Audiobooks: improving fluency and instilling literary skills and education for development

Audiolibros: mejorar la fluidez e inculcar habilidades literarias y educación para el desarrollo

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Abstract: The objective of this article is twofold: firstly, to provide a critical review of an assortment of articles and web pages that report on the use of literary audio books, their contribution towards language learning, the way in which they promote children's creativity and imagination and their role in contemporary children's literature. Secondly, to bring in two innovative educational projects related to solidarity and civic and intercultural competences, which use audio books as a tool for language learning. The conclusions indicate that using audio books in primary education may have a positive impact on the learners, and help students improve their language competence and their literary skills.
Key words: audiobooks; ICTS; linguistic and literary competences; multiculturalism and solidarity.

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es doble: en primer lugar ofrecer una revisión crítica de una serie de artículos y páginas web en las que se hace referencia al uso de audio libros, su contribución al aprendizaje de lenguas, la manera en la que promueven la creatividad y la imaginación del alumnado y su papel en la literatura infantil contemporánea. En segundo lugar, presentar dos proyectos de innovación educativa relacionados con la solidaridad y las competencias cívicas e interculturales y que usan audio libros como herramienta para el aprendizaje de lenguas. Como conclusión podemos adelantar que el uso de audio libros en educación primaria tiene un impacto positivo en el alumnado, que mejora su competencia en lenguas y sus habilidades literarias.
Palabras clave: audio libros; TICs; competencia lingüística y literaria; multiculturalidad y solidaridad.

Introduction

> Audio books are not a discovery of this century or even of the last one considering authentic books as "equivalent to its content and not to its format" (Baskin & Harris 1995:372). Taking this statement into account audio books have to be traced back to the ancient times when stories were transmitted from generation to generation, from storytellers to anyone who wanted to listen to them. Since, as Baskin & Harris (1995:372) explain, the "first literature was heard, not read" and that is a trait which audio books, the innovative format which digital narrative has recently adopted, share with traditional oral literature: we are back to what a voice can transmit to us. Moreover, as Johnson argues, if reading is understanding the content of the story or the theme, then audio books certainly succeed. No one would argue the importance of decoding in teaching children to read. But, understanding the message, thinking critically about the content, using imagination, and making connections is at the heart of what it means to be a reader and why kids learn to love books.
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> (Johnson 2003)

The objective of this article[1] is twofold: firstly, to offer a critical review of a selection of articles and web pages that report on the use of literary audio books, their contribution towards language learning, the way in which they foster children's creativity and imagination and their role in contemporary children's literature. Secondly, to introduce *Tales of the world* and *Ahora Toca…* (time for…), two innovative educational projects related to solidarity and civic competences, which the University of Valencia is currently involved in. Both projects use audio books as a tool for language learning. The content of the critical review is used as a guidance to design and propose a practical selection of reasons, as well as a sample of the different possible types of activities, that support the use of audio books with children who are learning English in a Spanish context, where the use of audio books is not an extended practice. The use of audio books is hereby described as favouring, in different ways, the development of the five skills described in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), namely, listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing and how they affect the teacher, the child and the process of learning. The conclusions indicate that using audio books in primary education may have a positive impact on the

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learners, who will not only improve their language competence but also their literary skills.

Critical Review of Literature

One of the gifts of audio books is that they have shaken up the habit of reading. In fact, the increasing number of easy-to-reach audio books has caused a rise in the number of people taking an interest in literary texts. In addition, the coincident publication of printed and audio narratives simultaneously has also supposed a step forward in the fostering of reading since many older titles have been reproduced again "making the rediscovery of great stories even more visible" (Grover & Hannegan 2012: 151). With the arrival of new technologies of information and communication, the audio books have been evolving rapidly. They have been transformed in just a few years from analogue "to digital, from tabletop to handheld, and from cassettes to Cds" (Grover & Hannegan 2012: 151) and from MP3-MP4 players to *Playaway*. *Playaway* is the most recent finding regarding audio books. They provide, as they explain on their website[2]: the portability of digital audio books with the grab-and-go convenience of a physical format. Unlike CDs, Audio Cassettes or downloads, *Playaway* does not need a separate player and comes preloaded and ready to use with High Definition Audio Content and a battery.

Hence, no matter the format, the main point about audio books is that they are fostering children's reading habits and, what is more, they are always available either at school, at home or in the library. Furthermore, it is possible to accomplish other manual tasks while listening to an audio book and "this is just another innovation that has affected the use of audio books in instructional settings" (Grover & Hannegan 2012:153, Baskin & Harris 1995: 372)

Nevertheless there is something which we would like to highlight: we are using mobile devices like tablets, MP3s, net-books and smart phones more than ever; anywhere and at anytime, but we must not forget the value of bookshops or libraries. We still like face-to-face service at book shops guided by experienced book sellers. For us, paper books and audio books are not incompatible, what is more, we find that they complement and enrich each other.

The contribution of Audio Books towards Language Learning by Means of Literary Texts

What is the contribution of audio books to literature? Why listening? These two questions are key to support the use of audiobooks. Audiobooks are not only

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[2] http://www.findawayworld.com/what-we-do/our-products/

another way to promote literary texts, but also a complementary-to-reading task which may encourage reading (Aaron, 1992: 213). According to Noland (2011: 12) "the importance of reading aloud to children in the development of emerging literacy is widely promoted today by libraries and schools". The benefits for beginners of listening to the audio while reading the print book have been highlighted by many authors, among which. Wilde and Larson (2007:24) explain that children make connections "between the words they hear and the written words. Among wich

The research carried out about the benefits of audio books according to different age ranges indicates that aince for beginners (4-7 years old) listening comprehension comes before reading comprehension, it is apparent that their exposure to a variety of speech patterns increases their oral fluency. Conversely, independent readers (8-12) find that audio books give them more time to read, since they start to be quite busy with their homework and exams. Having audio books on hand increases the number of books that they read. In addition, a noteworthy benefit, given the global world they are facing is the fact that they are exposed to multicultural stories which will enrich them as citizens of the world. In turn, for young adult readers (12 and up) who are very fond of new technologies of education and communication, MP3/MP4 players, mobile phones and similar devices make 'reading' by means of audio books particularly appealing for them. At this age audio books function as imagination arousers while improving their oral expression and writing skills.

Who Are Audio Books for?

Any literature, either classical or more recent, either written for adults or for children is available for everyone. We highlight *everyone* taking into account that there are two types of learners: those who like reading and those who do not. The former group, usually those with a better hearing ability, can improve one of the basic competences considered in the European Framework of Reference for Language Learning: listening. In addition, they can also improve their speaking competences since the trained actors and actresses who have read the texts for recorded audio books could serve as a model in terms of inflection, tone, different dialects, rhythm, pauses, silence and different voices (Baskin & Harris, 1995). The dramatic performance increases listening pleasure, conveys meaning of a book more clearly and vividly, and transports captivated listeners into another world.

Conversely, those who openly declare that they do not like reading might find an extra motivation to use audio books given that, "the use of audio books with struggling, reluctant, or second-language learners is powerful since they act as a scaffold that allows students to read above their actual reading level" (Beers 1998: 33, Chen Shu-Hsien 2004). Moreover, the use of earphones allows the reader/listener to isolate him/herself inside the classroom and carry on the reading activity during the class time. This suits children's current lifestyle: headsets and isolation from external noises, one more reason to become fond of audio books.

To make the task of understanding the audio book easier, the reading speed can be controlled in such way that you do not change the reader's live performance, but you can speed up or slow down the playback. A case in point is the audio books web page ESL-Bits[3]. In this page, for instance, once the audio has started, you can either listen to the audio books at normal speed, play it at twice the speed or at half speed. This method helps them improve both their word recognition and comprehension (Bergman, 1999). More to the point, different studies have confirmed the interest which reluctant-to-read teenagers have shown in audio books (Marchionda, 2001). To put it briefly, audio books allow children who read slowly to still take part in class activities as one of them declares: "I might not be able to read as well as others but I still have opinions. Because I could listen to the story I could finally share my opinions with my classmates" (Chen Shu-Hsien, 2004; Wolfson, 2008; Carstens, 1996).

There is one more trait of audio books which could help those reluctant readers to discover the world of books: the shortened versions. Broadly speaking, although we are not in favour of using reduced narratives too often, "they can be of a great help in school settings in which unwilling or frustrated readers (the term "frustrated readers" refers to teenagers who had a bad experience with reading in the past) can find their way towards the reading world by way of abridged versions" (Basken & Harris, 1995: 375). Thus, traditional narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1980), *The Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer, 1992), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1977) and many others can be available to everyone in their shortened versions.

Learners with Additional Needs

Learners with particular needs are one of the collectives that can benefit the most from audio books. For obvious reasons, learners with visual disabilities can increase their level of enjoyment for reading. But they are not the only ones who can benefit from the features and virtues of audio books: students with physical disabilities (either temporary, due to an accident or surgery, or permanent) may find the task easier than holding a book, turning its pages, taking notes and other related activities (Basken & Harris, 1995: 376).

As argued by Baskin and Harris (2005) slow learning students who find difficulties in interpreting the print; that is to say, being told, rather than trying to fight against decoding and interpreting, since difficult words or paragraphs may function as deterrents, making them reject a book, and thus literature, as soon as they see it.

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[3] . http://esl-bits.net/Books/books.html

Coping with and overcoming reading difficulties

As mentioned previously, audio books model reading, teach critical listening, build on prior knowledge, improve vocabulary, encourage oral language usage, and increase comprehension (Goldsmith, 2002; Grover & Hannegan, 2005). But, in addition, audio books seem promising as a tool to cope with reading difficulties.

There are some audio books-based reading strategies which can aid those with reading difficulties concerning vocabulary, making sense of the text and fluency. If the reading difficulties are down to a limited vocabulary, audio books are a good tool to recognise and learn vocabulary since learners will practise those skills when decoding words. But when the task is found difficult due to the reader/listener's inability to use context clues to make meaning out of print, the reading strategies could channel their efforts into the development of skills used in decoding words. Finally, if the setback is focused on fluency, following a written text while listening to it will allow the learner to read with fluency, mostly if they read word by word instead of phrase by phrase.

Occasionally, the reading difficulties also extend to audio books or, better said, stem from audio books. The reason for this is that some learners might find audio books a nuisance due to, either the length or the complexity of some sentences, and even some books, or a confusing text organization.

Follow-up exercises based on audiobooks

Audio books can serve also an educational purpose beyond learning languages. They can be an interesting tool for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) since on the one hand, they can be used with many different subjects: science, social, history and so on. On the other hand, there are some websites that incorporate what they call educational stories, that is, stories which add a content component, like the web page Storynory[4]. This page contains an educational stories section in which audio books concerned with, for instance, Greek Myths can be found.

Moreover, on that same website, a selection of phrases from one of their stories is available. These audio books are suitable for "English language learners and young people who want to improve their English with stories[5]". But classical literature such as *Alice in Wonderland* or many narratives by Oscar Wilde and Rudyard Kipling and fairy tales by the Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen and Perrault can be also accessed. There are some other interesting pages where follow up activities, namely, anglomaniacy.pl, specialised in language learning for kids, can be found.

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[4] www.storynory.com

[5] http://www.storynory.com/archives/educational-stories/

Nowadays, textbooks also include audiobooks, so children can listen while they read, together with other listening activities such as repetition and rhymes among others.

Regardless of the sort of activity, the main focus of audio books is mainly set on achieving real skills for autonomous learning, more willingly than simply on content acquisition. In other words, audio books are a very useful tool to accomplish life-long learning competences since they give students the chance to learn how to learn.

Where to Find Audiobooks for Children

There are three aspects to be taken into account when looking for an appropriate audio book:

- The purpose which the audio book is going to serve to and the intended audience that that audio book is going to be selected for.
- The audio: the voice has to be clear and appealing. In our view, the music, the special effects and other technical aspects do not have to be too striking so as to avoid learners to distract attention. The audio book can be, according to (Hoffman and Ostee 1994; Chen, 2004):

  - Fully voiced: the personalities of all the characters are dramatized vocally and maintained through the production.
  - Partially voiced: Focuses on individualising one or more characters while allowing others to move into the background.
  - Unvoiced: Older, flat form without using vocal –role playing.
  - Multi-voiced: Employs a cast of individual characters, each representing one character.

The story and the readers/ authors: because if, according to Chen (2004), we are looking for a particular type of narrative by a particular author then, the reader moves to the background. Nevertheless, if what we are looking for is a voice, someone able to engage students in the story, no matter what the narrative is, then the reader is the one who comes to the foreground. According to (Chen, 2004: 24), "we have to take into account if the reading flows and enhances the text, if his or her voice inflection keeps the listener engaged and interested and if the reader overdramatises to detracts listener's attention from the book to his or her performance".

In sum, we have to look for audio books that are both of good quality and balanced in terms of sound quality and reader's style. Some examples of web pages which we consider join all the traits above mentioned are:

http://talesfromtheforest.co.uk/
http://robertmunsch.com/book/moose-2

The Role of Audio Books in Contemporary Children's Literature
How they Affect the Teacher, the Child and the Process of Learning

Audio books bridge the gap between listening vocabulary and reading vocabulary since children's listening vocabulary is usually larger than their reading vocabulary (Chen Shu-Hsien, 2004). Furthermore, while listening, learners are demanded intellectually more in depth and if they do not pay close attention, they will get lost thus, it requires effort and attention. Another reason is that, with audio books, students can associate the form of the words they are looking at with their sound. In classes of English as a Foreign Language, it is a good method to achieve correct pronunciation, intonation and inflection due to the process of imitation (Chen Shu-Hsien, 2004).

An important trait of audio books in relation to the process of learning, is that they fulfill the requisites of life-long learning stated by the European Framework of Reference for language learning given that they can become part of the learner's self study process because children can practice without a teacher's help and they can monitor their own reading skills while practicing their oral reading over and over again.

Talis: tales of the world and ahora toca… (time for…)

Tales of the World (Alcantud 2011, 2012a, b, c, d, e, f) and *The Power of Tales: Building a Fairer World* (Ahora Toca…)(Alcantud, 2013) are two projects part of an innovative educational project, TALIS[6] (Teaching and Acquisition of Intercultural and Solidarity Competences through Linguistics and Literature) that Dr. María Alcantud leads from the 2010-2011 academic year and which Dr. Carmen Gregori also belongs to. TALIS main aim is to connect all the agents of the educative community in support of a common objective: to recognize languages as very useful scaffolding to construct a more and more intercultural and respectful-with-the-human-rights world to which all the communities were able to contribute without losing their identities. Furthermore, this idea was also born as an educational project aimed at fostering reflection and critical thinking on the global reality, promoting civility and rights attitudes solidarity and justice and making easier the social change process (Alcaraz, 2004:134).

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6 http://talisuv.wordpress.com

In addition, TALIS is framed within the activities of the ICTs research groups Anglotic[7,] led by Dr. Barry Pennock-Speck and ELCIS[8]. The former settled at the Faculty of Philology and the latter, led by Dr. Josep Ballester, belongs to the Department of Didactics of Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, both from the University of Valencia.

One of the objectives of TALIS is to create and use audio books as one of their most salient tools. Both projects emerged from the combination of many educational methods and concepts: project work, creative writing, blended-learning, new technologies of information and communication and digital portfolio, all of them implemented in the subject Stylistics of English, an optional subject taught within the English Studies Degree at the University of Valencia in Spain.

In order not to focus too heavily on the issue of the digital portfolio since it is out of the scope of the present article, we will just explain that the main objective of the subject was to narrow the existing gap between the professional world and what learners study at University. Thus, considering Stylistics of English a crossing between language and literature, we encouraged our students to put themselves into the shoes of different professionals working with different genres (newspaper reporting, blurbs, advertising, poetry to mention but a few) so as to write creative writing projects which, all together formed a digital cultural magazine (Alcantud, 2011).

One of the projects dealt with was tales. After studying the tale as a genre, we decided to include intercultural and solidarity competences in the task and thus, we asked our students to look for an underprivileged country, race, town or similar and to contextualize their tales in that setting. This task was compulsory for everyone but we dealt with a second stage, this time a voluntary one. We asked the learners to translate their tales into Spanish, to collect all of them and to publish a book, *Tales of the World* (Alcantud 2012a, b, c, d, e, f) with the aim of offering it to an NGOD so they could raise funds for a solidarity project.

Hence, we asked them to change the classroom into a publishing company in which some of the students were in charge of editing, correcting, surfing social networks to find a sponsor, looking for illustrators and so on, in other words, a real collaborative task. So we donated this project to VOCES[9], a culture and education based NGO which, together with the publishing company DualBooks, specialized in symmetrical bilingual books and audio books, published the six volume collection *Tales of the World* (Alcantud 2012a, b, c, d, e, f). The forty multicultural and solidarity tales which make up the collection were also recorded by British Erasmus students in

7 anglotic.blogs.uv.es
8 www.uv.es/=elcis/castellano/index-e.html
9 http://www.voces.org.es/

English and by the authors themselves in Spanish as free-downloadable audio books[10]. All the funds raised are being used in a project aimed at combating the AIDS problem amongst children and teenagers girls in Leogane, Haití, a town which was almost completely destroyed by the 2010 earthquake.

In turn, the outcome of one of the projects belonging to the digital portfolio, a short tales collection against violence, performed in the subject Stylistics of English in the academic year 2010-2011 was based on the work of some of the competencies described in the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) related to multiculturalism, multilingualism, solidarity and civic education by means of creative writing projects and digital portfolios. Those tales have been used as a basis to produce a book, *The Power of Tales: Building a Fairer World* (Alcantud, 2013) and educational materials for the program Ahora Toca… by the NGOD *Ayuda en Acción*.

The Power of Tales: Building a Fairer World (Alcantud 2013) is a selection of 15 tales against violence collected the previous year following a similar process. Their on-line didactic units aimed at laying the foundations for a national educational innovation project named Ahora Toca… (Time for…) carried out by the Spanish NGDO *Ayuda en Acción*. This NGOD[11] seeks to involve children in primary and secondary schools in the fight against poverty. The 15 tales which make up this project were also recorded by two volunteer British Erasmus students who, like the ones who participated in the first audio books project, kindly provided their voices to this end and so did the authors themselves in Spanish.

The reason for recording these audio books was twofold: firstly, because we wanted everybody to have access to our tales, even those visually impaired or those people with reading difficulties (dyslexia amongst others) and audio books are the formula to achieve this aim. The second reason was because English pronunciation taught in a Spanish setting is one of the most challenging tasks our students have to face and, according to my experience as a teacher of English for more than 20 years; I find audio books the most effective tool to help them to accomplish this challenge.

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[10]http://www.dualbooks.es/audiolibros/
[11] http://programaeducativo.ayudaenaccion.org/tag/ahora-toca/

Conclusion

This article has examined in some detail the use of audio books in primary education providing a critical review of a collection of articles and web pages that report on the use of literary audio books, their contribution towards language learning, the way in which they foster offspring's creativity as well as their role in current literature aimed at children. Regarding creativity, as Gregori (2008: 46) says "the possibilities offered by the multimedia tools […] certainly invites students to be more creative and thus may help introduce and encourage different ways of learning/teaching English".

Moreover, we have researched how audio books may have a positive impact on the learners who will not only improve their language competence but also their literary skills. In addition, as seen in the present article, audio books provide a method to learn the patterns of language and to learn expressions, new formulae, idioms, etc. (Wolfson, 2008) as well as the development of all four language systems; phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic.

In addition, what mostly can be found in audio books are stories and, as Cameron (2002:159) explains, the stories "represent holistic approaches to language teaching and learning that place a high premium on children's involvement with rich, authentic uses of the foreign language".

Likewise, given the current worldwide crisis that has brought many cutbacks in education, it is, in the main, cheaper to provide a set of audio books for the class to share and thus, the noteworthy task of bringing together children and literature could not be affected at any rate.

Furthermore, we have introduced the innovative educational project TALIS carried out by some teachers from the University of Valencia together with other universities and social agents and which has given birth to Tales of the World and Ahora Toca… (Time for…), two projects related to solidarity and civic and intercultural competences which use audio books as a tool for language learning.

The final conclusion drawn from the present article is that the use of audio books favours and fosters the development of the five skills described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), namely, listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. Hence, using audio books in primary education may have a positive impact on the learners, who will not only improve their language competence but also their literary skills.

It is possible that using the CLA glossaries, combined with a regular IELTS course, could contribute to improving lower intermediate students' global level of achievement in IELTS. The glossaries probably reinforce the students' receptive skills

and increase their confidence when using productive skills, thus contributing to improving their overall level and ability to cope with IELTS. It is our task to make the necessary adjustments identified in this evaluation in order to ensure the glossaries are also the vocabulary-learning tool we intended them to be. Research has shown that word lists can be an efficient instrument of learning. After a thorough review bearing in mind all the points brought to light in this evaluation, the CLA glossaries could become useful learning tools.

A number of issues have been uncovered in this paper that could be matters of future inquiry. A question that remains unanswered is exactly which words are necessary in order to achieve a 5.0 in IELTS. How large is an IELTS 5.0 lexicon? Research of the Cambridge Learner Corpus might cast some light on this difficult issue. This paper has also questioned the taboo placed on rote and decontextualized learning by current SLA theory and communicative ELT teaching. A related issue is looking into how making the best of culturally-bound learning styles (rote learning, list learning – see Tinkham, 1989), can be beneficial to learning.

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