre 12 y 13 años y se encontraban en un nivel de inglés A1. Según los resultados, durante el pre test, la mayoría de los participantes obtuvieron puntuaciones “regulares” y “malas”; en contraste, en el post test, la mayoría pasó a puntuaciones “regulares” y “buenas”. Por lo tanto, se concluyó que hubo una mejora significativa después de recibir lecciones de listening utilizando pódcast como principal recurso didáctico.

**Palabras clave:** inglés como lengua extranjera, habilidades de escucha, podcasts, herramientas tecnológicas.

## Introduction

Mastering a language implies mastering the four basic skills of writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Nevertheless, many EFL learners present great difficulties when developing listening skills which may be due to the wide range of English accents as well as the limited exposure that they have to oral input which makes it difficult for them to adapt their ears to English (Erzad, 2020). In Ecuador, EFL learners perceive listening skills as one of the most complex language skills to master (Heredia, 2018).

Due to the challenges that mastering listening represents to EFL learners, the necessity to find solutions has been identified, and as mentioned by Islam and Hasan (2020) currently technology has become the best ally for the EFL teaching and learning process. The authors mention that many benefits from using technological resources have been discovered and ensure that nowadays EFL classes have become more technology-dependent. In the specific case of listening skills, Al-Jarf (2021) claims that there are a number of greatly beneficial technological tools and resources that can be easily used by teachers and learners in order to improve listening skills.

One of these technological tools is podcasts which as Solano and Sanchez (2010) explain are multimedia auditory files found on the web that cover topics of popular interest. These podcasts are an effective way of developing listening skills since they are highly motivating and engaging materials and the topics can be selected in line with the EFL learners' interests, levels, and age. Brooks (2018), podcasts can be listened to wherever, whenever, and as many times as the learners want. That is why they are considered greatly advantageous. Likewise, Yugsán-Gómez et al. (2019) also mention that podcasts offer total control of their speed and they can be adapted to learners' needs and abilities.

Therefore, the present research proposes to improve ninth-grade Ecuadorian EFL learners' listening skills. As stated by Obregón and Díaz (2023), ninth graders are supposed to be at A1 level according to CEFR; however, they are still not able to understand basic spoken sentences, questions, classroom instructions, commonly used expressions, identify words and sounds, find the gist, specific information of simple audio material, etc. One of the main reasons for their low listening comprehension is the little or poor implementation of technological tools and resources (Obregón and Díaz, 2023).

For this reason, the current study aims to discover how effective the use of podcasts is in improving EFL learners' listening skills. In order to achieve this purpose two research questions have been proposed: Do podcasts improve ninth-grade learners' listening skills? and What is the perception of ninth-grade learners towards the implementation of podcasts to improve their listening skills?

This study will provide valuable information for the EFL teaching and learning field. The results obtained from this research will help English teachers and curriculum designers both in Ecuador and around the world to be aware of the benefits that come with the implementation of digital tools, such as podcasts, to improve the listening skills of EFL learners. These outcomes will encourage teachers to implement these resources in their English lessons on a daily basis.

## **Literature Review**

### **Listening skills**

Wulandari and Sya'ya (2021) define listening skills as a part of receptive skills that connect previous and new language knowledge to interpret and understand spoken messages. Furthermore, the authors mention that listening is fundamental to promoting and executing the language. In the same way, Ulum (2015) indicates that the ability to listen is an input scaffolding because learners acquire the language to process and understand the oral message. Similarly, Saodat and Sherzod (2021) define listening as the individual's ability to understand a spoken message, which is not an easy task since it entails having knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and accents, among others. Additionally, listening is always the first skill that begins to develop since learners are exposed to the spoken language from the first class (Erzad, 2020).

Kasimi and Höl (2023) point out that listening is an essential ability since it allows EFL learners to receive a large amount of input that will allow them to enhance other language skills. These authors elucidate that practicing listening enables students to increase vocabulary knowledge as well as grammar and pronunciation awareness hence they also improve their speaking abilities.

In this sense, Hussaeni et al. (2020) determine that listening is closely related to speaking, that is, both skills complement each other and both constitute oral language skills. They assert that an EFL learner would not be able to pronounce a word without having heard it before, that is where we can perceive how these two skills intertwine. Furthermore, they conclude that to be proficient at speaking English you must first be a good listener.

### **Listening difficulties faced by EFL learners**

Although listening skills are imperative, they often do not receive the attention they deserve. This is due to the fact that some EFL teachers tend to focus more on other language components such as grammar, and vocabulary, as well as other skills such as reading and writing or even speaking, but do not propose interesting or engaging activities specifically focused on improving listening skills (Kasimi & Höl, 2023). On this matter, Erzad (2020) affirms that many EFL learners present great difficulties when it comes to listening and one of the main causes is the wide range of accents that exist since English is a worldwide spoken language. Moreover, the author claims that as foreign language learners are not in constant exposure to the target language outside the classroom, it is difficult for them to adapt their ears to English; therefore, listening comprehension becomes more challenging. To conclude, Erzad (2020) asserts that it is essential to look for the root of the listening comprehension problems, which is the responsibility of the EFL teachers in order to make the necessary changes or implementations to enhance EFL learners' listening skills' mastery.

### **Listening difficulties in the Ecuadorian context**

In the case of Ecuadorian EFL learners, Heredia (2018) stipulates that a large number of them, regardless of their level of education, consider EFL listening skills to be one of the most complex to master. Specifically in the Ecuadorian framework, the author interviewed EFL learners that claimed to understand less than half of the English oral input they hear. Furthermore, the students indicated that the most complex aspects when improving their listening skills were understanding new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, accents, intonation, and stress, as well as complex grammatical structures. Likewise, Núñez (2021) found that a considerable amount of Ecuadorian EFL high school students fail to fully develop their listening skills.

In this regard, Obregón and Díaz (2023) indicate that in Ecuador 9th grade high school students are supposed to have an A2 level; however, according to their findings, students in this grade still do not meet the descriptors proposed by the Common European Framework Reference for A2 level (Council of Europe, 2020). By way of illustration, when it comes to listening comprehension, ninth graders are still not able to understand basic sentences, questions, classroom instructions, commonly used expressions, identify basic words and sounds, decipher the main idea of the audio, etc. Obregón and Díaz (2023) affirm that this low level of listening skills is due, among other factors, to the very little use of technological tools to support EFL learning, L1 overuse, poor distribution, or little time allocated to some language skills like listening, and little exposure to a wide variety of English accents.

In the same way, Tigrero (2023) also highlights the significance of listening skills and contrasts it with the real situation that can be evidenced in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms. She revealed that listening comprehension is one of the biggest weaknesses of Ecuadorian high school students. Therefore, what is stipulated by the authors mentioned above, is a reality observed in EFL learners throughout the whole country since most of them have not yet achieved the listening goals set for the proficiency level they are supposed to be at. Thus, this same issue has been also evidenced in the educational institutions of Milagro City.

### **The use of technology to improve listening skills**

According to Yugsán-Gómez et al. (2019), technology has become an essential tool for teaching English as a foreign language in our current society, so it is a must for English teachers to modify their traditional way of teaching and adapt to the new EFL teaching trends in order to improve the quality and results of the language teaching-learning

processes. This can be done by learning how to manage and implement these digital tools within the EFL classrooms.

Similarly, Islam and Hasan (2020) assert that in recent years technology has become popular worldwide within the field of EFL teaching and learning; therefore, there has been an increase in research into the benefits that it brings. They also ensure that EFL lessons have become much more technology-dependent which has led to the creation of many technology-based approaches and methods that have provided great contributions and advances within said field. Another great benefit the authors mention is the accessibility and ease of learning a language through the use of technology.

Despite its usefulness, Medina (2021) points out that in Latin countries such as Ecuador, technology implementation still has a long way to go and EFL teachers still need to recognize the advantages it brings to improve the language teaching and learning process. The authors discovered that technology use varies a lot when comparing public and private education in Ecuador since public institutions do not have sufficient equipment in order to introduce technology to improve EFL classes' quality.

Additionally, the authors also found out that teachers do not employ technology during their classes mainly because of their poor mastery of technological tools as well as little enthusiasm for improving or transforming their EFL lessons so that they are more engaging and interesting for learners.

In the specific case of English listening skills development employing the use of technology, Al-Jarf (2021) mentions that there are a number of greatly beneficial resources and tools; nevertheless, it is key that English instructors know how to master this technology so that they can get the most out of it. That is to say, for technological tools to help improve listening, both teachers and students must play an active role in the teaching-learning process.

## **The use of podcasts to improve EFL listening skills**

There are some methods, strategies, and techniques used to improve listening skills that have become obsolete in today's society since they no longer fulfill the purpose of engaging and motivating students to develop their abilities. Hence, nowadays, technological tools have gained great relevance and there are digital resources specifically used to improve listening skills, one of these is podcasts (Heredia, 2018). Solano and Sanchez (2010) define podcasts as multimedia auditory files found on the web that cover topics of popular interest. These authors firmly believe that podcasts are an excellent way of enhancing listening skills since they are highly motivating and engaging resources and the topics can be chosen according to the interests, age, and tastes of the EFL learners. They also indicate that podcasts can be utilized inside and outside the classroom which allows constant practice and the possibility of carrying out a variety of listening activities.

Additionally, in line with Brooks (2018), podcasts are radio shows that are found on the Internet and therefore can be listened to wherever, whenever, and as many times as the learners want. For this reason, podcasts are considered greatly beneficial since they are currently created on an endless number of topics aimed at different audiences and ages. Therefore, these technological resources are considered useful tools to enhance the listening skills of EFL learners of different proficiency levels.

Likewise, Yugsán-Gómez et al. (2019) corroborate that one of the greatest advantages of podcasts is that they allow language learners the freedom to listen to them wherever they want and as many times as necessary, as well as the power to control their speed and adapt them to learners' needs and abilities.

In this sense, Núñez (2021) highlights how valuable it is to use podcasts to enhance listening skills since they allow learners to practice listening to content that is attractive

to them which makes them enjoy the process and achieve better results. This author concludes “podcasts are a brilliant and entertaining way of improving one’s listening skills” (p. 3).

### **Previous studies**

The purpose of this work is to discover how effective is the use of podcasts in improving 9th-grade students' listening skills at a private high school in Milagro, Ecuador. Accordingly, it is important to first analyze studies that have been previously carried out in similar contexts in Ecuador. One of these studies was conducted by Obregón and Díaz (2023) who analyzed the impact of the podcast as a digital strategy on listening skills in 9th grade students of an Educational Unit in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Employing field, bibliographic, and statistical research, they found that podcasts are an innovative listening resource for 9th-grade students who present great difficulties in listening comprehension. They determined that introducing podcasts to work on listening skills is advantageous because they contain a myriad of suitable topics for the EFL learners' educational levels.

Similarly, another related study was conducted by Sarmiento et al. (2023) in Palmale, Ecuador where the researchers proposed to discover how beneficial it is to use the BBC Learning English app and its podcasts to improve learners' listening skills. The authors discovered that employing BBC podcasts is highly advantageous for the improvement of listening skills. Consequently, they established that podcasts are an excellent alternative to the traditional EFL teaching approaches and resources used within the EFL classroom to improve listening. They also declared that the use of technology is an essential resource that greatly enhances the EFL teaching and learning process.

Throughout this first section, it was found that many researchers in the past few years have discovered the importance and usefulness of the implementation of technological

tools in the teaching of EFL. Likewise, many of them have focused on the use of digital resources such as podcasts to improve listening skills and have been able to discover that they are greatly effective and a better alternative to traditional EFL teaching. As it was evidenced in previous studies, research has been conducted in contexts similar to that of the current study and the results have been potentially positive.

## **Method**

### **Setting**

This study was conducted at a private high school in Milagro City, province of Guayas, Ecuador. This educational establishment offers the last three years of basic education and the three years of secondary education. This high school has a total of 850 students and classes are held only in the morning. Students at this institution receive a total of 7 hours of English class per week.

### **Research design**

The present study employed a quantitative approach to gather and analyze the evidence. The main objective was to discover how effective the use of podcasts is in improving EFL learners' listening skills. In order to achieve the purposes of this study, the following research question is posed: Does the use of podcasts improve ninth-grade students' listening skills?

### **Sampling**

During this study, purposive sampling was employed. The sample was composed of 20 ninth-grade students from a private high school who were purposely chosen. The students' ages ranged from 12 to 13 years old. Their English proficiency level was A1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

### **Instruments**

#### **Pre-test and post-test**

In order to find out the effectiveness of podcasts in enhancing 9th graders' listening skills, the instruments of pre and post-tests were applied to measure their listening abilities before and after the intervention using this technological tool. The scores obtained on both tests were later compared to discover whether there was a positive result or not. The tests consisted of three sections where their listening skills were

measured: listening for gist, listening for specific information, and listening for detailed information.

## Results

The results obtained after applying the pre and post-tests are displayed and analyzed below. It is important to mention that during both tests the subskills of listening for gist, attitude, specific information, and details were considered.

### Pre and Post-test results

**Table 1.**

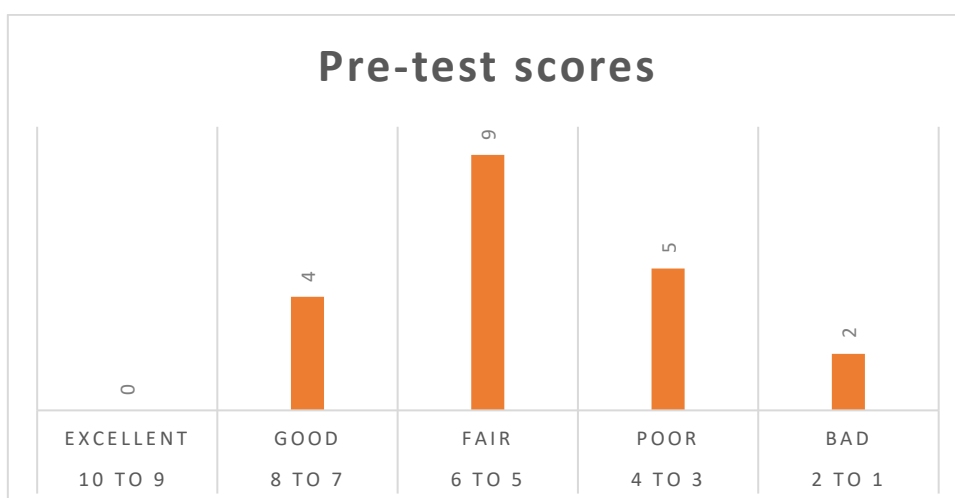
#### Pre-test results

Scores	10 to 9	8 to 7	6 to 5	4 to 3	2 to 1
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Bad
Number of students	0	4	9	5	2

*Note.* This table depicts the number of students according to their pre-test total scores.

**Figure 1.**

#### Pre-test results



As it can be noted, **Table 1** depicts the number of students according to the scores they obtained in the pre-test which aimed to measure the participants' listening skills before the implementation of podcasts to enhance listening skills. As can be observed in **Figure 1**, the majority of the learners, that is nine out of a total of 20 participants, obtained grades between six to five out of ten in the pre-test which places them at a 'fair' level. Similarly, five more students obtained grades between four and

three which means they present a poor level of listening proficiency. The next most common range of grades was eight to seven (good) obtained by four students. Finally, only two students obtained scores between two and one which corresponds to a 'bad' level. These results indicate that the vast majority of students have a fair to poor listening level for their proficiency level A1. These data clearly justify the need to find better strategies and approaches to improve the listening skills of EFL learners. These pre-test results agree with those obtained by Ainun (2023) who mentioned that after applying the listening pre-test the results yielded low scores and the majority of learners presented a poor listening level. The author claimed that most learners seemed quite confused while listening and they took a long time to answer the questions. Likewise, Febrianti et al. (2023) also obtained a significant number of 'very poor' and 'poor' scores when grading the participants' listening pre-tests.

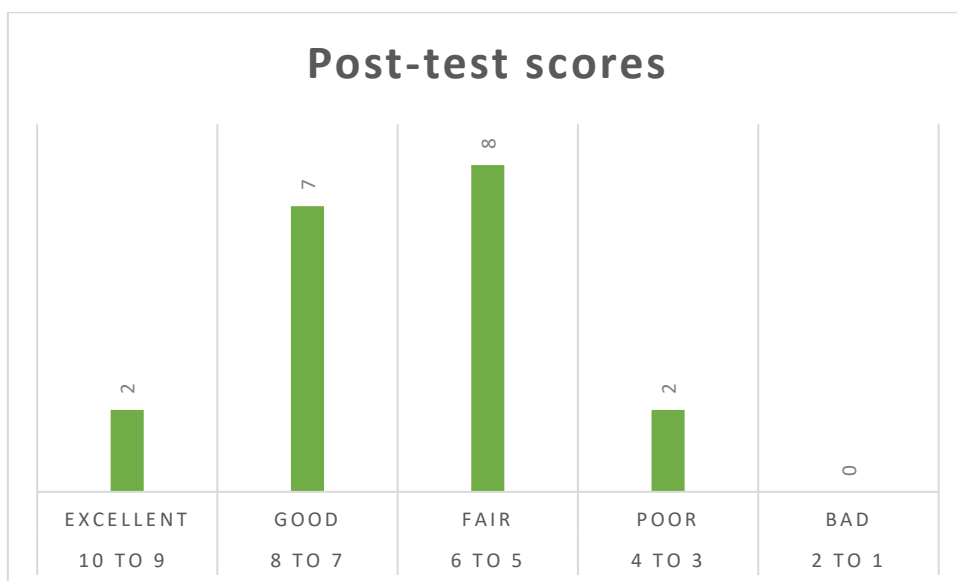
**Table 2.**

Scores	10 to 9	8 to 7	6 to 5	4 to 3	2 to 1
	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Bad
Number of students	2	7	8	2	0

*Note.* This table depicts the number of students according to their post-test total scores.

**Figure 2.**

**Post-test results**



**Table 2** displays the number of students according to the grades they obtained during the post-test which aimed to measure the participants' listening skills after implementing podcasts as technological tools. As it can be observed in **Figure 2**, seven students obtained scores between eight and seven points, followed closely by another eight students who obtained scores between six and five. It is also worth mentioning that two students achieved grades between ten to nine points whereas two other students obtained low grades of between four to three points out of ten. From these data, it can be stated that the majority of students possess a good to fair listening level.

These findings demonstrate that there was a slight improvement in the students' listening skills, which is due to the fact that the podcasts used during the intervention stage were useful in improving this language skill in the EFL learners. This agrees with the results found by Febrianti et al. (2023) who, when comparing the results of pre and post-tests, was able to identify a great improvement in the scores after using podcasts to enhance the listening skills. The vast majority of students went from having a poor listening level to achieving good and fair scores. After comparing the students' mean

scores from the pre and post-tests, the author concluded that the use of podcasts does improve EFL students' listening skills

In the same way, the results obtained in the present study imply that if podcasts continue to be implemented in EFL classrooms, the students' listening ability levels will gradually progress. In other words, applying appropriately selected technological tools such as podcasts is a highly effective technique to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process of English as a foreign language. These findings are also corroborated by Naidionova and Ponomarenko (2018) who found that employing podcasts as a language teaching tool greatly helps to enhance learners' listening skills since it offers meaningful and authentic audio material for students to get motivated and interested during EFL listening practice.

## Conclusions

The present study had the main objective of discovering the level of effectiveness of using podcasts for improving English listening skills. Therefore, after comparing the results of the pre and post-tests it was possible to evidence a clear and significant improvement in learners listening abilities after receiving listening lessons employing podcasts as the main teaching resource.

During the pre-test, most participants obtained scores between 6 to 5 and 4 to 3 points out of 10 which means that their listening proficiency levels were between 'fair' and 'poor'. On the other hand, in the post-test, the majority of learners obtained grades between 6 to 5 and 8 to 7 which indicates that learners were at 'fair' and 'good' listening levels. After comparing both tests, a gradual improvement was evidenced, most learners advanced from 'poor' and 'fair' to 'fair' and 'good' levels. In other words, after being assessed in the subskills of listening for gist, listening for attitude, listening for specific information, and listening for details the vast majority of learners demonstrated improvement. These results coincide with the findings of Naidionova and Ponomarenko (2018), Ainun (2023), and Febrianti et al. (2023) who also discovered that employing podcasts is quite beneficial for learners' listening skills.

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