Authentic audio materials in ESP

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Abstract

A contemporary approach to acquiring good listening skills in a foreign language has recently emerged due to audio publishing online. It is known as 'podcasting' and has become common because it offers language learners extra listening practice both inside and outside of English classes. Moreover, podcasting as online communication technology is a new way to inspire learning: it provides an exciting way for students and educators to explore and discover educational content. However, applicability of podcasting to teaching English needs researching.

This paper describes research into learners' perceptions of online listening to podcasts, self-evaluation of their own performance in individual listening practice and reflections on ways of improving listening skills. The findings give insights into a practice of developing listening competence. Some implications of research are described including a recommendation for a so called 'blended learning', i.e. combination of multiple approaches to learning by harmonizing online listening with classroom audition activities in learning English for Specific Purposes.

Introduction

Online audio and podcasts are the innovative tools of learning communicative English. The best place to explore what can be used in English classes is either the BBC website, or the BBC World Service website, or English learning websites. To start listening to online radio materials, the first step is to download the BBC iPlayer. Another online option is listening to podcasts. A podcast, in plain English, is an audio program that needs to be subscribed to, quite often free of charge. It can be listened to either on one's computer, or MP3 player or iPod. Podcasts are supposed to be the best options because students can listen to them anywhere outside the class – in the street, on a public transport, etc. There are a number of podcasts related to learning English. The British Council has just created some new LearnEnglish Podcasts Web pages that are free fro teachers and students to use. Some of the available websites are reproduced below.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/podcasts

http://www.britishcouncil.org/learningenglish-podcasts

http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/podcast/index.html

http://a4esl.org/p/ which include:

VOA Special English

Links to Podcasts for ESL

Links to Podcasts for Native English Speakers

Links to Downloadable MP3 Files

Advantages of podcasting and its research

A novel approach to teaching listening skills has emerged due to the hi-tech developments. It is a so called 'podcasting' (a portemanteau of the words iPod and broadcasting), which has recently become very popular. The term 'podcast' was coined in 2004, and it means the publishing of audio via the Internet. Audio recording is designed to be downloaded and listened to on a portable MP3 player of any type, or on a personal computer. Listening to audio is nothing new to the Internet. Audio files available for downloading and other means of online listening have been around for some time. Podcasting differs from other ways of delivering audio online by the idea of automatically downloaded content. Podcasting offers language teachers and students a wide range of possibilities for extra listening practice both inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, podcasts enable students to practice listening in a self-directed manner and at their own pace. By 2005, the concept of 'podcasting' reached its top point: thousands of podcasts were created, and The New Oxford American Dictionary named a 'podcast' its official 'Word of the Year'.

The advantages of podcasts are numerous: they can enhance the range and register of English language listening practice material available for the students to use in a variety of ways, provide increased connectivity between different elements of the course, give the language teacher a wealth of materials for teaching listening skills. P. Constantine (2007) covers the subject of podcasts on several levels and deals with the questions of the podcast advantages, selection of the most beneficial podcasts, and discusses how to maximize learning from podcasts: 1) learners can benefit from global listening, even if they only listen from three to five minutes a day; 2) students will be exposed to the new language; 3) the intermediate learner has a need for authentic texts and to be exposed to a variety of voices. Podcasts are not just intended for listening. Often there is a transcript provided along with worksheets. A number of websites interact with the students and ask them to write in with questions or comments. According to P. Constantine (2007), one innovative usage of podcasts is to have a student listen to a podcast and read along

its transcript. Then the student will make a recording of the material on a cassette tape and hand it out to the teacher along with a written journal. The teacher then listens to the student's recording and gives appropriate feedback to the student. This type of activity helps the students to develop fluency in reading, to improve pronunciation, to acquire new vocabulary words, and to perfect listening skills.

It is thought that podcasting is particularly beneficial for English learners as it provides a means for students to get access to 'authentic' listening sources about almost any subject that may interest them. Teachers can take advantage of podcasts as a basis for comprehension exercises, as a way of generating conversation based on students' reaction to podcasts, and as a technique of providing each and every student diverse listening materials.

In his guide to using computers in language teaching, J. Szendeffy (2005) argues that computers provide students and teachers with greater access and integration of material than tape recorders or videocassettes. Moreover, this guide gives useful information how to digitalize materials and easily create recordings for class activities as well as good suggestions for finding online broadcasts, TV materials, and prepare students' own recorded speeches.

The substantial contribution into the problem of listening comprehension in the CALL environment was paid by the Special issue on Technology and Listening Comprehension of the *Language Learning and Technology Journal* (Volume 11, Number 1, February 2007). R. Robin (2007) argues that although „off-the-shelf technology is not ready for interactive oral-aural instruction…, but it is ideal for use by the strategically independent learner to acquire and improve receptive skills in an authentic environment". R. Robin suggests reexamining the value of pre-packaged listening comprehension materials in which L2 listeners are guided in listening strategies but are not encouraged to make use of technological innovations that native listeners are coming to use on a regular basis. On the other hand, M. Rost (2007) claims that teachers have to plan interventions that develop students' skill at making the input comprehensible: "Helpful interventions in teaching listening promote the listener's motivation by advancing the listener's goals for listening". In M. Rost's opinion, the interruptions in the listening process can lead to a desire to listen more closely and with heightened curiosity. Therefore, providing targeted interventions that focus on the component processes of listening can allow learners to get more out of each listening encounter.

Having examined the available sources on developing learners' listening skills in language classes, it is easier to understand why Internet audio has become so popular now. Although Internet audio and video files have been around for many years, recent technical innovations allow subscribers with portable MP3 players to use technology for downloading podcasts and to

listen to files at one's own convenience. This opens up new educational potential of using unproductive time for learning (McCarty, 2005).

Research into the student reaction to podcasting is still in progress but early indications from student feedback collected so far and analysis of course tracking suggest that the podcasts were highly appreciated and extensively used by students. The podcasts were frequently downloaded, and students reported listening to each several times over both for the listening practice they provided as well as for their entertainment or informational value (http://www.elanguages.ac.uk/podcast/index.html). Various research projects have investigated the use of podcasting in education. Details of these can be found on the website of the IMPALA Project (http://www.impala.ac.uk/index.html), a Higher Education Academy research project into podcasting. Current plans on e-languages podcasting include introducing a podcast strand to all academic skill courses being delivered online.

The BBC world service website published the survey on the users of podcasts. The data are shown below in a chart titled "Who downloads podcasts?"
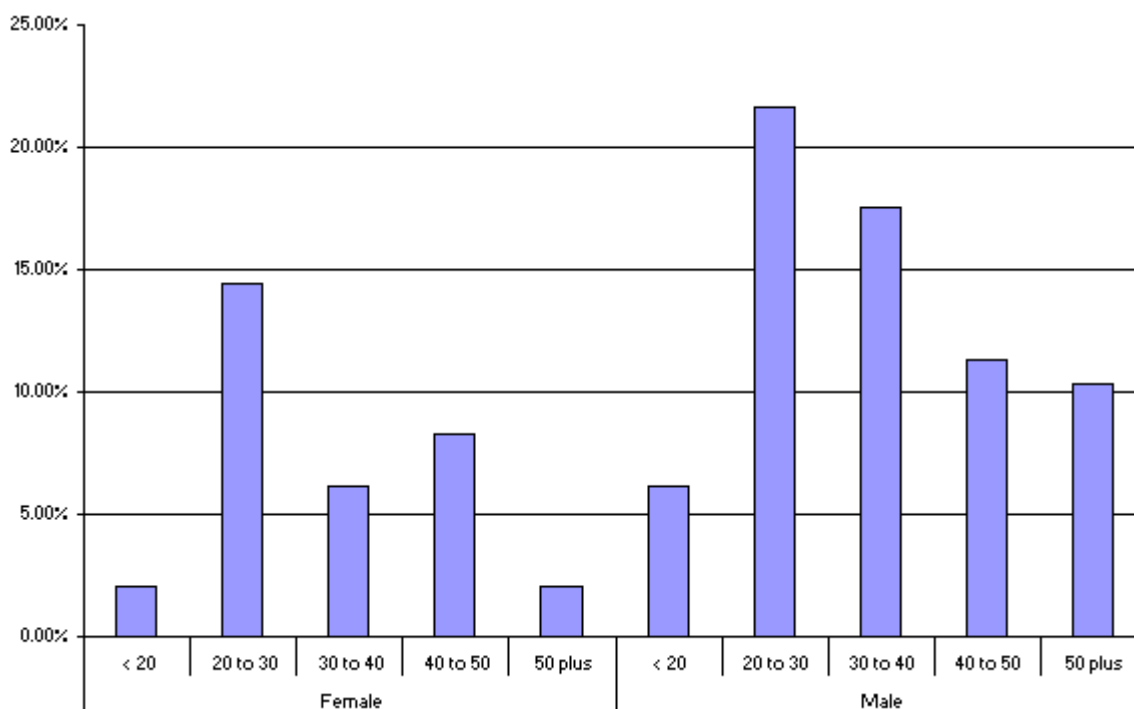
It appeared that out of 285 responses there were 31% of females of various ages: 2% - under 20, about 15% aged 20 to 30, 6% aged 30 to 40, 8% - 40 to 50. There were 69 % of male users: 6% - under 20, 21% - aged 20 to 30, 17% - aged 30 to 40, 15% - aged 40 to 50, 10% - aged 50 plus. It shows that men are more active in downloading podcasts – 69% versus 31%. The age range of English learners is from 20 to 50 plus.

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/1720_ten_years/page8.shtml)

A brief overview of how podcasting can be used in English Language Teaching is provided by T. N. Robb (http://www.cc.kyoto-su.ac.jp/~trobb/podcasting2.html), who suggests that there are three basic modes of activities for podcasting: 1) students as consumers, and teachers create material for students or assign them to listen to one of the many available ESL podcast sites; 2) students as producers or publishers, and teachers have students create material for others to listen to; 3) students practice through various exercises.

Aims and intended outcome of research

The **aims of research** are, firstly, to examine the challenges of listening to diverse authentic podcasts, and, secondly, to analyze learners' self-evaluation data on various ways of improving listening skills.

The intended **outcome** of research is to formulate the tips for good practice in teaching / learning the techniques of perfecting skills of listening in ESP.

Research Techniques and Respondents

The research methods included, first, the survey of students' self-evaluation of their performance in listening to various podcasts at upper-intermediate, advanced, native speakers, or intermediate level (for learners of lower proficiency), and, second, students' reflections on their experience of online listening.

The research techniques employed learners' reflections on their difficulties to listening to authentic recordings. Practice of listening to podcasts aimed to demonstrate to learners the opportunities of improving listening skills outside English classes.

Listening to podcasts had to serve a number of purposes: 1) to enhance the range and register of English language listening practice material available for the students to use in a variety of ways; 2) to provide increased connectivity between different elements of the course; 3) to increase the scope for discussion activity in the classroom in pairs after students have shared their listening experiences.

The major learners' task for podcasting practice was the evaluation of their ability to understand authentic language. The individual self-assessment involved checking one's comprehension (doing relevant exercises), reading transcript for clarification, looking up unknown vocabulary items in a dictionary, and summing up one's performance (very good, good, satisfactory).

The participants in this research were the 1st and the 2nd year full-time students of the same specialization – psychology, who at the Faculty of Social Policy, Mykolas Romeris University,

Lithuania. The students were requested to accomplish listening to podcasts assignments and answer relevant questions of a specially designed questionnaire. The podcasts were chosen by learners themselves from the website http://a4esl.org/p/ which included the following sections:

VOA Special English

Links to Podcasts for ESL

Links to Podcasts for Native English Speakers

Links to Downloadable MP3 Files

The reason why learners were free to choose podcasts for themselves was the aim of self-evaluating their own listening abilities individually. The idea was to motivate learners in the future to develop listening comprehension skills without the threat of teacher's evaluation. It has been assumed that none-threatening practice may help learners who dread taking risks and who will enjoy some success in listening individually.

Corporate listening to records in class differs from individual listening to podcasts in many aspects. The most obvious features of corporate listening are: either top-down or bottom-up techniques are employed, students work in pairs or small groups, listening themes are brain-stormed, essential vocabulary is generated, students do various exercises before the listening procedure, e.g. matching vocabulary items with their definitions, predicting the contents or the details of the recorded material, etc., followed by checking learners' comprehension after the listening procedure has been accomplished.

Contrarily to corporate listening activity, listening autonomously in one's spare time ensures independence of learner's judgment of one's performance and helps develop critical approach to evaluation of success or failure in the activity. Also, there is an opportunity of improving listening skills from reading transcripts as a follow-up exercise. A fruitful idea of learning from transcripts was applied and discussed by T. Lynch (2007).

The students were asked to carry out the tasks of listening to podcasts for homework. The deadline of two weeks was agreed with each group, by the end of which learners submitted feedback in writing.

It should be noted that performing their assignments some learners have chosen easier recordings while others looked for more challenging and difficult podcasts available at the above mentioned websites. Having completed the assignment and done comprehension exercises, students were able to evaluate their performance impartially by checking results (if an answer key was available), or reading a transcript and looking up the meanings of unknown words. Such approach to independent self-evaluation helps learners assess their abilities to follow authentic English speech impartially. Learners submitted their feedback in writing which makes it easier to analyze. The major points are presented in the following section. Furthermore, students

described listening experiences in their weblogs, and some reflections are reproduced in Appendix.

Results of the self-evaluation survey

The results of the survey that examined the learners' self-evaluation of listening to podcasts experience are displayed in Table, which summarizes students' perceptions in percentage. As the number of students in groups differs, displayed percentage makes it easier to compare students' opinions in both groups.

Table. Students' self-evaluation of performance in listening to podcasts. (Results are obtained from the 1st and 2nd year students, who studied ESP for Psychology in 2007).

Survey questions	Specialization of Psychology (2nd year 16 respondents)	Specialization of Psychology (1st year 17 respondents)
1. Students' perception of the speaking rate in a podcast	**Percentage of students**	**Percentage of students**
Fast (Advanced Level)	20%	81%
Average (Upper-Intermediate Level)	56%	11%
Slow (Intermediate Level)	24%	8%
2. Number of the listening times to a single podcast	**Percentage of listening times**	**Percentage of listening times**
Once	47%	31%
Twice	47%	66%
Three times	6%	3%
Four times	-	-
3. Students' self-evaluation of their	**Percentage of students**	**Percentage of students**

ability to understand a record		
Very good	6%	12%
Good	59%	75%
Satisfactory	35%	13%
4. Students' supported ways of improving listening skills	**Percentage of students**	**Percentage of students**
- listen to podcasts as often as possible	76%	88%
- listen to authentic cassette recordings in class	41%	69%
- listen to your friends in English classes	18%	38%
- watch English video films or movies on TV	88%	94%
- speak to the native English speakers	70%	69%

The first entry in Table is students' perceptions of speaking speeds. As it is shown in Table, the 2nd year learners' perception of speaking rates in recordings at advanced level differs significantly from that of the 1st year learners – 20% against 81%. Moreover, fewer the 1st year students (11%) find the speakers' rate average at upper-intermediate level than the 2nd year students (56%). At the intermediate level, the percentage of perception is, respectively, 8% and 24%. Interestingly, learners reported that it was easier for them to follow American speakers than British speakers (the findings are not included in Table). This can be explained by the research into 'listenability' (Sharma and Barrett, 2007) that compared speaking rates by BBC, ABC, and CNN broadcasting companies. On average, BBC broadcasters do speak faster than CNN broadcasters (172 words per min. versus 153 words per min.), but BBC speakers use longer pauses, which help listeners to process information. However, linguistic complexity on BBC sites can complicate comprehension: on average, the sentence length in BBC broadcasts is 39 words versus 22 words in CNN broadcasts. Nevertheless, speaking rates and linguistic

complexity are not the only factors that affect the ease of comprehension. It is thought that listener's background knowledge, speaking fluency and acoustic factors also affect comprehension significantly.

The second entry in Table gives numbers of audition to a single podcast. The number of listening times to podcasts by the 2nd and 1st year students also differs: listening once – 47% and 31%, respectively, listening twice – 47% versus 66%, and listening 3 times – 6% versus 3%. Although these figures might seem controversial at the first sight, they reflect summative response to recordings of divergent difficulty. The important point is that none of learners needed to listen more than 3 times.

The third entry in Table shows learners' evaluation of listening ability. Rather surprisingly, fewer students in the 2nd year estimate their abilities as very good, good, and satisfactory in comparison to the 1st year students' estimations – respectively, 6% versus 12%, 59% versus 75%, and 35% versus 13%. As a matter of fact, listening ability of an individual learner is comparable to his / her performance in listening tests in English classes. The possible interpretation of these findings is that older students are becoming less confident and, perhaps, more realistic about their listening abilities.

Finally, the fourth entry in Table shows students' positive attitudes to the techniques of improving skills of listening. The techniques include listening to podcasts (76% vs. 88%), watching English video films and movies on TV (88% vs. 94%), improving listening by talking to native speakers of English (70% vs. 91%) and listening to authentic recordings in the classroom (41% vs. 69%). However, listening to peers in English classes is the least favorite activity – 18% for the 2nd year students, and 38% - for the 1st year students.

It has already been mentioned that learners were free to choose two podcasts online and listen to them outside English classes. The learners were expected to choose the podcasts of appropriate level of English: upper-intermediate, advanced or for native speakers. However, some of the students chose podcasts at intermediate level. Their excuse was the inability to spot the podcasts of the right level.

On the issue of comprehensibility, which has not been included in Table, students mentioned the following techniques that they used in order to clarify the questionable parts of podcasts. Here are the most common answers: a) looked up the meaning of unknown words in a dictionary b) recognized the words by sight from having read the available transcript; c) used a dictionary while reading a recorded text; d) guessed the meaning from the context.

The sources of the difficulties that learners face in listening were examined by the researcher elsewhere (Kavaliauskienė, 2008). Several facts have emerged. Firstly, learners' perceptions of speaking speeds in the same recorded message differ. Secondly, pronunciation in the recorded

messages affects comprehension of many learners. Thirdly, even pre-taught vocabulary might present difficulty in understanding, probably due to the failure to retrieve it during listening. Finally, in listening activities students found it hard to get some specific information and wanted to hear each word, while in post-listening activities the most common difficulties were gap-filling and summary writing. These results infer the potentially important role of vocabulary development in L2 listening proficiency.

Results of learners' feedback: reflections on listening activities

There are various ways of developing listening skills in a foreign language: listening activities in class, individual listening practice outside classes, using multi-media in one's spare time.
In the classroom, activities of listening to authentic records are the most common ways of practicing listening comprehension. In accordance with students' feedback (Appendix), not every learner is keen on such activities. The major cause is most probably the diversity in language proficiency – what is beneficial to some students might be problematic to others, and some learners are reluctant to admit their difficulties in front of the class.
Another way of practicing listening skills is podcasting which enables learners to conduct the activity at their own pace and at the convenient time. Students' assignment of podcasting, which was used in this research, revealed a variety of attitudes. In the online reflections, students admit to having problems in listening and reason how to cope with difficulties. This is a positive point in itself as a student learns what she/he can do about it, e.g. keep practicing individually.
Real life listening, e.g. socializing with the native speakers of English, is not feasible on the daily basis in this country but highly appreciated by learners. Passive listening by watching TV films is also ranked high and can be easily exercised nowadays due to the availability of the cable TV and the diversity of unabridged foreign films in local cinemas.
In this research, students evaluated their listening skills individually by writing self-assessment entries in their weblogs. Some excerpts from students' entries are being reproduced below in Appendix.
The learners' weblogs can be found in the researcher's weblog
http://gkavaliauskiene.blogspot.com. The students' language in the reproduced weblogs entries has not been corrected for the authenticity reasons. It should be noted that some students compare listening activities in English classes with the autonomous activities of listening to podcasts online or listening to authentic speech of English speakers outside classes while others describe generally their opinions on listening experiences.

Conclusions

Two important aspects, the extent to which learners consciously focus on aspects of language, and the degree of noticing its particular features, have been currently debated by linguists and practitioners. This article documents the ways of raising language awareness by assigning a task of evaluating one's ability to understand authentic speech outside language class. Such an activity seems important for language processing and learner development.

In this paper, the author infers that there is an opportunity for raising language awareness by employing podcasting which allows learners to carry out homework assignments at their own pace and under non-threatening conditions. The online methodology involves downloading a variety of podcasts and listening to them at the convenient time. Follow-up classroom discussions on benefits or failures of listening to podcasts enable each learner to evaluate their ability to understand authentic records. Summarizing various types of listening experiences in individual weblogs allows learners to store written records of their progress.

The tips of good practice in teaching / learning skills of listening are numerous. First, individual online listening to podcasts at one's own pace and at the convenient to a learner time prompts and motivates learners to improve skills of listening without being intimidated by possible failure. Second, raising learners' awareness of suitable individual ways of perfecting skill of listening promotes language learning. Third, the novelty and diversity of outside class listening motivates learners to perfect their skills without being observed by peers or teachers. Fourth, harmonizing online listening with classroom audition activities in teaching / learning English should benefit all learners. Fifth, learners become aware that listening skills can be improved through a lot of practice of their own choice. Finally, self-evaluating one's achievements and publishing a self-evaluation report in individual weblogs encourage learners to keep improving. Catering for the learners of diverse personalities, the teacher must acknowledge the fact that not all learners enjoy using digital technology in learning. Therefore, blended learning, which is a combination of multiple approaches to learning, might be preferable (Sharma and Barrett, 2007). A typical example of blended learning is a combination of e-learning and face-to-face sessions in the classroom. Students' reflections prove the importance of such an approach.

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Appendix.

Learners' reflections on listening activities in class, experience in podcasting, and listening practice outside class.

The excerpts refer to the reflections of students who were involved in this study. For the sake of authenticity, the language has not been corrected.

http://adambrauskaite.blogspot.com/

Listening activity is the most difficult for me. I think that my listening skills are not good and I should improve it. I think that my performance in listening activities in the class is quite bad, because I can not hear the main facts. However, I have really enjoyed listening to podcasts.

http://tvasilevskyte.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class*:* Help to practice and improve my comprehension, however I need more practice.

Listening to podcasts*:* It is very useful and interesting , helped me to improve not just listening but also

other skills.

Listening outside class*: it is easier to understand and usually the comprehension is better because the speech is not so formal.

http://grudzinskaiteb.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class were the most difficult tasks for me. In my view, I could perform better. I need more practice because sometimes I miss some words. Listening to podcasts was a new task. It was difficult for me to do this. I need to listen to podcasts as much as I can if I want to get more practice and perform better.

http://iavinaite.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class*: Sometimes it was hard for me to follow the text. I performed quite good when doing these tasks, and my weakest point is filling the gaps while listening. And I perform worse if the question I have to answer has 2 or more answers and I have to choose one, the most suitable.

Listening to podcasts: It was not hard for me to listen to podcasts, for I have chosen the ones, which had interesting theme. My vocabulary is good enough to understand everything I hear. Also there was a text written which helped a lot.

Listening outside the class: it was quite difficult to hear and understand foreigners speaking English, for they have different dialects and pronounce some words differently. However, I lived with them and listened to them speaking for quite long period of time and managed to understand everything.

http://kgasinska.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class. My performance on this task hasn't changed a lot this term. It was quite good before too.

Listening to podcasts. It was quite a difficult task. I had to listen to podcast for several times in order to understand it all. I think that my skills on this task became better.

Listening outside the class. In order to improve my listening skills I've tried to listen to BBC radio programs and also to watch English movies without reading subtitles. It's not easy.

http://jzenkova.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class were not very difficult, almost every time we were listening twice, so it helped to understand as better as possible. I found it not very difficult.

Listening to podcasts was more difficult than listening in class. I found much more easier to listen about interesting topic than about politics or something like this.

Listening outside class: I had a lot of opportunities to listen and use English language outside the class, and again I persuade myself that I can understand quite well, but need to improve my vocabulary and practice more.

7) http://vgruzdyte.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class: I think I performed satisfactorily in listening. It is difficult for me to understand some certain word when they are taped and said by foreigners , but usually I can understand the main idea of the speech, so I think I just need to have wider vocabulary and to listen to foreign speakers more often.

Listening to podcasts: my performance was satisfactory. It was difficult to understand certain ideas, but the main idea of the speech was clear to me.

http://gturskyte.blogspot.com/

The most intensive are listening activities in class. It was always one of the most difficult tasks to me, but I'm happy now. It's a rare success to make an exercise without mistakes, but I feel like I'm a step forward. I've listened to podcasts just once, so it's difficult to evaluate my skills objectively. And I should admit I have never practiced listening outside the class.

 http://ijankauskaite.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class: my skill is sometimes better and sometimes worse. This is unaccountable thing. Of course sometimes the task ir harder and sometimes easier but maybe it depends on introversion and the quality of record.

Listening to podcasts. Interesting task but the stories are sometimes very boring and when you are listening to them you feel asleep, but my performance wasn't bad and I'm happy.

Listening outside class. Sometimes I watch English channels and try to understand what they are talking about. If the words aren't specific I can understand the point. Although this term I had a lot of practice in speaking and listening because I went to the USA embassy and I needed to have a conversation with the USA embassy employee. Everything was good and I understood everything what they have said to me.

http://ikazlauskaite.blogspot.com/

Listening activities in class: my listening improved because the texts which we listened were quite easy so it was not so hard to plug in the text.

Listening to podcasts. This task was good because I could read the text of podcasts and translate the words I did not know. Listening outside class: I watch movies in English. It helps me to improve the understanding of this language and also it helps me to cream off what is the most important.