

Promoting e-Learning of Listening Skills on English as a Foreign Language for Students of Islamic College

by Dr. Andi Muhammad Yauri Tarbiyah

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Abstract

This exploratory research aimed at an initiative to improve English listening skills by promoting e-learning among pre-service teacher training students of the state College for Islamic Studies (STAIN) Watampone. This project chooses to make use of podcast links on the internet. Instructions were created on WebQuest and were made available online by the researcher in Nicenet. 24 students with age ranging between 20 – 22 years old and with language competencies of high beginning to low intermediate, took part in the project. Students were provided with information for podcast links for listening exercises and a rubric for their tasks and self-assessment. They were then asked to write and post their reflections regarding the podcast links and exercises in a class blog. This research indicated that students were not only enthusiastic but also motivated to perform self-study.

Introduction

The growth of technology in the field of education opens the possibility to engage Islamic learning and to use information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning process in Islamic higher institution or college. The innovative teaching has been introduced in order to upgrade the quality of learning process in the class, for example is by incorporating internet technology. Nevertheless, not all lecturers could use it to support the learning process in the class. The reason could be due to the assumption that they are not familiar with the technology or they have a very limited idea how to develop their course material by using technology. This

paper provides the initiative effort to encourage the class by using electronic learning or e-Learning. The study is limited only for the English class particularly English Listening subject.

English listening is one of the important elements which could probably enhance verbal communication skills. However, there is very little communication using this skill although in pre-service teacher training students of English Educational Departments themselves. On the other hand, students must be exposed to authentic listening skills practices. In this project, it was decided to make use of the podcast links to enhance listening skills.

⁴ Podcast is derived from the words *iPod* and *broadcasting* which refers to recorded audio files in MP3 format that are available in the internet (Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2012). It is a device which enables learners to listen or to watch video broadcasts in the internet. It could also be easily downloaded to computers and mobile phones.

² Studies have been conducted to investigate the use of podcast links in the teaching and learning process, for example, examined the use of podcasts in a class, particularly with regard to the suitable duration for an effective podcast class, which he found to be about five minutes (Evans, 2008). Another study by Besser, Larson, & Hofmann, (2010) indicates that students are motivated to use podcast links. They are motivated to use podcast links not only because it is convenient and has become a common habit, but also for several purposes such as for social interaction, entertainment, learning and just to fill in their free time (Chung, 2008). Among college students, the main motivation to use podcast is for their school work. Bergström & Lindwall (2008) explored the possibility to learn by using podcasts and blogs in the internet. Students use podcasts to relive the lecture experiences as well as to improve their learning (Scutter, Stupans, Sawyer, & King, 2010).

Sutton-Brady, Scott, Taylor, Carabetta, & Clark, (2009) investigated the use of podcast among undergraduates and post graduate students. Another study by K. P. King, (2010) describes professors using podcast in class as instructional tools to promote critical and responsive perspectives of teaching. The study suggests a dynamic model of podcast that is responsive to learner needs, faculty needs, and changing situations. Although many studies have supported the use of podcasts in the teaching and learning process, its effectiveness however partly depends on its accessibility for potential learners and users.

English Setting of Islamic College

All students enrolled in this college are required to take English courses. One of these courses, the Listening Comprehension Course is 1440 minutes long and is delivered within 16 weekly meetings. The weekly class is 90 minutes long. At the end of each semester, the learners will be assessed based on attendance (25%), assignments (10%), mid-term test (30%), and final examination (35%). Basically, the goal of the Listening Comprehension Course is to improve students' listening skills by focusing on the main ideas, details and making inferences from taped audio recordings in the language lab. The course syllabus is based on a textbook *Active Learning Second Edition* by Steven Brown and Dorolyn Smith. Each unit in this textbook provides a topic, function and grammar theme.

Generally, the English courses are delivered by using both English and Bahasa Indonesia. It depends on the content of subject study such as English skills, English knowledge, theory and practical English teaching subjects, and Islamic value subjects. With regard to English skills particularly Listening subject, traditionally, the students come to language lab to have listening practice. The lecture provide listening cassette or in CD and the students use headsets to listen to listening materials. Unfortunately, the language lab in this college cannot be used effectively

as most of the headsets are broken. The last mentioned subject was solely in Bahasa Indonesia.

The Lack of Infrastructure

The study was conducted at STAIN (Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri) Watampone college, South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. It is a state owned Islamic college managed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The college has two faculties, namely Syariah or Law and Tarbiyah or Education Faculties. The college provides *Wireless Fidelity* or Wi-Fi which enables both lecturers and students to same limited access of the internet in the classrooms.

Unfortunately, it could not be used effectively because of the bandwidth problem and a service that is often interrupted. To add to this problem the computer lab has only eight computers for the students. In short, accessibility to the internet in the college is very limited. As a result, lecturers seldom make use of the internet in the teaching and learning activities. Some of the students, very few of them, who do have laptops use the internet after lecture hours in the internet cafés for fun or social networking as well as to search for supporting resources for their class assignments. Both lecturers and students, however, are familiar with Powerpoint and word processor which are tools for the delivery of lectures.

There are very few computers for the students to use. However, almost all of students do have mobile phones. Most of the students in STAIN College use their mobile phones for fun without realizing that they can get many benefits by using them for academic purposes. They also do not seem to have the motivation for self-study to improve their English language competencies. Due to the limited accessibility to the internet in the College itself, the students have not been exposed

to e-learning as much as they should be. This project was conducted mainly to overcome the lack of infra-structure facilities in the college, to familiarize the students with e-learning and to explore to what extent e-learning by means of podcast could motivate students to improve their listening skills competencies.

1 Methods

The method of study followed in this research was exploratory and aimed at initiating ways to improve English listening skills by introducing e-learning among pre-service teacher training students of the state College for Islamic Studies (STAIN) Watampone. Exploratory research allowed the researchers to meet an issue that had not been clearly defined yet and aimed to open up directions for future research (Prapinwong, 2008). Both lecturers and students have known a little or it might be they have not known at all about using web 2.0 tools such as WebQuest, Nicenet, Podcast, and web blog to support e-learning in terms of English learning at an Islamic college. Therefore, exploratory research seemed as appropriate method for the study. In other words, the exploratory research was to explore the lecturers' and students' class interaction in e-learning. In this case, the researcher analyze the students' reflection that they wrote in web class blog after experiencing e-learning activities.

For the purpose of this project, the researcher, myself, decided to amend the course goal in line with e-learning activities. The original Listening Comprehension Course goal is regarding enhancement of students' listening skill by using taped audio recording. As such the new goals for the Listening Comprehension Course are to enhance students' motivation to learn English through the use of podcast or any related listening material files in the internet, to familiarize students with Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the process of teaching and

learning by experiencing authentic listening exercises through web links or mobile phones, to follow the course instructions in WebQuest, to have self-assessment in online Rubric, to discuss their experiences on Nicenet as well as to write and post their reflections in English on a class blog.

A semester earlier the researcher tried to create an on-line class by yahoogroups. However, it took so much time and effort on my part. As Nicenet provides more options to create classes as compared to yahoogroups, the researcher decided to try Nicenet. It was then decided to create a Nicenet class as a medium of on-line discussion and to provide them with instructions and learning tasks. The students were instructed to get connected to the internet in free public Wi-Fi areas outside the college, or in internet cafés or they could use modems in their own laptops. Fortunately, 10 of the students had their own laptops and were willing to share their laptops with their friends. Procedures of joining Nicenet were sent through their e-mails. The researcher was rather apprehensive at first about the students joining the Nicenet and the ensuing discussion. However, the worries were unfounded. All students had joined Nicenet without any assistance from me and were willingly taking part in the class discussion. They introduced themselves and discussed the tasks given in Nicenet.

The researcher suggested some podcast links for authentic listening practices and asked the students to write their reflections on web blog. Before doing that the researcher had to demonstrate to them how to use their mobile phones to download and listen to podcast or any other MP3 files format. After that, the researcher sent the task message in the Nicenet and WebQuest, instructing them to visit podcast web at http://www.eslpod.com/website/index_new.html. This web was chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, it provides authentic listening practice. Native speakers of the English language would sound differently from non native speakers. The

researcher also wanted the students to listen to the proper pronunciation and intonation of the words and phrases used in the language. Secondly, because it was quite slow paced, the researcher thought it was suitable for the students who were mostly high beginning to low intermediate in listening skills. The researcher decided to choose the slow paced podcast not only because the students would need more time to access the link without the researcher's direct instruction, but also they need time to listen and get the main ideas of what is being said by the speaker in the podcast. The researcher had also instructed the students to reflect and write a report of their reflections on a class blog. After much deliberation, the students finally listened to nine different authentic topics or episodes which were ³ Supra Natural Power, English Café, First Day Intend to Office, Home Architecture Styles, Taking the Driving License, The Scribing One's Skill Level, American President, Kumbaya Song, and The Childhood Illness and Disease. Lastly, perhaps the most important reason, the podcast web provides various themes is easily accessible and can be downloaded for free.

The researcher first thought was that each student should create one blog each, but the researcher realized that they would have to spend more time to read and make corrections for 24 different students' blogs. Unfortunately, the researcher did not have that much time. An effective solution for the problem, the researcher thought, was a class blog which would enable all students to participate on it. But the researcher had to find a way of letting the students to upload their writings on the blog. This brings another problem what would happen to the blog if students were to use different identification to sign in? Finally the researcher created a single e-mail for the students to enable all of them to upload their tasks on the blog.

The researcher created a weekly blog for reflection. The researcher was quite convinced that their new learning experience using ICT will motivate them more to

learn English. Since the researcher is more interested in exploring their attitude towards the use of ICT and considering the fact that they are still beginners in their English writing skills the researcher decided to be more accommodative and allowed them to write their reports in Bahasa Indonesia. However, all students preferred to write in English.

The students and the researcher went to a free hotspot area located in a town park near the college to post the reflections. The researcher monitored the students and provided assistance when necessary. To help them did their reports, the researcher sent several structured tasks and questions. The students could ask the researcher questions and the researcher would respond to their queries. They could also find some instructions on Webquest.

The first task of reflection was done. They posted the first draft on Nicenet and continued to write the second draft. This time, before they could post their reflection to the class blog, the researcher instructed them to work in pairs for language correction which enabled them to check each other's work.

Results

This section is divided into two parts namely reflection of the students and reflection by the researcher. The students' reflections were taken from their piece of writing on a class blog. The researcher reflection is in accordance with the observation I have done after four week project concerning the important changes before and after the project.

- **Students' reflection**

Before this project, the students did not have any formal experience in using the ICT to learn English. After listening to various podcast files, they were very enthusiastic and surprised that those files could be easily accessed and downloaded into both computers and their mobile phones.

Some students reported that they could understand only a little bit of what the speakers had said. It might be the time duration of podcast files were various between 10 – 20 minutes. For example, student 1 said:

“After listening the speaker in the file, I could understand it, even though little by little, because the speaker in the podcast spent more than 20 minutes to explain ...”, Student 1.

Moreover, they had to listen to the podcast file several time in order to follow what the speakers had said.

“At first, I felt confused because I was afraid if the meaning of the podcast was wrong, so I listened it again ...”, Student 2.

Some informed that they could guess the meaning of the speech if the speaker talked in spoken slowly.

“Fortunately, the speaker talked in slow paced so I could guess some of his words ...”, Student 3.

This report is also interesting regarding to the pacing.

“Before I listen to podcasts, I could not catch the meaning in a quick conversation, but after I listening to podcast I could follow the meaning of conversation a little bit”, Student 4.

In terms of the content of the speaking, the students were also managed to know the generals idea of the conversation.

“Although I just listen little by little but I could make a short conclusion of the content of the conversation...”, Student 5.

With regard to the students’ feeling, after experiencing new way to listen to authentic listening files they felt positive sense of feeling.

“Even though, I did not understand all the meaning of the conversation in the files, I was so proud because this could increase my listening skills in English”, Student 6.

The reflection indicates that the students listening to the authentic conversation or speech by means of podcast need more effort to listen more than twice, in order to catch the meaning. They need to do this as they had to consider both duration of time and pace of conversation. However, their motivation had arisen since they experienced the positive feeling and pleasurable way to listen to authentic listening files.

- **The researcher’ reflection**

The researcher noticed some interesting alterations. Firstly, the students did not have any interesting options to practice authentic listening materials except listening to

songs. However, after this project, they got something new and a lot of fascinating material in the web. Secondly, the students did not know podcast or any other downloadable authentic listening files in the internet at all. Nevertheless, they felt happy and excited as they realized that by listening to podcast in terms of self-study could improve their listening skills. Thirdly, the students were familiar with social networking such as Facebook or Twitter and wrote their ideas in it. Nonetheless, they started to use a blog to share their ideas with their friends as well as give motivation, even though they still need to improve their writing skills. Finally, this is also the most important change in this project. The students used their mobile phone for fun or communication purposes. After giving a treatment to 20 sample students of 24, the students used their mobile to listening to podcast for self-study purpose and got a new atmosphere in learning English. Moreover, the students from other groups also tried to use their mobile for listening to podcast after being inspired by some students in this project.

Due to the first task was listening to podcast, for further plan is choosing other sort of listening files, which include pre-task, on-task, and post-task listening activities. The on-task listening activity is focused on interactive questions that enable learners to answer the questions directly on the web link. For example, in the link <http://www.esl-lab.com/>.

Another option is by providing both sound file and text related to the sound, for example, <http://www.manythings.org/voa/animals/>. For adding warmer or filler, the researcher will include interactive this song http://www.eslvideo.com/esl_video_quiz_low_intermediate.php?id=9572. The researcher thinks by giving these listening files web links, the learners will be more challenged and motivated in terms of self-study. In addition, the researcher' long-

term planning is designing a syllabus that includes technology or web skills in teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

There are many ways to help students improve their language competencies. This project chooses to make use a simple but effective tool as a first step to introduce e-learning among a group of Islamic college students. With the revolution in ICT today, an organization does not need to spend a lot of money to set up infrastructure facilities to implement e-learning. Instead it has to learn to be resourceful and creative in making use of the many tools and facilities that are already easily available.

By experiencing the interactive web to the class project, it could inspire the researcher to bring a new atmosphere with regards the way the researcher teaches in the classes. Moreover, it seems that the students got to motivate to perform the self-study since they had a chance to increase their listening skills with fun. The study suggests that e-learning could bring the benefits to the students in order to familiarize themselves with authentic listening practice by means of podcast.

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Resources

Interactive listening activities which provide pre-, while, and post- listening practice: <http://www.esl-lab.com/elem/elemrld1.htm>

A podcast link which can be downloaded in MP3 format:

http://www.elspod.com/website/index_new.html

The podcast links which provide both MP3 files and text

<http://www.manythings.org/e/requirements.html> and

<http://www.manythings.org/voa/animals/>

A class blog: <http://eedstainwatampone.blogspot.com/>

Interactive video song which is modified by the researcher, it can be used as a filler

http://www.eslvideo.com/esl_video_quiz_low_intermediate.php?id=9572

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