

**Habits that contribute to the development of speaking and listening skills
in English as a Second Language contexts****Hábitos que contribuem para o desenvolvimento de habilidades de fala e
escuta em Inglês como Segunda Língua**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to discuss habits that contribute to the development of speaking and listening comprehension skills in a group of Brazilian English language students. A theoretical framework within the field of Applied Linguistics concerning language skills development was used as basis for the design of a 23-item survey of evaluation of study and language exposure habits, which was applied to a sample of 201 students divided into groups according to their levels of proficiency, based on feedback provided by 31 teachers. Resulting data matrix was analyzed through descriptive statistics. A ranking of habits considering their usefulness in the perspective of fluent students was obtained. Differences in terms of effectiveness as well as relationships between these habits are discussed. Results also comprise contributions to English language teaching classroom practices and help filter and define study habits debated in the field of Applied Linguistics which are more relevant and effective for local learners.

Keywords: Speaking. Listening. Brazilian students. Study habits. ESL.

RESUMO

O objetivo deste estudo é discutir hábitos que contribuem para o desenvolvimento das habilidades de compreensão oral e auditiva em um grupo de estudantes brasileiros de inglês. Um referencial teórico dentro do campo da Linguística Aplicada no desenvolvimento de habilidades de linguagem foi utilizado como base para o delineamento de 23 itens de avaliação de hábitos de estudo e linguagem, aplicado a uma amostra de 201 alunos divididos

em grupos de acordo níveis de proficiência, com base no feedback fornecido por 31 professores. A matriz de dados resultante foi analisada por meio de estatística descritiva. Uma classificação de hábitos considerando sua utilidade na perspectiva de estudantes fluentes foi obtida. Diferenças em termos de eficácia, bem como as relações entre esses hábitos são discutidas. Os resultados também incluem contribuições para as práticas de sala de aula de ensino da língua inglesa e ajudam a filtrar e definir os hábitos de estudo debatidos no campo da Linguística Aplicada, que são mais relevantes e eficazes para os alunos locais.

Palavras-chave: falando. Ouvindo. Estudantes brasileiros. Hábitos de estudo. ESL.

1 INTRODUCTION

English language has become a key factor for communication in the information age. It's the main language used in business, tourism, technology and several other fields. Its acquisition demands the development of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Fluent communication does not mean only effectively recognizing words, expressions and grammar structures: it involves understanding communicative purposes of spoken and written data and being competent to respond appropriately to these. In this sense, development of speaking and listening comprehension are among the greatest challenges for language learners due to different factors traditionally discussed in literature such as phonetic and phonological differences between English and Brazilian Portuguese (MORI, 2001; SHEPHERD, 2001), which hampers understanding and production of certain sounds.

When it comes to listening, one can also highlight the interference of external acoustic factors such as noise, overlapping voices or even quality of recording or connection in conversations which are not face-to-face (WILSON, 2008; HARMER, 2007). Limitations concerning meaningful practice, which is often restricted to language lessons when it comes to speaking, are definitely an obstacle for fluency building (UR, 2012). The development of both listening and speaking is also subject to socio-emotional factors: they are skills that demand prompt comprehension and responses, which can cause learner stress and anxiety (HARMER, 2007; RENANDYA; FARRELL, 2011).

The need to learn more about the development of speaking and listening comprehension is reinforced by indications that these skills often neglected or overlooked by teachers in the classroom context (RICHARDS, 2006; RENANDYA; FARRELL, 2011; SIDDIQUI, 2014). In the broader context, research points to the importance of study and even leisure habits which can promote the improvement of these skills, such as watching films and surfing the web, once it is acknowledged learning does not take place only inside language classrooms (MILLER, 2003).

This study aims to discuss habits which contribute to the development of speaking and listening comprehension skills in Brazilian students. Discussions will focus on the effectiveness of habits in the perspective of a large group of fluent students who have successfully developed these skills. The idea is to outline study and language exposure-related habits discussed in the field of Applied Linguistics considered more relevant and helpful for local learners and speakers.

2 METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research used quantitative survey methods seeking to objectively identify how learners who have successfully developed speaking and listening skills evaluate the effectiveness of different study and language exposure-related habits in terms of contributing to fluency acquisition.

3 PARTICIPANTS

A group of 201 students (♀ = 109 / ♂ = 92) and 31 teachers (♀ = 19 / ♂ = 12) from 2 language schools located the metropolitan area of Recife, a Brazilian northeastern capital city, took part in the research. All the subjects agreed to participate as volunteers provided confidentiality was ensured and the data obtained was used for research purposes only. The sample, as well as the scope of the study, comprises several age groups. The youngest participant is 15 and the oldest 50 years old.

The sample design defined for the purposes of the research comprised only students at upper-intermediate and advanced levels. This decision was made in order to ensure focus on a group of individuals who have both their fluency developed as well as linguistic maturity to identify habits which have contributed to the development of their speaking and listening skills.

Participant students were grouped into 2 categories based on their teachers' evaluation: **0 – developing fluency** and **1 – fluency developed**. This allowed the study to map the habits of speakers who have successfully developed their skills, thus avoiding listing habits mentioned by students who haven't yet developed their speaking and listening comprehension.

4 SURVEY

The survey designed for the research is composed of 23 items, presented in Figure 1, which represent habits students may judge more or less effective for speaking and listening comprehension skills development. The items were defined based on literature review, understood as a tool which can identify "the existing body of knowledge, provides a theoretical foundation for the proposed empirical study, substantiates the presence of the research problem, justifies the proposed study as one that contributes something new to the cumulated knowledge" (PARÉ et al, 2015, p. 183).

Figure 1 – Survey items

- a) Watching films, TV series and other audiovisual products in English without subtitles.
- b) Listening to podcasts in English.
- c) Reading texts aloud.
- d) Using smartphone learning apps for speaking skills development.
- e) Watching films, TV series and other audiovisual products in English with subtitles in Portuguese.
- f) Listening to radio programs in English.
- g) Talking to other Brazilians in English.
- h) Telling stories using narrative tenses.
- i) Taking part in conversation clubs and groups.
- j) Repeating or acting out dialogues from films, series and other audiovisual products in English.
- k) Travelling to English-speaking countries.
- l) Singing in English.
- m) Trying to use more sophisticated expressions when speaking – e.g. *phrasal verbs*.
- n) Looking for opportunities to practice with other Brazilian English learners or speakers.
- o) Attending language lessons regularly.
- p) Doing online activities aimed at developing listening skills.
- q) Using smartphone learning apps for listening skills development.
- r) Trying to use more sophisticated grammar structures when speaking – e.g. *3rd conditional / present perfect*.
- s) Recording and listening to own voice.
- t) Listening to music in English.

- u) Talking in English to native speakers.
- v) Repeating sentences aloud.
- w) Watching films, TV series and other audiovisual products in English with subtitles in English.

A 1 – 5 point scale was used to quantify participants' perception of the habits presented to them in the items, aiming at establishing levels of effectiveness for each of them. Attributing 1 to an item means the action presented contributed very little, in the respondent's perception, to the development of his or her skills. The value 5 means the respondent believes the habit has contributed a great deal to the development of his listening or speaking, while 3 indicates an indifferent position and 2 and 4 represent, respectively, intermediate values closer to each extreme. Participants were also given the possibility of flagging items as 'zero' when they didn't recognize the action presented as a habit.

5 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A tabular data matrix composed of columns and rows was built from the responses given to the survey. The first column, named 'participants', contains numeric ID codes for each respondent. The other columns correspond to survey items A – W, containing the scores given by each participant to the habits evaluated. Fields flagged as 'zero' were left in blank.

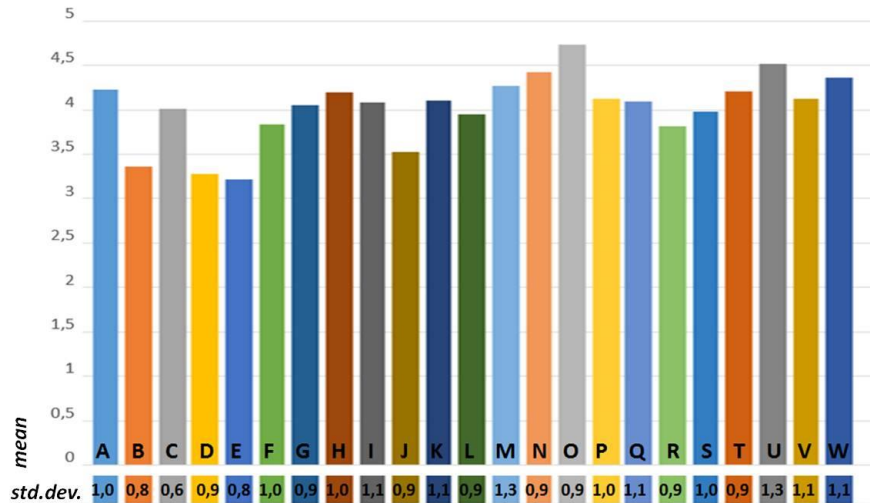
The last column, named 'fluency' indicates how students were originally grouped by their teachers: **0 – developing fluency** and **1 – fluency developed**. The focus of the analysis was the fluent students' viewpoint, which corresponds to part of the sample. But storing data from all the students would enable comparing and contrasting perceptions of students in both categories for future studies.

Having these variables defined, the matrix was analyzed through descriptive statistics. Mean values were obtained for each item as well as their standard deviations, which indicate the degree of approximation between the individual values and the group mean. Pearson's correlation test was also used to identify relationships and common variations between the habits depicted.

6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the 201 students who participated in the research, 134 were evaluated by their teachers as fluent in relation to their speaking and listening comprehension skills, which is equivalent to 67% of the sample. Based on the perceptions of these students, effectiveness of each of the habit is indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Survey items' scores



The item 'O' – *Attend language lessons regularly* obtained the highest ranked mean, identified by learners as the activity which has contributed the most ($\mu = 4.76 / \sigma = 0.9$), among those presented, to the development of their language skills. The relatively low value for standard deviation indicates that this understanding is shared by several respondents. This finding highlights the importance of structured systematic formal learning in the context of language schools as well as the role of the teacher as a guide who brings about essential contributions for fluency building.

The item which was given the second highest rating was 'U' – *Talking in English to native speakers* ($\mu = 4,61 / \sigma = 1,3$). Language teachers may invite native speakers to their lessons to interact with their students: according to this data, it could be factor of student engagement. Practices that advocate not only for the learning of language systems but also the development of cultural awareness are consistent with a shift in the field of Applied Linguistics which has been taking place over the last decades: "current oral pedagogy has the objective of enabling nonnative speakers to communicate effectively and to negotiate cross-cultural interactional norms" (HINKEL, 2006, p. 116).

Analyzing the third highest rated item 'N' – *Looking for opportunities to practice with other Brazilian English learners or speakers* ($\mu = 4,44 / \sigma = 1,3$), it's possible to establish a connection with previously mentioned items 'O' and 'U'. Interaction with native speakers and the classroom environment are often associated to one common element: meaningful practice, which is often not viable in other contexts as pointed out before (UR, 2012).

A conclusion one can come to from the top 3 highest rated items, considering what they have in common, concerns the extent to which fluent students hold practice important to the development of their speaking and listening comprehension skills. Adding the lack of opportunities mentioned above to the natural intricacies of developing skills for interactional talk, which is viewed as an extremely complex and subtle phenomena (RICHARDS, 2006), one could easily understand why students value these moments. It's critical teachers set to create opportunities for practice, through classroom tasks and even homework or learning projects which require spoken interaction among learners.

The items 'B' – *Listening to podcasts in English* ($\mu = 3,39 / \sigma = 0,8$) and 'D' – *Using smartphone learning apps for speaking skills development* ($\mu = 3,35 / \sigma = 0,9$) are among those which were given the lowest scores. In comparison to the other habits, fluent students who have done these activities consider them less effective in terms of the contributions to their language skills development. In relation to podcasts, considering the highest values attributed to the items 'A' and 'W' which involve films and TV series, there's an indication that audiovisual media may be more attractive to students than pure audio content. This can be related both to the cinematic appeal of these products as well as the fact that image aids comprehension when associated to spoken language (WILSON, 2008).

It's also pertinent to point out that these data does not mean podcasts and learning apps are useless or even harmful for language skills development. Taking the large variety of learning apps available, it should be noted that these findings represent only students perceptions of specific apps they may eventually have had experience with, not an unrestrictive rejection to any kind of educational digital application. There's also a considerable amount of evidence podcasts are extremely beneficial for language learning (ASHTON-HAY; BROOKES, 2011). But the fact that their effective systematic use is associated to being socially aware of them as communication technology (RAGUSA; CHAN; CRAMPTON, 2009) indicates there's a cultural component involved in the use of podcasts and learners might need to be properly introduced and instructed in order to benefit from it.

In this sense, if educators consider it pertinent to promote any activities involving this technology with focus on speaking or listening comprehension, they might want to do it carefully due to the low potential for student engagement. Preferably, low ranking activities should be used in association to others considered more effective by the students in order to balance the motivation component. Interest is a key aspect in listening skills development in classroom activities as it is directly related to the cognitive effort one makes to follow a text spoken in a foreign language. Not surprisingly, distraction and speaking rate are reported by students as the most significant sources of listening comprehension problems (RENANDYA; FARRELL, 2011).

7 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ACTIONS

Relationships between the habits listed in the survey were identified through correlation analysis. The first finding in this sense concerns a moderate trend in respondents who gave high ratings to item 'B' – *Listening to podcasts in English* giving similar ratings to item 'K' – *Travelling to English-speaking countries* ($r = 0.56 / p = 0.00$). Participants who gave lower ratings to one of these items also tended to do the same to the other, which shows these items varied together. Given that the recognition of one of them as an useful activity is associated to the recognition of the other, it seems reasonable to propose the use of podcasts with students who value authentic language experiences abroad. The caveat, previously highlighted, that podcasts ought to be used with caution should be kept in mind nonetheless.

The second connection which was identified involved items 'G' – *Talking to other Brazilians in English* and 'H' – *Telling stories using narrative tenses* ($r = 0.53 / p = 0.00$). Despite item 'H' having obtained higher scores than item 'G', respondents who gave one of the items high ratings tended to do the same to the other. This data enforces the Idea that "narratives and descriptions can be effective in fluency-focused teaching" (HINKEL, 2006, p. 115). In this perspective, the use of different verb tenses and narrative structures can contribute to the creation of a discursive environment in which the communicative effort demanded enhances language skills. Therefore, focus on accuracy can also be a way for teachers to promote fluency.

Based on correlation tests, it can also be concluded that there's a relation between items 'L' – *Singing in English* and 'T' – *Listening to music in English* ($r = 0.54 / p = 0.00$). Taking into account the recognition of one of these habits as useful is often accompanied by recognition of the other, it is reasonable to assume these activities can be combined with the

purpose of promoting listening skills as well as aspects of speaking, such as pronunciation. Suggesting that students sing when they listen to music, during lessons or in their free time, may be a valuable tip.

8 CONCLUSION

Contributions drawn from the analysis of the data obtained are consistent with literature in the field of Applied Linguistics when it comes to development of speaking and listening comprehension skills. The sample as well as the use of descriptive statistics allowed the study to reach solid data, avoiding fragile conclusions based upon small samples of single groups of students.

The survey has enabled the analysis of levels of usefulness associated by successful students to habits and activities which can promote the development of speaking and listening comprehension skills. Through the analysis of the scores it was possible to establish a ranking of activities. It is also important to highlight contributions to teaching practice drawn from the data in the form of recommendations concerning classroom activities and learning strategies for teachers and students.

Considering that the sample tends to reflect more closely participants' context rather than the global reality of English speakers, it can be inferred that this study helps filter and define cultural and study habits discussed within the field of Applied Linguistics which tend to be more relevant and effective for local learners. Therefore, an argument can be made in the sense of highlighting the importance of studies of this nature for local contexts.

For future developments, we propose the observation and analysis of lessons with focus on the strategies used by teachers and learners to promote language skills as well as student engagement in learning activities aimed at speaking and listening comprehension. Besides applying a larger number of surveys to validate data in a wider scale, it also seems pertinent to incorporate qualitative approaches in the form of interviews in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how these habits contribute to the development of these skills.

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