



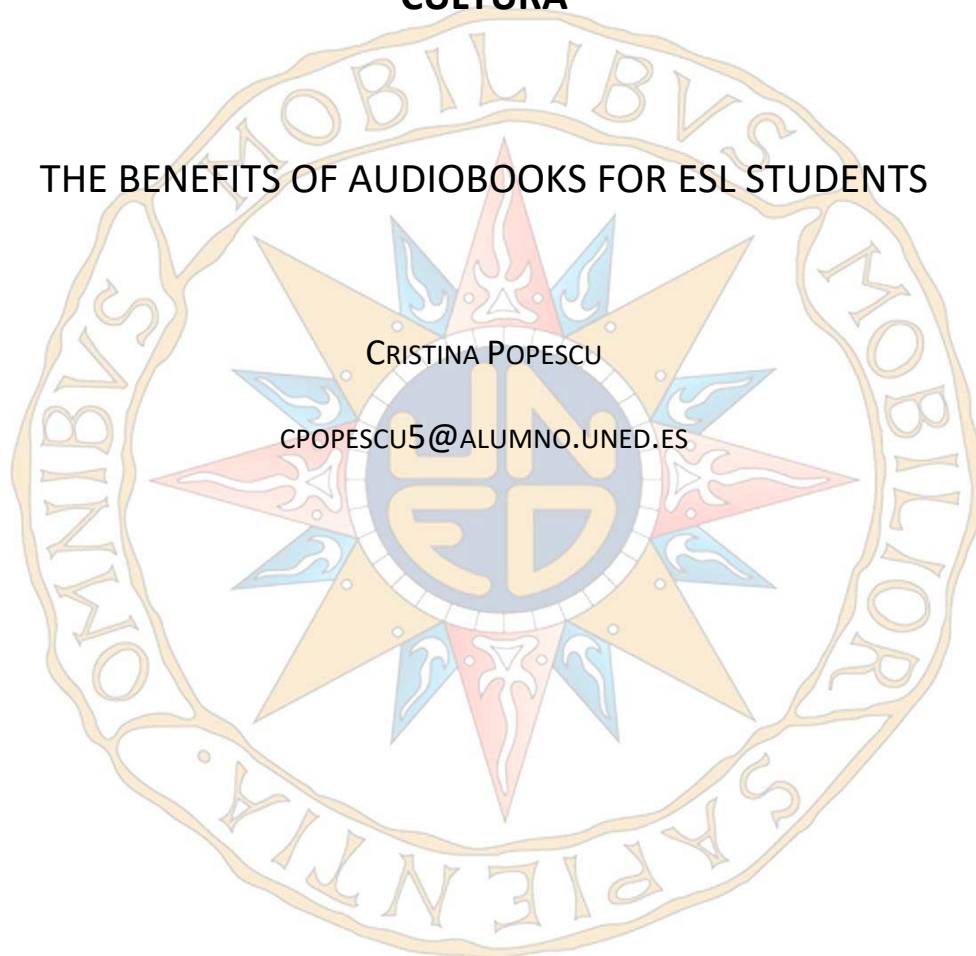
**TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO**

**GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES: LENGUA, LITERATURA Y  
CULTURA**

THE BENEFITS OF AUDIOBOOKS FOR ESL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Audiobooks have become the most popular format for reading in English and listening comprehension is one of the most important skill in the academic context. The aim of this paper is to determine the benefits of audiobooks for ESL students, if any, by reviewing the existing literature on the subject. The academic benefits of audiobooks for native English speakers determined further research on ESL students. The conclusions of various studies on ESL listeners reveal significant improvement on listening fluency, listening comprehension, critical listening, vocabulary gain, motivation, pronunciation, and literary skills. It has been proven that reading while listening brings more positive results on developing L2 skills. The frequency of listening, choosing the appropriate level of proficiency, the narration style and speed play an essential role in developing these skills. The two main platforms where to find audiobooks are LibriVox (free access) and Audible (subscription-only). The mobility and affordance of audiobooks make them an important asset inside and outside the classroom.

*Keywords:* audiobooks; listening comprehension; fluency; vocabulary gain; reading while listening.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Motivation and Academic Relevance

As an undergraduate student in an English Studies program, literature courses are mandatory, thus reading is the basic task. The volume of literary works to be read becomes overwhelming at times. For non-native English speakers, reading in English is a challenge most of the times, and the skills have been acquired by spending long hours in front of books and other printed materials, especially at school and in the library. This endeavor focuses mainly on grammar and vocabulary, and the students are forced to use other resources in order to improve their listening and speaking skills. However, learning a language also implies listening to it.

Until recent years, listening comprehension in second-language learning context happened only in classrooms, with limited, standard materials. The easy access and affordable technologies we are granted today can have a great impact on the process of L2 learning outside the formal setting, helping students of all ages and levels, at their individual pace, in the comfort of their homes.

ICT (Information and Communications Technology) has become part of our life. A simple ride in the public transportation system will expose many people listening to their MP3 players, mobile phones or tablets, especially the younger generation, born immersed in digital technologies. The Survey on the Equipment and Use of Information and Communications Technology in Homes in 2016 conducted by the INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística) reveals that 98.4 per cent of young people aged between 16 and 24 years old use the Internet, representing a 17 per cent increase compared to 2006 (Rodriguez-Gomez, Castro & Menses, 2018). In the same article, the writers outline that the use of ICT complements “more traditional approaches that tend to only focus on training processes and practices” (ibid).

In September 2019, a group of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, used MRI images to measure and analyze the brain activity of nine participants who, in separate sessions, listened to and read the same stories. The study’s report, published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, showed that “although the representation of semantic information in the human brain is quite complex,

the semantic representations evoked by listening versus reading are almost identical” (Deniz, Nunez-Elizalde, Huth & Gallant, 2019). Their results suggest that “the representation of language semantics is independent of the sensory modality through which the semantic information is received” (ibid).

Audiobooks have always been regarded as second-hand reading. Those who until now believed that listening to audiobooks is just as effective as reading printed books now have science on their side, while audiobooks begin to gain the respect they once lacked. The fact that the revenue from audiobooks grew 25.8 per cent in 2016 and continued its significant growth in 2017, increasing by 29.7 per cent (while eBooks and paperback books suffered negative figures), made me notice a new trend and opportunity of integrating a popular digital type of technology in language-learning on a massive scale.

This paper will try to answer the question: What are the benefits, if any, of integrating audiobooks into the English-learners’ routine?

## Objectives

The general objectives of this project are the following:

1. To review the existing literature on the topic of audiobooks and their influence on ESL students.
2. To present data and provide information about their impact on students’ comprehension skills.
3. To outline the most important sources of audiobooks and their efficiency (the formats, the access, the price, the interface).

## Methodology

As the aim of this paper is not to carry out a new study but to explore the already existing theoretical and pragmatic framework, the point of departure for my research was to find any reliable studies, articles in specialized journals or books (on print and digital) that could describe any possible benefits of listening to audiobooks to ESL students.

The most demanding step was selecting all the pertinent materials, developing their approach, and evaluating their relevance and importance to the topic.

As a practical contribution to this paper, a rubric was designed not only to enumerate some of the most important sources of audiobooks, but also to evaluate their efficiency in EFL learning. Following the example of Arús-Hita, et al. (2014), a template was created following the format of an analytic rubric.

### State of the Art

The impact of audiobooks on ESL students lacks a thorough investigation, most of the data being retrieved from the last twenty years, approximately. Historically, audiobooks were associated with users who were visually impaired but new research lead them to new areas of expertise. This is a topic to be dealt with in Chapter 1 of this project.

One of the first studies concerning the relationship between listening and L2 students was conducted by S. L. Chen (Chen, 2004), but without specific details on ESL students. Another two studies followed in 2011 and 2014, bringing hard evidence on the development of listening fluency through audiobooks. Ekaterina V. Talalakina brings proof on the effect of audiobooks on academic development, and two professors from Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey, studied the impact on EFL students' listening comprehension. These studies, and many others, will be further developed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 is more practical, as I compare the most important sources, formats and prices of audiobooks using an in-house created rubric to facilitate the evaluation process when choosing one app over the other.

I conclude by acknowledging the success of the research, as there is enough proof that there are numerous benefits of listening to audiobooks to improve ESL students' skills, offering tips that can help improve the language proficiency.

# CHAPTER I: The Academic Benefits of Audiobooks for Students

## I. 1. Defining audiobook

It is crucial to differentiate between a-books (audiobooks) and e-books (electronic books), as audiobooks are electronic books, thus they constitute a sub-category of the main category, the e-book.

In most dictionaries, an audiobook (with the alternative British spelling “audio book”) is defined as a “recording of a book or magazine being read aloud” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online edition) and Collins English Dictionary (online edition) adds the format: “on tape, CD, or digital formats”.

In colloquial language, it is more natural to say “I listen to an audiobook” than “I read an audiobook”. Thus, we should not consider audiobooks as merely readings of the printed books but a whole new different experience, through a very distinct medium, in relation to listening practices.

## I. 2. Technological development of the audiobook

The audiobook is not a new phenomenon. Audiobooks are a fusion between the oral tradition of storytelling and the emerging technologies. When Edison developed the phonograph in 1877, he actually returned the book to its oral tradition of storytelling that had already happened before the invention of the printing press in 1455. Even if the phonograph was originally invented for recording speech, its primary use was for music.

The technological development of the audiobook began after the Second World War, with the reel-to-reel technique, continued through the 1970s with the introduction of cassettes which, by the 1980s, got replaced by the digital compact disc and in 1995, Audible offered audiobooks for download on personal computers. In 2002 audiobooks were made available for download from the Internet (Have, Pedersen, 2012). In the same article, the two authors use Rubery’s example: “Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* once required 119 records, 45



cassettes, or 50 compact discs (Rubery, 2011, p.9), today's MP3 file has made the audiobook weightless".

From a political point of view, the National Library Service for Blind and Physically Handicapped began offering "talking books" recorded on vinyl records in 1932 and, one year later, the American Congress passed an amendment that allowed the Library of Congress to produce audiobooks. In 1986, the Audio Publishers Association (APA) was organized and it approved "audiobook" as the term to be used for recorded books (Chen, 2004). Soon after, publishing houses like Random House and Warner Publishing created audio publishing divisions.

In their annual report from 2016, APA found that sales from audiobooks totaled \$2.1 billion (an 18.2 percent increase from the previous year), compared to \$1.8 billion of printed books sold.

### I. 3. The audiobook experience

The audiobook aims at creating a new experience where "an oral modality is matched with a listening activity that takes place in a singular situation and frames the reading experience" (Have, Pedersen, 2012).

In their 2012 study, the researchers presented Elleström's four modalities of conceptualizing media, applied to audiobooks:

As a material modality, listening to a digital audiobook involves sound waves that consist of technologically mediated orality. The sensorial modality involves hearing as well as the possible tactile experience of the earphones and an interface, but it also involves a perhaps moving body and sight that act independently of the reading situation. The spatiotemporal negotiation makes the audiobook experience extremely complex. The cognitive process by which one absorbs the story and plot is, in principle, identical to the reading of a printed book, but the imagined fictitious space is constantly, via sensorial inputs, challenged by a real physical space which one's eyes and body move through.

The audiobook experience can be lived in almost the same settings as the printed book, but it also favors additional ones, as the body and sight are mobile during the process: while cooking, doing housework, commuting, running, driving, etc. Thus, we can affirm that audiobooks are not used only for the literary experience, but also for entertainment, for feeling a human presence and more

often for learning or practicing a new language, topic which I will be dealing with in the next chapter.

In order to fully understand the experience of audiobook listening and how it affects our cognitive response, allow me to explain four distinct movements presented by Wittkower (2011).

First, the audiobook is audible and auditory. This means that the listener understands the meaning of a sentence as the phonemes are heard and replaced by others in a sequence. For example, the subject of a sentence can be acknowledged as such only in the presence of the not-yet-pronounced predicate which it, that is the subject, implies will follow. The construction of the meaning is possible by active contextualization: the spoken word is heard as a series of related points which bring further meaning to earlier components.

Second, the audiobook is spoken. The relevance of the words is not communicated only through grammatical roles, but also through “occult actions of punctuation marks... timed pauses and changes in tone” (Wittkower, 2011, p. 221): the commas are used to compensate for the modifying or explanatory clauses, the colon indicates content, some words are emphasized through volume, parentheticals are uttered at half voice. The pause also plays a significant role in the construction of meaning: it can function as a grammatical marker, it creates expectation, and the large one, especially at the end of paragraphs or sections, serves as the signal for completion of large set of meanings.

Thus far, “listening to an audiobook requires a listening which binds together past, present, and future in an active construction of meaning” (Wittkower, 2011, p. 225). But listening to an audiobook is not the same as listening to a person speak face to face. It is rather a performance of the written word, where meaning is revealed through its intonation and modulation.

The second movement implies a third one: the audiobook has a speaker. The experience depends on the listener as well as the performer. Professional audiobook narrators are used in order to limit listener’s focus on the formal aspects of the reading and keep it on the content. Authors who are narrating their own works are trained in a neutral or appropriate accent, for a global

understanding. For example, LibriVox, a website with free audiobook recordings in various languages, uses voluntaries—anybody with any kind of voice or accent can record any public-domain work. The voice itself can be used to represent and enhance the content, or it may be transparent, allowing the listener to focus only on the content. But it may also disrupt the experience, as might be the case of a poor quality recording or of a vocal characteristic that obstructs the content (for example, using a female voice to utter a misogynist message of a male author might obstruct the focus on the message).

The fourth characteristic aspect of the audiobook experience is the fact that the audiobook is started, stopped, and restarted. It is the listener who initiates the process of listening, keeping in mind and planning the physical and social context that may overlap the experience. Thus, “the audiobook *forms* a context for physical and social experience rather than being experienced *within* a physical and social context” (Wittkower, 2011, p. 228).

“The interaction between form and content applies to physical and social contexts of listening as well” (Wittkower, 2011, p. 227). In a practical sense, there is a difference in the experience of listening to a Shakespeare’s sonnet while hiking in the woods, being stuck in traffic or commuting in a crowded bus.

Wittkower (2011) introduces a fifth movement which states that the audiobook forms a context of physical and social experience. The social environment alters its perception on the listener, as he is in some kind of disconnection with it.

It is crucial to analyze the listening experience through these five aspects as the audiobook can reach us only if we prepare the experience and the context in which it occurs, as it is neither isolated nor exclusive.

#### 1.4. The general academic benefits of audiobooks

Listening is the language modality most used in communication. The studies show that 40-50% of the adult communication time is spent listening and only 11-16% reading. They also reveal that students receive their in-school information

through listening as about 90% (Gilman, Moody, 1984). Thus, listening comprehension plays a significant role in the academic context. The better a student understands what he is told, the better his level of knowledge and communication.

Rost defines listening as “a process of receiving what the speaker actually says, constructing and representing meaning, negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding, and creating meaning, and creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy” (Romanova, 2017). He also points out that the listener must have a background knowledge in order for the process to be successful.

Two different processes that are involved in listening must be differentiated. They are called bottom-up and top-down processing. The latter refers to the background knowledge that is required to understand the meaning of the message. It is also called world knowledge. The bottom-up processing refers to the incoming input as the basis for decoding the spoken message. It may be also known as linguistic knowledge. Thus, the interaction between the two types of processes creates the sense of the spoken input. For example, it is possible to understand the meaning of a word or phrase before decoding its sound just by the different types of knowledge the receiver has, including the one of the world. This is very important especially for receivers learning a new language but have a less linguistic knowledge. They depend on their skill to use all the top-down processing in order to interpret what they hear.

As mentioned above, audiobooks function on the same principle. Before being used as essential methodology strategies for second-language learners, they were used in classrooms for students who had difficulties with comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, fluency or motivation in reading. They were also used for extreme cases like students visually impaired or with disabilities.

#### 1.4.a. Influence of audiobooks on reading skills and vocabulary gain

Reading difficulties usually arise from difficult texts for students: long and complex syntax, books of hundreds of pages, formal vocabulary or with complicated context. It was noticed that usually first or second graders are not able to read a book written for the fifth or sixth grade level, but they have the ability to comprehend the same book when it is read to them. Unlike reading, when listening to audiobooks, children are not focused on pronunciation, difficult words or interpreting the text, but they are demanded intellectually and forced to pay attention to the text.

In a preliminary study, Chen (2004) discusses the benefits of audiobooks, and she finds them a useful tool especially for the poor, reluctant or struggling students. “As children listen to an audiobook and read along with the text, they are exposed not only to new vocabulary, but also begin to make association between the physical form of words and the sound of words that exist so far only in their listening vocabulary. Moreover... [they] can emulate accurate pronunciation, fluent reading with emotion, and expression” (Chen, 2004).

As seen above, listening to audiobooks is not a passive mental activity. Students need to make an effort and pay close attention to the speaker, so they could not miss crucial parts of the story: the setting, characters, conflict, and the developing plot. In this sense, audiobooks are an efficient tool during the transition period of the students until they reach the required proficiency. Children’s attention can be directed to look for specific information while listening: geographic names, language patterns, rhyme or repetition in the text.

A more recent study was conducted by Knutson (2019) in which he presented Scarborough’s Reading Rope Theory as a metaphor for the complexity of reading comprehension and the use of audiobooks in classroom. According to Scarborough, there are two major components that comprise reading comprehension: language comprehension (includes reader’s background knowledge, vocabulary, language structure, verbal reasoning, and literary knowledge) and word recognition (includes phonological awareness, decoding,

and sight-word recognition). If any of the two threads is weak, the comprehension is affected.

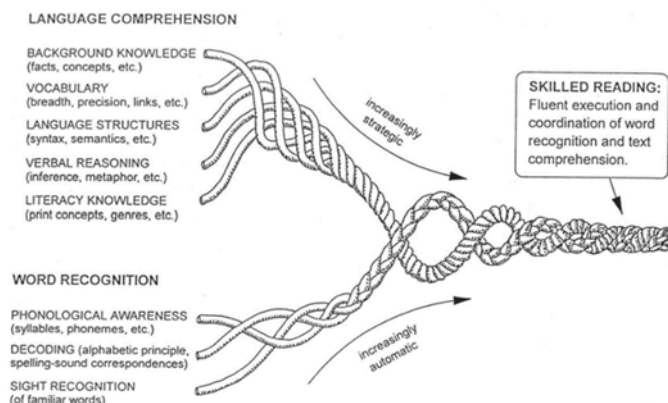


Figure 1. Illustration of the many strands that are woven together in skilled reading (Scarborough, 2001).

Audiobooks serve as a scaffold in such situations. Research showed that when struggling readers were given access to audiobooks in after-school activities, reading proficiency has improved and many students showed a positive shift in their attitude towards reading (Wittingham et al., 2013). Both their grades and volume of reading improved. This has a very significant importance for teachers as audiobooks may be a crucial tool to strengthen both threads of reading: language comprehension and vocabulary gain (Scarborough, 2001).

Another essential component of successful reading is fluency. Generally speaking, fluency refers to three components: accuracy, speed, and fluidity (Chen, 2011). Regarding reading, fluency has been considered “the ability to read text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly and automatically with little attention to the mechanisms of reading such as decoding” (Meyer, 1999, cited by Chang, 2011). Besides these, prosody is also important as this is how the reader articulates the meaning of the text. Its elements include tone, expression and intonation (Knutson, 2019). If any of these components is broken, comprehension delays may occur as too much attention is paid to word recognition can decrease brain’s activity to construct meaning. “Audiobooks can support readers’ fluency by freeing up brain capacity for students who struggle with automatic and prosody, increasing their potential to make meaning with print” (Knutson, 2019). They also help the students by allowing them to adjust the reading speed. The students’ prosody is also improved as the audiobooks are usually narrated by trained professionals, offering an exemplary model of voice, tone and intonation.

#### I.4.b. Influence of audiobooks on readers' motivation

There is evidence that suggest that audiobooks can support readers' engagement and motivation in several ways. For example, in one study cited by Knutson (2019), struggling readers were provided audiobooks of the same literature that their colleagues were reading, and the results revealed that engagement increased as learners were reading more and exerted more effort that before being offered audiobooks. Moreover, participants developed positive attitudes towards the act of reading and their abilities as readers. They felt more competent and autonomous in the reading process.

Knutson also carried out his own study on a small group of seventh-grade students during a summer school reading remediation class (Wisconsin, USA). Students were transitioned into independent reading through mini-sessions of 15 to 25 minutes. They were taught how to bookmark, pause, rewind, and change the speed of the narration, so they can adapt it to their needs. Considerable evidence from this study revealed that when granted access to audiobooks, students' perceptions toward reading and motivation to read improved, they stayed engaged throughout the process (the professional narration seemed to help them understand the emotions and the plot, blocking the outside stimuli), they showed improved perceptions of their comprehension (overcoming fluency and vocabulary deficits); however, the findings suggested that students did not change their negative perceptions toward written work or discussing the book with their colleagues (they were not motivated to write or discuss about what they listened).

The use of audiobooks in academic settings is rapidly increasing. More and more libraries are incorporating them into their catalogues, as any other type of material. In a 2007 article, Cardillo et al. have noted "one additional benefit: parents and other family members are listening in as well". They also hinted that audiobooks can help students who are struggling to learn English as their second language.

If audiobooks are able to benefit students in their native language, their impact is even greater for students who are learning English as a second

language, regardless of their age, gender, education or cultural background. The following chapter will explore more this topic.

## CHAPTER II: The Influence of Audiobooks on ESL students

### II. 1. Influence on listening fluency

Anna C-S. Chang is one of the most prolific researchers in the field of L2 learning. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and, as of 2014, she is a Professor in the Applied English Department at Hsing-Wu University, Taipei, Taiwan. Her main research interests are focused on listening and reading development, and vocabulary learning.

One of her first studies (Chang, 2008) is based on the concept that “aural-written verification helps L2 learners develop discrimination skills, refine word recognition and gain awareness of form-meaning relationship”. She compares two modes of aural input: reading while listening (R/L) and listening only (L/O).

The departure point of her study was another study conducted by Stewart and Pertusa (2004) who argued that watching movies in L2, but with L1 subtitles, did not encourage students to use their listening skills. The listeners relied on their L1 reading skills than putting an extra effort into comprehending L2. However, the students gained more vocabulary when the captions were in L2.

This study proved Chang (2008) that L2 listeners need additional support when processing auditory input. She wanted to understand the differences, if any, of reading while listening and listening only. As reading while listening has been proven beneficial to L2 learners’ listening comprehension, she conducted a year-long experiment on 92 low-intermediate college students, aged 18-19 years old, with languages proficiencies between A2 and B1 in the Common European Framework. They were divided in two groups: high and low listening proficiency levels. Two stories of Methold K. were chosen for the listening texts: *This Year’s*



*Color* (1455 words) and *The Shoplifter* (1501 words), recorded in standard English with American accents.

The overall comprehension rate was 72% for the R/L mode and 62% for L/O mode, so the overall gain was of 10%. 51% of the high level proficiency (HLP) students and 61% of the low proficiency level (LLP) students strongly agreed that the R/L mode helped them understand better. Almost 80% of all students paid full attention when listening with R/L mode. 78% of HLP and 69% of LLP students endorsed and strongly endorsed that concurrent listening and reading of stories was great fun. It is not surprising that students scored higher with the R/L mode as they could check their aural input with the written text. However, the study showed that R/L has many limitations that interfere with comprehension: students can not follow the rapid speech rate and they may not be able to read as fast as the speech pace. R/L mode implies two skills and, unless the student has the same proficiency in both, the gains are very limited. Even so, all students, regardless of their level, felt that stories in R/L mode were more interesting, seemed shorter and easier, helped them concentrate and comprehend better.

Another observation of the study is that HLP students performed significantly better in L/O tasks than the LLP ones, who had very poor results. The gains in this mode imply that “higher level students paid more attention to language use and it is also possible they used bottom-up processing and so acquired more language elements” (Chang, 2008).

Following the general research from 2008, Chang (2011) conducted a more specific study focused on the effect of audiobooks on listening fluency and vocabulary gain. It involved 7 Taiwanese students, aged from 15 to 16 years old, who received reading while listening (RWL) teaching throughout a two-semester period. The study materials were mainly CDs from Oxford Bookworms, Macmillan, and Cambridge, with an average of one book each week. The rest of the students received standard listening-only teaching.

The results were impressive: the RWL outperformed the control group (the rest of the students), but on the dictation task the listening score increased more than 100%. This gap shows that RWL must have a large effect on improving listening fluency. Chang suggests that “the key to the success of the RWL group

thus can be attributed to the large quantity of aural input and the support of the written form” (2011, p. 53). The differences in vocabulary gain were not so significant, although the amount of words gained by the RWL group can be considered substantial. Chang concluded that students focused on developing their listening fluency, and the vocabulary gain “can be considered a by-product of reading while listening” (2011, p. 54).

Another observation from Chang’s study is that “students’ input quantity increased by 81% in the second semester” (p.58), implying that their interest in audiobooks and motivation increased. Chang also mentions one reason why students do not use more often listening materials to develop listening competence: the cost of purchasing CDs and books. But audiobooks can easily solve this problem, as there are various free websites and apps (which will be mentioned in Chapter 3).

In 2014, Chang continued her research (alongside professor Sonia Millett from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) with another important study on the effect of extensive listening<sup>1</sup> (EL) on developing L2 listening fluency. The 113 participants were university students with a low-intermediate level of English, divided in three groups with different input mode: reading only (RO), reading while listening (RL) and listening only (LO). The study included a 100-minute reading course and a 100-minute listening course each week. Ten books (Level I) of graded readers from the Oxford Bookworms were the used as study materials. As predicted by previous studies, the results showed that “the use of simultaneous reading and listening before focusing on listening only is the most effective approach in improving L2 listening fluency. Among the three groups, the comprehension results of the RL group were the most consistent and significant”. (Chang and Millett, 2014, p. 37).

Furthermore, the result of the current study revealed that “abundant input and consistent practice are essential to improving listening fluency” (ibid.). The authors suggested that teachers should carefully plan the program, and monitor their students both in class and outside the class. They also make some

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<sup>1</sup> Extensive listening refers to listening (for pleasure) easy, enjoyable and comprehensible materials like audiobooks, radio and TV programs, songs, etc.

recommendations: a reasonable amount of practice should be done for the learners' fluency to develop, a combination of reading and listening skills enhances their confidence, and the study materials should be interesting and adapt their competence.

In section II.6. of this chapter I will reevaluate the benefits of EL on teachers.

## II. 2. Influence on listening comprehension

Galip Kartal and Harun Simsek (2017), from Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey, carried out a study that focused on the effects of audiobooks on the learners' listening comprehension skill while learning English as a second language. The 66 participants, age-ranged from 18 to 22, are first-year students of an undergraduate degree in English Teacher Education. In order to identify the effectiveness of audiobooks on the students' listening comprehension, the researchers used two unabridged audiobooks narrated by native speakers: *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck and *The Call of the Wind* by Jack London. The study lasted 13 weeks. The students were divided into two equal groups: the participants from experimental group, unlike the ones from the control group who only read the print version of the books, listened and read the books simultaneously.

The post-test score of the experimental group is significantly higher than the score of the control group. Hence, the researchers confirm that the use of audiobooks significantly increased the listening comprehension skills of the participants.

The most interesting aspect of this study is the quantitative input of the students: almost all admitted that audiobooks improved their reading and listening comprehension skills. A significant majority has reflected a positive attitude, conforming improving pronunciation, reading comprehension skills and motivation.

However, there were two students who did not enjoy them: one admits they improved his skills, but he found them boring, as he is not good at listening to people in real life either; the second one complained about their length and could not see any effect in a short time.

Another study on developing listening comprehension among ESL students was conducted by Manal Mohamed Khodary Mohamed (2018) at Northern Borden University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While teaching an English course to EFL preparatory year students, she noticed that most of her students had weaknesses in listening comprehension: her students had difficulties in understanding the information they listened on the radio, TV or watching an English film. Other instructors from the same university complained about the same inability of their students.

Before undergoing the actual study, the researcher interviewed 19 students on the causes of their poor listening skills. They pointed out that their weakness in listening comprehension could be the result of either unfavorable strategies of teaching this skill or simply the lack of any. She subsequently interviewed 5 EFL instructors who indicated that, although their students were exposed to spoken English material of various types, they failed to understand most of the information, and that no effective listening strategies were put in place in order to help them develop this skill. Thus, her study has a double significance: (1) to explore the usefulness of audiobooks on enhancing EFL students' listening comprehension skills, and (2) to present the instructors with an effective tool in teaching listening to EFL students.

Mohamed Khodary (2018) used 88 Saudi female students (18 to 22 years old) with similar linguistic background and without audiobooks experience, divided into two groups: an experimental group, where participants individually listened and repeated listening to a text, followed by a silent reading, and a control group, where the participants, unlike the one from the experimental group, only listened and repeated listening, without having access to the printed text. Furthermore, the participants from the experimental groups were given a CD so they can listen to the text outside the classroom. The control group could only listen to it on the computers in the classroom. The audiobooks were selected from the Internet:

short stories from *Half-Past Seven Stories* by Robert Gordon Anderson, narrated by native American speakers at a normal and understandable speed.

The results showed that the use of audiobooks “significantly improved listening comprehension among the experimental group” (Mohamed Khodary, 2018). The researcher suggested some reasons why the audiobooks implemented in the study developed learners’ listening comprehension skills:

- The audiobook gave the natural tone of language, it was delivered by a native speaker and hence it provided the students with a real language to deal with;
- The audiobook made “a perfect environment for them to listen and read at the same time” (ibid), offering the students the opportunity to practice various skills;
- “Some audiobooks have the merit of using both female and male narrators, music, and sound effects in order to add to the realism of the text” (ibid);
- Audiobook are easy to access by students and teachers, and some of them are provided with a PDF file or other printable versions;
- Students found them very enjoyable and helpful, motivating them to practice more in out of classroom activities.

This study caught my attention because it was the only one I found that was addressed to both students and teachers, and that included some recommendations on how audiobooks should be applied in classroom listening lessons and home assignments. Please find some suggestions below:

- Teachers should be trained on the use of audiobooks in teaching listening comprehension;
- Curriculum developers should enclose them in the planning;
- Audiobooks should be made available in all libraries (for the use of both students and teachers);
- Teachers should implement assignments based on audiobooks.

## II. 3. Influence on developing critical listening

In an era of abundance of ICT, educators from all over the world seek to introduce them in language learning, both in classroom and outside. Ekaterina V. Talalakina is one of them. Actually, at the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of International Conference “ICT for Language Learning”, held in 2012, she presented a study she conducted on Russian students learning English at National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. She considers listening a unique challenge, unlike reading, speaking and writing, which can be trained without technology. She addresses two skills that training listening aims at: comprehension and critical listening. While comprehension is essential at elementary stages of language learning (referring to Chastain, 1979, who considers comprehension as a base for more specialized processes like discriminating between sound and intonation patterns, perceiving oral message, its processing and final understanding), critical listening is crucial in advanced ESL classrooms. Regarding the later, Talalakina cites Way (1973) who believes critical thinking to be “characterized by more intensive focus on what is being said, but the purpose is to detect fallacies in the presentation of a theme” (Way, 1973, p. 474, cited in Talalakina, 2012). Thus, critical listening is a skill that goes beyond comprehension, into a deeper cognitive understanding.

Considering these aspects essential in training listening skills, Talalakina (2012) suggests three advantages of audiobooks in critical listening:

(1) Authenticity. Audiobooks provide material which is not recorded only for native speakers; non-native ones can practice listening to lectures from all realms, by a variety of speakers, accents, dialects, etc.

(2) Eliminated medium factors. Medium factors (ungrammatical forms, pausing, speech errors, reduced forms, rhythm, stress, etc.) are characteristic of the oral discourse and they usually pose difficulties for non-native listeners. Audiobooks eliminate them, as audiobooks are reproduced from script-based materials.

(3) Transparent structure. Generally speaking, audiobooks contain elements of academic writing, structured ideas and explicit outline. Thus, they ease the

comprehension and allow the development of more complex cognitive processes, such as critical listening.

Talalakina's research was conducted on a group of sixty ESL university students (sophomore undergraduates with high-intermediate and advanced-low levels of English proficiency), divided in two groups: thirty in the experimental group and thirty in control group. She chose eight extracts from *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* by Barak Obama (2006), which were listened during one semester. The results revealed that "the use of audiobooks in ESL classroom contributed to overall academic listening proficiency with average indicator of a 23% increase, while [...] the results of the experimental group on average exceed the results of the control group by 12%" (Talalakina, 2012). Her observations also concluded that "the use of audiobooks increased learners' motivation for self-study since learners expressed enthusiasm and excitement about innovative listening assignments and wished to continue listening to audiobooks as out-of-classroom non-credit activity" (ibid). Furthermore, the study showed "positive students' feedback in terms of reducing their anxiety while being exposed to authentic listening pieces, which can be attributed to eliminated medium factors and transparent structure" (ibid).

In her study, Talalakina sheds light on the indisputable urgency of technologies as training material for ESL students, especially the advanced ones.

## II. 4. Influence on vocabulary gain

Traditionally, reading is considered to be the most efficient source for the acquisition of new vocabulary and the majority of the studies have focused their research on this field. One of the first thorough researched carried out was a PhD thesis conducted by Hilde van Zeeland in 2014 at the University of Nottingham, UK: "Four Studies on Vocabulary Knowledge in and from Listening: Findings and Implications for Future Research". It was awarded with the "Christopher Brumfit Thesis Award" the same year. In an article published in *Language Teaching* (2017), she summarizes two areas of her vocabulary research: *spoken vocabulary knowledge* (vocabulary *in* listening) and *vocabulary acquisition*

*through spoken input* (vocabulary from listening), discussing her findings from 4 studies. All participants are high-proficiency learners of English, enrolled in MA or PhD courses at a British university. Van Zeeland warns against the comparison with students of lower proficiency, as it is a question for further research.

In the above-mentioned article, Van Zeeland (2014) arises two problems: (1) there are no sufficient studies to directly assess learners' spoken versus written vocabulary knowledge (questioning the accuracy of the test formats), and (2) to what extent the isolated words are recognized in the listening context (referring to researchers like Vandergrift, 2007), discussed in the second and in the first study, respectively.

The first study conducted in her thesis (van Zeeland, 2017) focused on "how learners' knowledge of isolated word forms (in a meaning recall interview) predicted their knowledge of these same words in reading and listening". It revealed that the learners could understand them more often in reading than in listening, if they knew its meaning in isolation.

The second study assessed "the relationship between learners' written and spoken vocabulary knowledge [...] as well as the difference between their knowledge of spoken words in isolation and in short sentence context". It showed a small advantage of the written over the spoken word knowledge and, in the spoken mode, learners failed to recognize a known word when placed in a sentence (in 16.8% of the cases). This conclusion widens the "gap between knowledge and recognition in the spoken mode", thus the spoken vocabulary tests are likely to overestimate learners' knowledge, especially in the spoken mode.

According to van Zeeland (2017), another area of interest, but which has received less attention, is the enhancement of vocabulary knowledge, especially the area of lexical inferencing and the one of incidental vocabulary acquisition. The issue she acknowledges is that all the studies involved reading. She identified three main variables that affect a successful vocabulary inferencing:

(1) background knowledge (as referred in Pulido, 2007)—the more the learner is familiar with a topic, the more successful the lexical interference may be;



(2) contextual clue types (as referred in Qian, 2005) —the “local clues” in the sentence bring a more efficient inferencing than the “global clues” scattered throughout the text;

(3) L2 vocabulary size (as referred in Wesche & Paribakht, 2010) —the more words the learner has a command of, the more successful the inferencing is.

Study 3 in her thesis (van Zeeland, 2017) assessed how the three variables affected the lexical inferencing and if L2 listeners could identify unknown vocabulary in listening (the author used pseudowords for this test). The study revealed lexical inferencing success rates of almost 60% by the native listeners and of 35.6% by the non-native ones. Both categories revealed that “inferences were more successful if listeners could use local (vs global) cues, had high (vs low) background knowledge, and had a large (vs small) vocabulary size”. The study also showed that L2 listeners failed to identify less than half of the pseudowords (44.2% recognition rate). The author concludes that the lexical inferencing can be seriously affected by the limited lexical recognition skills.

Incidental vocabulary acquisition (how often a word needs to be read/listen) has also been explored mainly in reading. The last study, Study 4 (van Zeeland, 2017), focused on three aspects: form recognition, grammar recognition, and meaning recall. Its results showed that:

- (1) listening led primarily to participants’ ability to recognize word forms;
- (2) word meaning was more difficult to acquire;
- (3) there is no clear relationship between learners’ acquisition of the target words and their frequency of occurrence in the input (3 to 15 times);
- (4) any frequency effects had disappeared after two weeks.

Van Zeeland (2017) suggested that, “for listening to lead to durable learning, more than 15 occurrences of words are needed”.

Van Zeeland’s conclusions at the end of her article from 2017 are impressive and she also offers some suggestions for both teachers and researchers, especially regarding the selection of the materials:

Learners are more likely to infer (and likely also acquire) new word meaning if they can rely on background knowledge as a resource, and if the text contains sufficient local clues. [...] lexical inferencing might be a more appropriate learning strategy once learners have achieved a certain level of proficiency. [...] Listening may be more appropriate for strengthening partial knowledge rather than for establishing new knowledge. Perhaps it is best to teach or learn new word meaning explicitly, and use listening to gain deeper knowledge of words, such as nuances in meaning, collocations, and word frequency.

Applying this exhaustive research to my field of study, I may dare to say that audiobooks do not have a significant impact on English learners, but their specific features may help:

- the listeners may repeat certain passages as many times as they need;
- the listeners may choose to have a printed copy or a digital version of the book where they can check the spelling;
- the listeners can autocorrect their understanding of the new words;
- the listeners can improve their vocabulary size;
- the listeners can listen the tone, intonation and pace of the narrator, thus be able to identify irony, metaphors, hidden meanings, and others.
- 

## II. 5. Influence on literary skills

Dr. María Alcantud-Díaz and Dr. Carmen Gregori-Signes from the Universitat de València, Spain, published an article in 2014 supporting the use of audiobooks in the Spanish context, a system in which audiobooks are not a very popular tool for English learning, both in classroom and outside of it. They argue that audiobooks

fulfill the requisites of life-long learning stated by the European Framework of Reference for language learning given that they 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.

The two authors consider audiobooks as a way to promote literary texts, emphasizing "the importance of reading aloud to children in the development of emerging literacy" (Noland, 2011, cited in Alcantud and Gregori, 2014). They also cite another study (Wilde and Larson, 2007) that explains the benefits of audiobooks for children according to different age ranges:

- 4-7 years old: the exposure to various speech patterns increases their oral fluency;

- 8-12 years old: audiobooks give them more time to read, thus increasing the number of books they read. Moreover, audiobooks present them multicultural stories which will widen their world knowledge (one of the two essential elements of word recognition and vocabulary gain).
- 12 years old and up: new technologies make reading very appealing to them. At this stage, audiobooks stimulate their imagination and creativity, improving their oral expression and writing skills.

The results of these researches determined them to create *two projects* as part of a larger educational project, TALIS (Teaching and Acquisition of Intercultural and Solidarity Competences through Linguistics and Literature):

1. *Tales of the World* (Alcantud, 2012): 40 multicultural and solidarity tales (free-downloadable audiobooks), published in a six-volume collection, recorded by British Erasmus students (in English). All the fund raised were donated to another project of combating AIDS among children and teenagers in Haiti.

2. *The Power of Tales: Building a Fairer World* (Alcantud, 2013): a selection of 15 tales against violence, also recorded by volunteer British Erasmus students. The online didactic units of the project represented the foundation for a national educational innovation project named *Ahora Toca...*, helping in the fight against poverty.

The creators of the two projects (Alcantud and Gregori, 2014) revealed the reasons for recording these audiobooks: firstly, because they wanted everybody to have access to their tales (visually impaired, those with reading difficulties such dyslexia) and they considered audiobooks the best available format; secondly, because English pronunciation is one of the most challenging task learners in Spain have to deal with and, according to their experience as teachers for over 20 years, they consider audiobooks “the most effective tool to help them to accomplish this challenge”.

## II. 6. Influence on EFL teachers' proficiency through Extensive Listening (EL)

A very recent study (published in July 2019), conducted by two teachers from Indonesia (Kukuh Dwi Pamuji and Rob Waring) and another one from Japan (Eri Kurniawan), put the EFL teachers in the spotlight and analyzed their personal experiences with spoken texts. The three researchers investigated how extensive listening (EL) activities contribute to successful acquisition of L2 for those who are not formally learning it (inside a classroom). They based their study on the ten principles of extensive reading by Day and Bamford (2002) and applied them to EL. Briefly, the listening materials should be easy to comprehend, within the students' linguistic ability, of their choice, from a variety of topics and having the teacher as their "model" and person who keep them on track.

The study initially was based on the participation of 27 English teachers from all over the world, 25 of whom confirmed they had done EL and enjoyed it. After multiple follow-up interviews, two teachers were selected to participate in the actual research.

Teacher A has been teaching English for more than 30 years and has practiced EL since elementary school. As she did not have a partner to practice her English, she developed her proficiency through listening and watching English materials. Her long experience of EL contributes significantly to her current profession, as she still practices it today, on a daily basis, for 4-5 hours.

Teacher B, an English-native speaker, describes his experience of EL when he learned Japanese as L2. He started interacting with Japanese audio materials when his vocabulary had grown, and he listened materials according to his level of proficiency. He found the materials interesting and enjoyable. He used to listen to many audiobooks while he was driving to his office, but he does not do it anymore as his current office is very close to his home. Currently, he listens to Japanese materials when he has some free time, sometimes a few minutes after work or while preparing dinner.

According to the testimonies the two teachers presented in the study, EL contributed a lot to Teacher's A proficiency (developed her vocabulary, listening

skills, comprehension skills, writing skills, made her more confident in L2 usage), as she considers consistency and daily use as crucial, while Teacher B admits that vocabulary acquisition was his main gain, being able to recognize various dialects and aspects.

The three researchers concluded that “the benefits from EL do not appear instantly, but after some considerable amount of time [...] Once we become addicted and do it regularly, our L2 proficiency will grow effectively without much conscious awareness” (Pamuji et al., 2019).

## CHAPTER III: An Evaluation of the Main Audiobooks Sources

The impressive growth the digital audiobook category has experienced over the years changed the way both publishers, readers and learners view this sector. In 2012, audiobook annual publication increases 125% from 7,200 to 16,309 units (see Annex II). According to Audio Publishers Association (APA), the titles produced between 2014 and 2018 almost doubled. 95.4% of all audiobooks sold in 2018 were on digital format.

Fiction books had more sales than the non-fiction ones (67.3% of the sales units were fiction), and 90.5% of the books were for adults. Most of audiobook consumers listen in their car (74%), 68% listen at home; 55% of all audiobooks listeners are under the age of 45, and 51% of frequent users are between 18-44 (APA).

As of April 2019, a new survey published by APA showed that 50% of Americans have listened to an audiobook. They explain that growth can be partly attributed to in-dash information and entertainment systems in their cars. The APA annual consumer research study also revealed that 40% of audiobooks listeners agree that audiobooks help them read more books, as their format speed them the reading progress. “This new data continues the positive trend we’ve seen the last few years. Audiobooks are becoming mainstream, and most of the growth is coming from people using technology to find time in their day to

consume more books”, said Chris Lynch, Co-Chair of the APA’s Research Committee in the final 2019 APA press release.

### III.1 Audiobooks formats

Mobility is an important characteristic of the digital audiobook and the file format (usually the MP3) has a key role in its flexibility and mobility. Have & Stougaard (2013) discuss Sterne’s (2006) study on MP3s and their qualities of sound that the human ear is unable to hear: “MP3s are designed to be heard via headphones while outdoors, in a noisy dorm room, in an office with a loud computer fan, in the background as other activities are taking place and through low-fi and mid-fi computer speakers. They are meant for casual listening” (Sterne, 2006, cited in Have & Stougaard, 2013). Thus, the quality of the file contributes to the reading experience.

MP3 files are exported from WAV files. WAV files are uncompressed files that store all the nuances of the recording that is afterwards used for mastering by the audio engineer. The MP3 files are smaller, thus more portable. This format allowed thousands of audio files on our smart devices and they were fundamental for the growth of audiobooks. MP4 files are similar to MP3, but they are smaller and often used by iTunes.

Audible uses only two formats for download: Format 4 (.aa), with the quality of MP3 sound, mono channel, and Audible Enhanced Audio (.aax, encrypted M4B) that provides AAC sound, mono or stereo.

### III.2 Narrators and speed

The voice plays a significant role in the audiobook experience, as already seen in Chapter I. The narration of the audiobook is met by

a different rhetorical strategy since that which is narrated is mediated or performed by a narrator in a verbal physical performance. [...] The listener is thus assigned the intonation, tempo, and phrasing of the narrator in a very concrete way. [...] It is relevant to discuss *how* the voice performs: that is, to consider materiality or grain (Barthes, 1988), tone, *ambitus*, dialect and diction; the use of glottal stops, style, and intensity; and tempo,

pauses and timing. [...] The narrator's style is crucial to an audiobook's success, to the extent that many audiobook readers look for their favourite narrator before they look for their favourite author when searching for a new audiobook (Have & Stougaard 2013, p. 135).

Is there such thing as speed listening? Indeed. The average English-native adult reads about 250 words per minute (WPM), but he/she reads only 150 WPM. So, at 2x speed an adult can actually listen faster than reading the text version ("What's the Deal with Audiobook?", EBSCO blog online, July 31, 2017). Adjusting the pace according to the listeners' level of proficiency and literacy is one of the main advantages of audiobooks, especially for ESL speakers.

### III.3 Where to find audiobooks

Audiobooks have gained a lot of popularity in the recent years; thus, they forced the publishing market to adapt to the new technologies. If I were to give a short answer to the indirect question from the subtitle, it would be: everywhere you find printed books, mainly online stores and platforms, and public libraries. Below, I will introduce some of the most common places where to listen to and purchase audiobooks.

#### III.3.a LibriVox

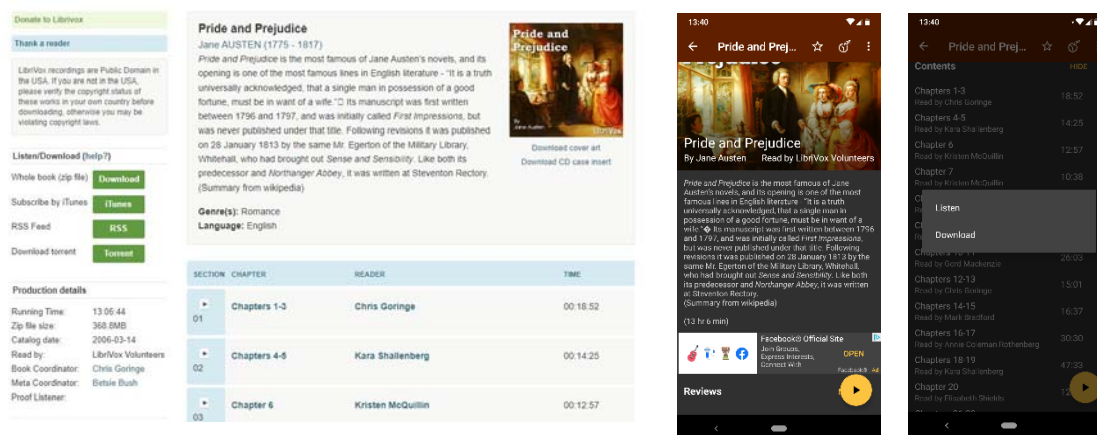
LibriVox is a non-commercial, non-profit and ad-free project founded in August 2005 by Hugh McGuire. The name comes from the Latin "libri" which means "voice" and "vox" which means voice"; so, it means "BookVoice". All the audiobooks are narrated by volunteers from across the globe, in all languages. Volunteering for LibriVox does not require any experience nor special equipment. They use free software to record the audiobooks. The volunteers are allowed to read any language they speak, in all kinds of accents, without even auditioning. They can read an entire book or just some chapters. It is very common to listen books by male voices even though they were written by female authors.

Most of their texts are from Project Gutenberg and Internet Archive hosts the audio files for free. Their catalogue is structured by author, title, genre and language. By May 2020, they had 13,932 catalogued works (most of them classics), in 40 languages, 1,800 non-English works and almost 10,000 readers.

The audiobooks are free to listen on computers, iPods or other mobile devices, and they even can be burnt onto a CD.

I have chosen as an example the book *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. There are six complete versions of the book in English (and in English only), two of which are read in collaborative projects (more than one narrator, both male and female) and one is a dramatic reading. A Spanish version is in progress. Of the one-narrator versions, two of them are read in American accent and one in British English. All three are read by female narrators. The dramatic version is read by a group of narrators, mostly in a British accent.

This collaborative version is narrated in both American and British accents, by both male and female readers. You can listen to it online, chapter by chapter, or you download it in your computer and then transfer it to your mobile device of choice. Or you can directly download it from their app. LibriVox has a free app that can be downloaded from Google Play or Apple Store. You can both listen or download the files on your mobile device. You can also add reviews and rate it.



### III.3.b Audible

According to their website, Audible is “the world’s largest producer and provider of spoken-word entertainment and audiobooks”.

Their story began in January 1995 when they launched the first production-volume digital audio player that only supported playbacks of audio files and had 4MB of memory (approximately two hours of audio). In 2003 they began to provide audiobooks for Apple iTunes Music Store. In 2008, Amazon announced the purchase of Audible, which became a subsidiary of Amazon. In 2012, Audible



launched Whispersync for Voice, a technology that allows readers to switch between reading a Kindle book and listening to the corresponding audiobook. Furthermore, Audible incorporated a new tool that has the benefit of real-time highlighting named Immersion Reading. It is aimed to “boost reading comprehension and overall retention of content” (Audible online Help Center). Immersion Reading works on Kindle App for iOS and Android, and Fire Tables 2nd Gen and above.

Audible is not free. It is a subscription service. However, some content may be discounted or free for some members or specific circumstances. For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, Audible removed subscriptions and offered its entire selection for free for the entire duration of the lockdown (only in US).

New members can enroll in a free 30-day membership. After this trial period, members will have to pay a subscription fee of \$14.95 per month. It includes one or two credits. Most books may be purchased with these: larger books cost two credits and some short works may cost less than one credit. For additional purchase, members receive a discount of 30%. It is separate from Prime membership and it can be canceled anytime.

Audible audiobooks are supported by the majority of devices: iOS, Android, Windows, Fire tablets, Kindles, Sonos devices, just to name the most common ones.

As of May 2020, Audible contains more than 400,000 audio programs, grouped in 26 categories: fiction (classics, historical, Sci-Fi, etc.), non-fiction (arts & entertainment, self-development, business, etc.), newspapers and magazines, language instruction (6 main languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Spanish), etc.

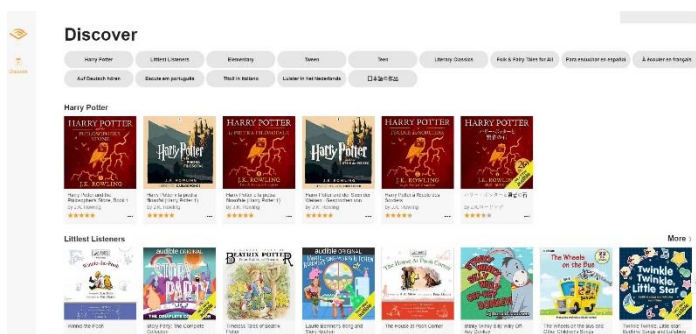
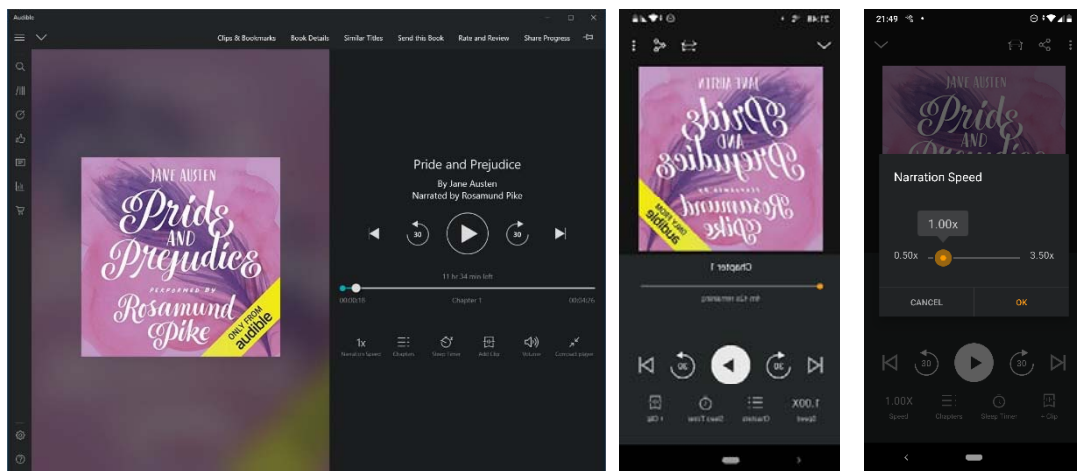
What brought much popularity to Audible were the Hollywood stars and famous people from all realms (Michelle Obama, Tom Hanks, Colin Firth, Nicole Kidman, Trevor Noah, to name a few recent ones) who narrated both great works of literature and their own. Here are a few examples from Audible app:

- *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, narrated by Claire Danes;

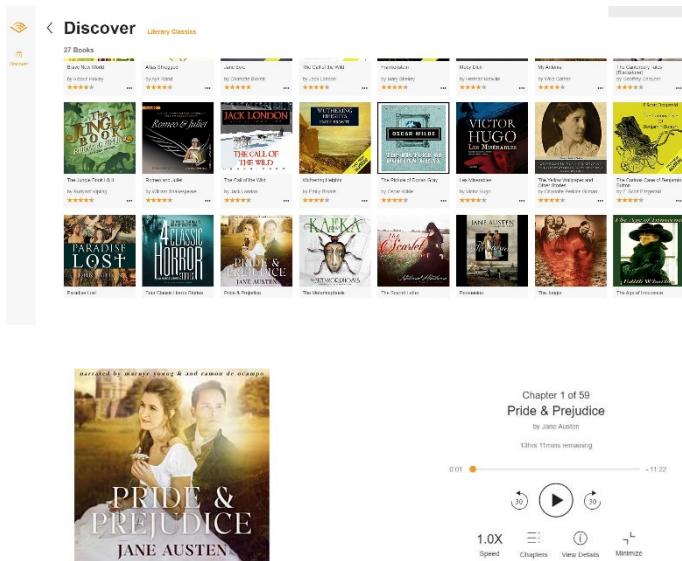
- *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by JK Rowling, narrated by Stephen Fry;
- *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee, narrated by Reese Witherspoon;
- *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders, narrated by 166 actors (Susan Sarandon, Nick Offerman, Ben Stiller, Julianne Moore, and others);
- *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, narrated by herself;
- *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, narrated by Jeremy Irons;
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, narrated by Elijah Wood.

Searching for *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen in the Audible store, there are over 20 versions. Most of them are in English, narrated by only one person. However, there are 7 books in Spanish, 3 in Italian, 1 in Danish and 1 in Chinese. As for the English language, the version with the highest ratings (4.8 out of 5) is narrated by the talented English actress Rosamund Pike (she also played the role of Jane Bennet in the 2005 film adaptation). It is unabridged and can be used with Whispersync for Voice-ready.

Here are some screenshots from the Windows app and Android app:



Audible also has a service of free audiobooks called Discovery. No subscription or identification is required. They are simple FREE audiobooks.



There are 27 books in the Literary Classics section and *Pride and Prejudice* is one of them.

Its menu is very simple and intuitive, with the possibility to change the narration speed, to go backward or forward 30 seconds, and to choose the chapter. Regarding the speed,

it starts at 1.0X, which is considered to be ideal for ESL listeners who have a low level of the language. It goes up to 3.0X.

### III.4 Analysis of audiobooks sources available online

Besides the two above-mentioned audiobooks sources, there are many more. This section of the paper tries to introduce the most common ones, focusing on the technical specifications of the apps. A total of 16 sources were assessed, using the information available on their websites and, when possible, they were tested on a mobile device (when they were free to download, had a free-trial period or provided free samples). In order to assess the price for à la carte purchases, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen was taken as a specimen.

Table 1, on page 36, describes them in detail, presenting specific features for each one.

Name	Type	APP	Price	Languages	Specific Features
Audible <a href="https://www.audible.com/">https://www.audible.com/</a>	26 categories (fiction and non-fiction)	iOS Android Windows	30-day free trial; 14.95\$ monthly subscription (credit system); Cancel-anytime policy; FREE - Audible Discovery.	English Spanish Chinese French Portuguese Italian German	Professional narration. It offers free sample. Large variety of topics. It can be synchronized with Kindle. Language-learning options. Relatively expensive.
Audiobooks.com <a href="https://www.audiobooks.com/">https://www.audiobooks.com/</a>	15+ categories	iOS Android	30-day free trial (3 FREE audiobooks); \$14.95 monthly subscription (credit system); Cancel-anytime policy; À la carte purchase.	English	VIP membership (additional free audiobooks). Affordable prices ( <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> from \$2.99).
Auditeka <a href="https://audioteka.com/en/">https://audioteka.com/en/</a>	10+ categories	iOS Android	À la carte purchase.	English	Fairly expensive (prices start at £5.49 and go up to £80). <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> : £38.50. Samples up to 2h.
Downpour <a href="https://www.downpour.com/">https://www.downpour.com/</a>	20+ categories	iOS Android	\$12.99 monthly subscription (credit system); Cancel-anytime policy; À la carte purchase.	English	It offers digital rental, MP3 CD, audio CD. Fairly expensive ( <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> at \$34.00).
Google Audiobooks	20+ categories	iOS Android Windows Google Home	À la carte purchase.	10+ languages	Preview free samples. It takes notes that sync with Google Drive. Offline reading. Affordable prices ( <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> from €0.49 to €17.99) small selection of titles.

Gutenberg - The Audio Books Project <a href="https://bit.ly/3bXfrlx">https://bit.ly/3bXfrlx</a>	Public Domain (mostly classics)	N/A	FREE	40 languages	Human-read and computer audio books. It uses Librivox platform. PG is no longer adding audio eBooks to their collection.
Kobo <a href="https://www.kobo.com/">https://www.kobo.com/</a>	20+ categories	iOS Android Desktop Win   Mac	30-day free trial; \$9.99 monthly subscription (credit system); Cancel-anytime policy; À la carte purchase.	20+ languages	Affordable prices ( <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> , English edition, from €0,49).
KOOB <a href="https://www.koobaudio.com/">https://www.koobaudio.com/</a>	9 3D audiobooks	iOS Android	Price range: \$4.99-5.99.	English Spanish	Virtual reality audiobooks. Educational materials for children.
Librivox <a href="https://librivox.org/">https://librivox.org/</a>	Public Domain (mostly classics)	iOS Android Windows	FREE	40 languages	Narrated by volunteers. Variety of accents. Collaborative narration.
Libro.fm <a href="https://libro.fm/">https://libro.fm/</a>	20+ categories	iOS Android	\$14.99 monthly subscription; Cancel-anytime policy; À la carte purchase.	English Spanish	It is possible to purchase audiobooks directly through the local bookstore. +150,000 books.
LoyalBooks <a href="http://www.loyalbooks.com/">http://www.loyalbooks.com/</a>	Public Domain + Best Sellers	iOS Android	FREE + Paid Books (Audible)	25+ languages	7,000+ audiobooks. Download for offline use.
Open Culture <a href="https://bit.ly/2Tx3610">https://bit.ly/2Tx3610</a>	Public Domain + other media	N/A	FREE	English	1,000 free audiobooks and best educational media from web (Audible, iTunes, MP3 Stream, and other free streaming platforms).
SCRIBD <a href="https://www.scribd.com/audiobooks">https://www.scribd.com/audiobooks</a>	20+ categories	iOS Android *ebook readers	30-day free trial; €9.99 monthly subscription (unlimited access); Cancel-anytime policy.	English	*some ebook readers can't connect to Scribd app (Nook GlowLight, Kobo, and most Kindle). Foreign languages learning materials.

Spotify <a href="https://www.spotify.com">https://www.spotify.com</a>	copyrighted works (mostly classics)	iOS Android Desktop Win   Mac	FREE or Premium from €4.99 per month (ad-free, offline listening, download option).	English	Various artists: Audiobooks, DBS Audiobooks, Spotify's Women's History playlists.
Storynory <a href="https://www.storynory.com/">https://www.storynory.com/</a>	6 categories	iOS	FREE	English	Educational stories for children classic authors, fairytales and mythology. Downloadable MP3 files. Printed versions available.
Storytel <a href="https://www.storytel.com">https://www.storytel.com</a>	15+ categories	iOS Android	14-day free trial; Monthly subscription from €12.99 (unlimited audiobooks).	15+ languages	Founded in Stockholm, Sweden. Kids mode. Offline books. 400,000+ titles. 1 million subscribers.

### III.4.a Design of an evaluation rubric for audiobooks sources

The criteria used for the evaluation the audiobooks sources cited in Table 1 were:

- 1) Diversity of topics and areas of interest (1 = very limited, 5 = very diverse);
- 2) Accessibility (1 = very limited, 5 = very accessible);
- 3) Price (1 = expensive, 5 = free);
- 4) Number of languages (1 = one language, 5 = more than 30 languages);
- 5) Overall quality of the recording: narration, style, sound quality (1 = poor, 5 = excellent).

### III.4.b Results

Table 2 sums up the score obtain by each audiobooks source.

Name	Diversity	Accessibility	Price	Languages	Narration & sound quality	Total
Kobo	5	5	4	4	4	<b>22</b>
Audible	5	5	3	3	5	<b>21</b>
Google Audiobooks	5	5	2	4	5	<b>21</b>
LoyalBooks	3	4	4	4	5	<b>20</b>
SCRIBD	5	5	4	1	5	<b>20</b>
Libro.fm	5	4	3	2	5	<b>19</b>
Downpour	5	4	3	1	5	<b>18</b>
Librivox	3	4	5	5	1	<b>18</b>
Storytel	4	4	3	3	4	<b>18</b>
Audiobooks.com	4	4	3	1	5	<b>17</b>
Gutenberg	3	1	5	5	2	<b>16</b>
KOOB	1	4	4	2	5	<b>16</b>
Spotify	3	5	5	1	2	<b>16</b>
Auditeka	3	4	2	1	5	<b>15</b>
Storynory	1	3	5	1	4	<b>14</b>
Open Culture	3	1	5	1	2	<b>12</b>

Table 2: Evaluation of audiobooks sources

### III.4.c Discussion

After evaluating the sources available on the market, it can be concluded that none of them scored the maximum of 25 points. Even if Audible is the most known app, Kobo scored higher because it has a lower price and there is a wider diversity of languages. SCRIBD has a higher score than LibriVox (better known) because the overall quality of their books is better, it is more diverse and accessible (it also includes an app for eReaders). Open Culture had the lowest score due to the narration quality, limited language, and accessibility problems (it changes from YouTube, Spotify, iTunes, among other streaming apps), and Storynory is limited to children stories (even if they are free for MP3 download).

### III.5 Other platforms

- Books on Tape
  - ✓ Both audiobooks and large print;
  - ✓ Only á la carte listening;
  - ✓ Only for librarians and educators.
- AudioFile Magazine
  - ✓ Monthly print publication;
  - ✓ Reviews and recommendations of audiobooks;
  - ✓ Interviews and behind-the-scenes with authors and narrators;
  - ✓ Free e-newsletters;
  - ✓ 2-year subscription: \$26.95.
- OverDrive
  - ✓ Free e-books and audiobooks from any local library;
  - ✓ Available offline;
  - ✓ Reading sync across all devices;
  - ✓ Listen in the car through Apple CarPlay, Android Auto or Bluetooth connection;
  - ✓ Send your library to Kindle;
  - ✓ 90% of public libraries in North America have OverDrive;



- ✓ Libby can be found in 78 countries worldwide (American School of Madrid—the only one in Madrid area).
- ✓

## CONCLUSION

The digital era fundamentally altered our habits of reading and methods of language learning. This paper tried to reveal the benefits, if any, of integrating audiobooks into the English-learners' routine.

First of all, it has introduced many articles and studies that promote the benefits of audiobooks for students of all ages. Thus, the doubt regarding the existing of benefits of audiobooks has a positive answer: Yes, there are, and many.

Secondly, the paper extensively presented their influence on various skills of language learning and even went beyond that. Advocates of audiobooks have claimed their role in motivating reading, developing vocabulary, promoting comprehension, literacy and fluency (in both listening and reading). They are supported by neuroscience and phycological studies, some of them as recent as September 2019.

Thirdly, the publishing market has adapted rapidly to the emerging technology and tailored their services to meet both the students and teachers' needs. Global projects, such as LibriVox, offer a wide variety of free of charge resources. Audiobooks are nowadays everywhere: mobile devices, home sound systems, and even car manufacturers adapted their audio systems to the increasing demand. Publishers try to motivate their readers using famous narrators and trained actors in order to offer the best listening experience. The evaluation rubric designed to assess the efficiency of the most common audiobooks resources shows that audiobooks are not inexpensive, but most of them are affordable and easy to use.

Additionally, teachers are encouraged to create opportunities and awareness regarding the benefits of audiobooks through practical activities. They should become role models for their audience. The ultimate goal is to provide all

students and English learners with the skills and strategies needed to become independent listeners and advanced users of the language. Further investigations into how audiobooks can be implemented are necessary.

However, there are some concerns regarding the abuse of technology and the negative effects of the time spent in front of mobile devices that may affect their users outside the classroom environment. This subject could also be a topic of further research.

### Suggestions for listening to English audiobooks for ESL students

In order to optimize the benefits of audiobooks, and following the recommendations of the researches described in the previous chapters, here are some tips for active listening:

- **Choose the most efficient audiobook.** Listen to audiobooks according to the language proficiency. Children's books are wonderful for beginners because they are meant to be understood by listeners with little vocabulary.
- **Read along.** Reading while listening has been proved to be the most efficient way for enriching the vocabulary and reading fluency.
- **Repeat.** One of the greatest advantages of an audiobook is the ability to rewind challenging sections. Repeat and listen as many times as you feel comfortable with. Repeating aloud the difficult words improve pronunciation.
- **Take notes.** Writing down difficult words or expression develops writing skills.
- **Choose an interesting topic.** Besides the level, another important aspect in choosing the right audiobook is the entertainment factor, thus boosting the reader's motivation and self-confidence.

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Open Culture, [bit.ly/2Tx3610](https://bit.ly/2Tx3610)

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# ANNEXES

## ANNEX I: Audiobook Industry Sales Survey (2019)



Audio Publishers Association

### AUDIOBOOK INDUSTRY SALES SURVEY KEY POINTS

#### Growth Rates

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Dollars	13.2%	20.7%	18.2%	22.7%	24.5%
Units	19.5%	24.2%	33.9%	21.5%	27.3%

#### Titles Produced

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
# titles	25,944	35,574	42,960	42,441	44,685

#### Returns (sales dollars)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Returns %	7.1%	5.7%	5.0%	4.1%	3.9%

#### Formats (sales units)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
CD	21.2%	15.3%	10.8%	5.8%	3.8%
Digital	76.9%	83.3%	87.4%	93.0%	95.4%
Other (pre-loaded devices, MP3-CD, Apps, Book & CD sets)	1.9%	1.3%	1.7%	1.2%	.8%

#### Formats (sales dollars)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
CD	29.0%	21.8%	16.2%	11.3%	7.8%
Digital	69.1%	76.8%	82.4%	87.5%	91.4%
Other (pre-loaded devices, MP3-CD, Apps, Book & CD sets)	2.1%	1.4%	1.4%	1.2%	.8%

#### Fiction vs. Non-fiction (sales units)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Fiction	77.4%	76.3%	73.8%	70.6%	67.3%
Non-Fiction	22.6%	23.7%	26.2%	29.4%	32.7%

#### Target Age (sales units)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Children/YA	13.3%	9.6%	10.1%	10.2%	9.5%
Adult	86.7%	90.4%	89.9%	89.8%	90.5%

\*These statistics are based on the sales survey conducted by the independent research firm Management Practice completed in Spring 2019.

For media inquiries and questions about the industry please contact APA Headquarters, [press@audiopub.org](mailto:press@audiopub.org)

Source: APA

## ANNEX II: A Brief History of Audiobooks



Audio Publishers Association

### **A HISTORY OF AUDIOBOOKS**

1931: The American Foundation for the Blind and the Library of Congress Book for the Blind Project establish the Talking Book Program.

1932: The first test audio recordings include a chapter from Helen Keller's *Midstream* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*.

1934: The first recordings are made for the Talking Book Program and include parts of *The Bible*, The Declaration of Independence, and Shakespeare's plays.

1948: The Recording for the Blind program is founded (later renamed Learning Ally).

1952: Caedmon Records is formed in New York and is a pioneer in the audiobook industry.

1955: Listening Library is founded and is the first to distribute audiobooks to libraries and schools.

1963: The cassette tape is invented.

1970s: Libraries start carrying audiobooks.

1985: *Publishers Weekly* identifies 21 audiobook publishers including Caedmon, Recorded Books, Books on Tape, Harper and Row, and Random House.

1980s: Bookstores start to display audiobooks on bookshelves instead of in separate displays.

1986: The Audio Publishers Association is created.

1986: The Book of the Month Club and The Literary Guild start offering its members audiobooks.

1987: *Publishers Weekly* starts a regular column to cover the audiobook industry.

1992: *AudioFile* Magazine is launched.

- 1994: The APA establishes the term “audiobook” as the industry standard.
- 1995: The first Audio Publishers Association Conference (APAC) takes place at the Chicago Marriott Hotel.
- 1996: The first Audie Awards ceremony for audiobooks takes place at the Chicago Hyatt Regency.
- 1997: Audible debuts the first digital audio player.
- 1998: The APA launches the first **June Is Audiobook Month** month-long celebration of audio.
- 2003: Audible’s deal with Apple marks an increase in public awareness as audiobooks became available on iTunes.
- 2004: CDs replace cassettes as the preferred medium for listening to audiobooks.
- 2005: Preloaded Digital Players, an all-in-one audiobook format, are created.
- 2009: Digital downloads surpass CDs as the most popular audiobook format.
- 2011: Audiobook self-publishing becomes possible with the Audiobook Creation Exchange (ACX).
- 2012: Audiobook annual publication increases 125% from 7,200 to 16,309.
- 2013: *The New York Times Book Review* begins their twice-yearly audiobook issues.
- 2014: The Deyan Institute of Vocal Artistry and Technology (DIVA) opened, the world's first school for teaching the art and technology of audiobook production.
- 2015: Author’s Republic launches, widening distribution options for self-published audiobooks.
- 2017: Findaway Voices opens up the DIY options for audiobook production.
- 2018: *The New York Times* starts a monthly audio bestseller lists.

For media inquiries and questions about the industry please contact  
APA Executive Director Michele Cobb at 401-354-9100, [press@audiopub.org](mailto:press@audiopub.org)

Source: APA