

## ***Stories on Youtube: Can this Be an Effective Learning Tool to Improve Listening and Transfer of Skills?***

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### **Abstract**

Use of online learning opportunities among language teachers and learners has become one of the commonly utilized tools as they provide effective means (convenient, accessible, authentic and sometimes free) to learn a foreign language. Research shows that online learning opportunities, particularly YouTube – a popular video sharing and viewing platform creates more meaningful and independent learning environment (e.g. Alhamami, 2013; Benson, 2015; Lacy, 2008), compared to other conventional way of learning a foreign language. This research reports on how two English language lecturers at a Mongolian University used stories available free of charge on YouTube to help students improve their listening and transfer of skills such as pronunciation, reading comprehension, note taking and speaking. This research project was initiated because of an increased interest to utilize YouTube in learning English from students studying at the University. The two lecturers took the students' desire on board and developed learning tasks for students to do independently outside the classroom (hereinafter self-independent work) using stories on YouTube. The fact that students were already using YouTube to learn English outside the curriculum was a positive start to the research project. The research project was implemented for a period of one year among first year English as a foreign language (EFL) students. The study results show that when learning content is easily accessible (ability to listen outside the classroom, on their phones, when travelling and walking etc.) and when there is a genuine desire to listen to an interesting story of their choice, students are more likely to effectively work on the learning tasks associated with the stories which in turn helped them to develop their language skills efficiently. However, limited access to WiFi or Internet, not seeking available support to execute the task were issues to develop the skills and independent learning style, despite a strong desire to learn English using YouTube.

Keywords: Online Learning, Stories on Youtube, Improve Listening Skills, Transfer of Skills

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## **Introduction**

“Globalization has changed the conditions under which foreign languages are taught, learned and used” (Kramersch, 2014, p. 302). Many language learners and teachers nowadays widely use YouTube as a learning and teaching tool. Within the context of using YouTube for language learning and teaching purposes, researchers describe it as a “worldwide literacy practice environment” that is informal and convenient for English language learners and teachers (Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou, 2004, p. 83). Kramersch (2014) points out that a frequent use of online resources has become a norm and its use especially YouTube is significantly increasing in teaching and learning contexts. Benson (2015) adds that such environment creates a real-life immersion to language including access to English speaking background people, English texts and language exchange. Although Internet provides rich environment for language teachers and learners, there is a lack of rich evidence in literature that captures how this impacts on developing EFL students listening and transfer of skills including pronunciation, reading comprehension, note taking and speaking skills. This research project aims to add to this research direction by investigating EFL students’ ability to develop their listening skills (primary goal) using stories available on YouTube as their self-independent work project which is part of their curriculum (but executed outside the curriculum), and assessed and marked. The study is also interested in finding out if the development in listening skills transferrable to other skill areas (secondary goal).

## **Literature review**

EFL teachers often have difficulties using multimedia and technology to motivate students to learn English language in and outside the language classrooms due to lack of access skills and funding. YouTube makes both teachers and learners’ job easier by being readily and freely available on the Internet. YouTube, a video hosting platform that started in 2005 is viewed billions of times every day around the world. Among a vast array of diverse content, YouTube offers a plethora of resources for educational purposes. However, substantive scholarly research documenting use of YouTube in EFL context is sparse. A study that looks at the use of video clips in a college EFL classrooms provided reasons why YouTube should be used in language learning and suggested teachers to incorporate videos in their classrooms by selecting YouTube content according to their purpose (Berk, 2009). Watkins and Wilkins (2011) highlight that teachers and students can literally do any exercises that they normally do in their classrooms using YouTube such as examining speech modulation, intonation shifts, grammatical elements, conversational nuances and many other topics.

Another study that examined the effectiveness of YouTube as a teaching tool to enhance EFL students on their listening comprehension skills found that significant effect on the part of the experimental group subjects' listening comprehension skills (Alqahtani, 2015). The differences found in the listening comprehension scores of the pre- and post-tests between the two groups, provided evidence of the significant effect of YouTube on the performance of the experimental group. These positive results implied that the use of YouTube videos provided an authentic native speaker setting that is beneficial to EFL learners. It is also regarded as a motivating factor that

encouraged EFL students to develop their listening comprehension skills and gained a deeper understanding of the foreign language (Alqahtani, 2015).

Watkins and Wilkins (2011) in their research paper entitled *Using YouTube in the EFL Classroom* point out that YouTube provides a real-life exposure to English language and promotes independent learning style. When students browse YouTube videos and listen to English media (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011), they are being immersed in English authentic language learning environment that largely lacks in EFL contexts (Johnson & Swain, 1997). This then increases second language (L2) input which in turn positively contributes to language acquisition process (Mangubhai, 2005). More positive impacts of YouTube have been documented in the literature such as it increases learners' ability to connect with the foreign language they are learning (Wang, 2005), and helps students to learn independently and potentially promotes autonomous learning habits (Leung, 2004). Benson and Voller (1997) describe learner autonomy as a mixture of five ideas: students are primarily responsible for their language development; students should develop transferable learning skills; students should be provided with opportunities to learn the language independently; students choose their path for learning; and students are interested in self-guided education.

An interesting question that was posed in Watkins and Wilkins' 2011 (p, 114) paper: "who should be more responsible for the direction taken in learning a language: the teacher or the student?" Their response was if teacher's focus is to develop students' learner autonomy, YouTube can be used to achieve this. Watkins and Wilkins' (2011) take on the use of YouTube and development learner autonomy formulated based on Benson and Voller's (1997) five idea of learner autonomy, is useful to this study. First, learners can identify their language limitations and areas for improvement while viewing YouTube videos in their own time while. This then provides possibilities for learners to further develop their language skills by viewing/listening the video of their choice as many times as they wish. Finally, given YouTube provides such learning opportunity for learning, self-guided follow up examination or in the context of this study comprehension tasks can be incorporated.

### **Improving listening skill**

It is useful to consider what listening skill is. O'Malley and Chamot's defined that "listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfil the task requirement" (1989, p. 19). As the definition shows, listening is an active process of understanding and constructing meaning from what learners are listening. In this study, students had to listen to the stories and read the captions at the same time. The primary goal for students was to listen and understand the stories with the aid from the captions and pictures. Therefore, reading and viewing were supplementary to the development of the listening skills. The benefit of listening to stories freely available on YouTube is that students could listen to the stories as many times as they liked. However, telling students to 'listen and repeat' if needed is not enough. To successfully learn a language, students need to know: what happens when they listen? and how listening skills help to improve other skills such as pronunciation, reading and vocabulary growth or speaking?

This means that teachers need to increase students' awareness on cognitive processes of listening and mindful listening. There are two cognitive processes: bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (conceptually driven) (Nunan, 1998). The bottom-up processing involves constructing meaning from the smallest unit of the spoken language to the largest one in a linear mode (Nunan, 1998). The bottom-up processing involves:

- decoding several sounds to form words.
- Then words are linked to form phrases, which make up sentences.
- These sentences build a complete text.
- The grammatical relationships (grammar elements, stress, rhythm, and intonation) also contribute to this data-driven processing (van Duzer, 1997). For example,

Learners can be trained to perform this processing (Nunan, 1998). The top-down processing is about interpreting meaning as intended by the speakers by means of schemata or structures of knowledge in the mind (Nunan, 1998). This emphasises background knowledge already possessed by the learners; and prior knowledge may facilitate their attempt to grasp the incoming information by relating the familiar with the new one. It is essential that learners are accustomed to performing this processing, usually by extracting the gist of the exchange they listen to. This again shows that teaching/discussion about the cognitive processes of listening to learners is essential to successfully develop listening skills and language learning for that matter. Griffiths (2003) points out that language learners should practice noticing language use when listening to native speakers.

Therefore, the concept that was useful to inform the development of this study and listening skills (other transferable skills) was 'mindful repetition' (Weiler, 2017) (see Figure 1). Weiler points out that key to learning is to be engaged in what we are doing. It is about being present to what one is learning.

Figure 1: Weiler's continuum to mindful repetition

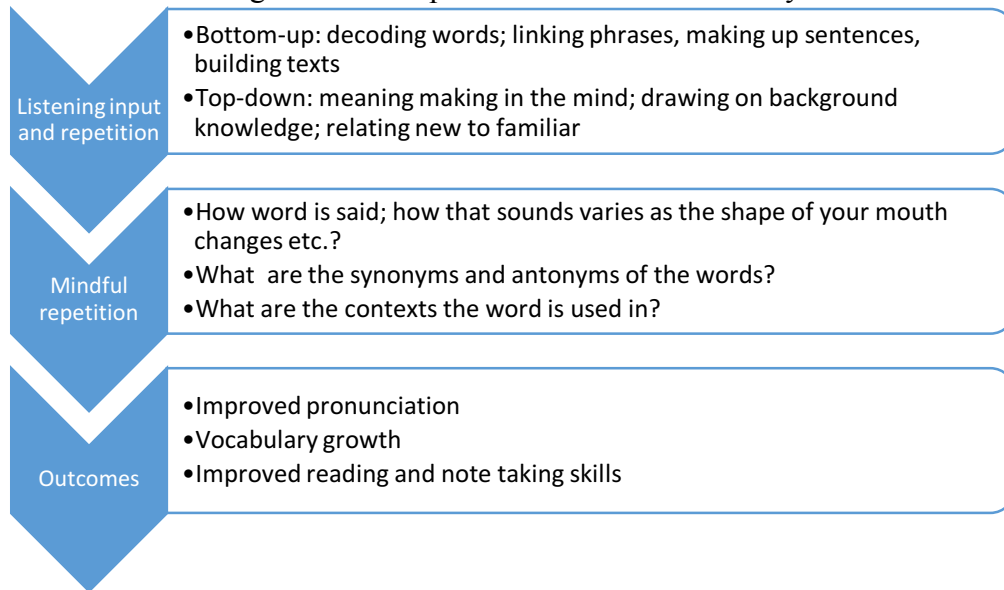


On this diagram, at one end of the spectrum there is 'repetition' commonly used word in teaching and literature. And at the other end, there is something called "mindful" repetition. Weiler says that learners' practice sits somewhere along that continuum. The first variety or repetition is where we believe that just by repeating, our practice or memory will improve. It works but when it is successful there are additional elements that language learners bring to what they may think as repetition. So, when this happens, "mindful repetition" happens. Mindful repetition is about having heightened awareness and noticing what you are doing consciously. Connecting to the mind and being engaged.

### **Conceptual framework of the study**

Based on the cognitive processes of listening and the concept of 'mindful repetition', the following conceptual framework has been developed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of the study



This shows that when students listen to an input (ie., a conversation) and repeat listening, cognitive process begins. They start from bottom up by decoding words; linking phrases, making up sentences, building texts then move on to top-down approach by meaning making in the mind; drawing on background knowledge; relating new to familiar.

As Weiler (2017) said, when people succeed in listening/learning, they engage in mindful repetition. This means they are aware of what is happening in their mind. What is working or what is not working? They ask questions actively: How word is said; how that sounds varies as the shape of your mouth changes?; What are the synonyms and antonyms of the words?; What are the contexts the word is used in?; What needs work on? Is something missing? Is the quality of the sound similar? Was the rhythm similar? etc. As a result of active mindful repetition, the outcome is usually positive. This study hoped to see improvement in students' listening skills, reading comprehension, note taking skill, and ability to retell stories. It also is interested how independent learning style is developed because of such learning.

### **The study**

This study aimed to gain an insight into using YouTube stories to develop and improve listening skills (primary goal). Also, it looked at understanding the process of listening and its impact on language learning and transfer of skills such as reading, note taking and retelling of stories. In this study, a series of fifteen stories published in Eden Buttenshaw's YouTube channel (originally from English7level.com) was used. The YouTube channel provided opportunities for learners to learn English through stories. These stories were selected because students can look at the pictures and read the captions as they listen to the stories that are clearly spoken by native English speakers with well-balanced speed and tone. List of stories are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Learn English through stories (Buttenshaw, 2017)

Stories	Length
1. Emma	3 hours 30 minutes
2. Ethan Frome	1 hour 43 minutes
3. Rebecca	3 hours 20 minutes
4. The enemy by Desmond Bagley	2 hours 50 minutes
5. About a boy	2 hours 35 minutes
6. The street lawyer	2 hour 5 minutes
7. The firm	2 hours 47 minutes
8. The Alchemist	2 hours 54 minutes
9. The Canterville ghost	31 minutes
10. The client	1 hour 50 minutes
11. Robinson Crusoe	1 hour
12. Remains of the day	4 hours
13. The stranger	55 minutes
14. One day	2 hours 30 minutes
15. Bridget jones's diary	2 hours 36 minutes

Initially, the stories seemed too long. But during the trial stage, teachers found out that once students are hooked in the unfolding of the story, they liked the fact that the stories were long. Before the commencement of self-independent work,

- teachers and students discussed what listening is and how it develops with the emphasis on conscious listening, meaning making and mindful repetition.
- teachers and students discussed how to use captions and pictures to aid their listening.
- students were familiarized with ways to take notes: notebooks, choice of note taking apps and mind mapping.
- students were familiarized with the follow up tasks that would be assessed and marked by the teachers (see **The study** section)
- students were encouraged to seek support from the teachers when needed.
- students were encouraged to listen to the stories at the University using the University Wi-Fi.

Sixty-eight English major students participated in this study. They were studying in their first year of University degree course. Students had one and a half month to spend on the self-independent work. This included listening to the story of choice and do follow up tasks. The follow up tasks that were assessed and marked consisted of retelling the story in front of the class and teachers. Students were allowed to retell the story looking at their notes. Students were instructed to take notes using only key words/phrases and drawing mind maps. They were not allowed to write full paragraphs and sentences from the YouTube video captions in their notes. The idea behind this was that when students look at the keywords and mind maps at later stage (during assessment time), the words and mind maps should trigger their memory and they can remember the story line (provided they learnt the words and also understood the story). Before the commencement of the retelling, students had to email their mind maps to the teachers but not the notes of the keywords. However, the notes were screened to ensure the instruction was followed.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data were collected using online survey called Survey Monkey (free of charge). This was used to collect data on the use of YouTube stories. Online survey is a convenient way to collect data from a large cohort answering the same questions (de Vaus, 1995) and it is one of the widely used survey methods (Walter, 2010). It is convenient in a sense that different types of data on different topics can be collected electronically from different respondents (Jansen, Corley & Jansen, 2007) in a short time and at little or no cost (Czaja & Blair, 2005).

The online survey was hosted on [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). The online survey link was sent to the students after the end of the one-and-a-half-month period. Students completed the surveys voluntarily before the final task and the respondents were anonymous which meant non-identifiable. [Surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) is a user-friendly tool that automatically analyses data itself. Respondent rate was very high –92%.

Students' marks awarded for their self –independent work was considered as data as they were used to see the relationship between marks awarded and results identified as a result of the online survey. Data analysis aimed to find meanings in data (Patton, 2012) or students' experiences with the tasks and their impact on developing listening, other transferable skills and also independent learning.

## **Results and discussion**

Online survey results indicate that overall students enjoyed doing the self-independent work. They reported that the more they understood the stories the more they enjoyed listening to them. Some of the points mentioned were: stories were easily accessible which made it easy to just open and listen on the go on their phones; the sound of the narrator's voice was soothing and clear that this motivated them to pronounce words clearly; the captions aided understanding of the story lines; aided the spelling when note taking; and the pictures also aided understanding as they created context to the stories.

Students also found the ongoing support during the one-and-a-half-month period from the teachers was useful. Although there were not many, some students needed help with unpacking some sections of the content, asked questions about using mindful repetition technique. It was difficult for them to continue listening to the story if they missed a section of the story. Other students sought help with their mind maps to check if they were on the right track. There were even some positive anecdotal comments from the students saying that active engagement with what they listened helped them to improve their listening and other skills "being present with these stories is very useful". However, there was an issue with not being able to listen to the story due to having a limited access to the Wi-Fi or Internet. Although they could listen to the stories at the University using University Wi-Fi, they did not seem to use this opportunity much.

Other survey questions identified that students noticed significant improvement in listening, pronunciation, reading comprehension, and some even reported speaking skills. Repeated mindful listening played a key role in improving those skills. There was no clear indication whether listening improved first then pronunciation or vice

versa. Or whether students reading comprehension improved first then listening skills. Regardless, it was clear from the data that mindful repetition technique was useful to develop those skills. Students seemed to approach differently to decode and unpack the stories. Some listened to the stories without reading the captions for the first time then the second or subsequent times, they listened and read at the same time which was “incredibly useful to understand” one student reported. Another student reported that reading captions first without even understanding the story was useful to a warm up as this exercise assisted the student to understand the story better the second time around “I first read and read. I was listening but I did not understand but still I read and read. Then after that I listened and read again, I understand the story well with dictionary”.

Note taking and mind mapping were also reported useful to better understand the story “I listened to the story many times. First, I just listened. Then I listened and read the captions in front of my computer and took notes. Third, I listened, read, and looked at my notes to check my understanding. It was good because it was easy to write my mind map after”. Students appeared to create their mind maps after they fully understood the stories by listening and reading several times, based on their notes of key words/phrases. They seemed to really enjoy creating the mind mapping exercise. One student wrote “when I write my mind map, I can see all stories in front of me”. Another student reported “I am glad I did mind map because I can check my understanding and see my understanding on the paper in front of me”. Several students created very colourful mind maps with pictures, although it was not the requirement, it was a sign of them enjoying working on the exercise.

All sixty-eight students successfully passed the self-independent work. 67% of the students were awarded higher marks ranging from 76 -96 and 33% of the students scored between 62-75. Compared to self-independent works in previous semesters, this time around the marks were significantly higher. This may be since students enjoyed listening to the stories, enjoyed doing follow up tasks and the fact that they were already using the YouTube made this task easier. It was found that higher scoring students created detailed but easy to follow mind maps. They also sought helps during the one-and-a-half-month period. Looking at their notes, it was found they used bottom up approach by decoding words and linking meaningful phrases. These assisted to retell the stories well. When they get stuck with words, they looked their notes up and continued retelling the stories. The detailed mind maps showed that the meaning making process happened in the mind which made the retelling easier for them with flow and continuity.

Higher scoring students were not looking at their notes as much which indicated that their vocabulary growth significantly increased which in turn may be attributed to their improvement in reading skills (reading of the captions). This shows that students did use mindful repetition technique, and this impacts positively on the development of a range of skills. As was explained by Weiler (2017), mindful repetition is about having heightened awareness and noticing what you are doing consciously - connecting to the mind and being engaged. The successful students must have been using this approach. Weiler (2017) points out that with the help of mindful repeated listening many learners maximise their chances of learning a language successfully (listening, vocabulary or reading skills). They have improved understanding and unfolding awareness of their learning (Weiler, 2017) including what is working, why



is it working; what is not working or why is it not working. This approach to learning increases learners' ability to connect with the foreign language they are learning (Wang, 2005), and helps students to learn independently and potentially promotes autonomous learning habits (Leung, 2004).

On the other hand, lower scoring students did not seek help from the teachers, their mind maps were largely unorganised as it was difficult to follow how the story was unfolding, and some were not able to recognise the key words/phrases that they wrote on their notes. This made it difficult for them to retell the stories successfully and fully. This shows that they may have been able to decode words, linked phrases to be able to retell stories but they may have not been able to successfully engage in meaning making process leading up to the final assessment. As was identified by Weiler (2017) listen and repeat technique has its limitations because it does not help students to know or be assured that success would be achieved (Weiler, 2017). This indicates why many learners struggle in their efforts to learn languages which may have been the case in these students' context.

However, it should be noted that in the final assessment it was found that almost all students' pronunciation skills markedly increased. This shows that mindful repetition and conscious listening exercises did in fact help language learners increase their pronunciation skills. When students listen to English media (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011) or in this case YouTube, they are being immersed in English authentic language learning environment (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Benson (2015) adds that such environment creates a real-life immersion to language including access to English speaking background people and English texts. The YouTube must have provided a great opportunity for the students to improve their pronunciation skills.

Finally, students made suggestions that incorporating YouTube stories into curriculum may be a way to motivate more students to learn English and develop language skills. However, the suggestions also included choosing shorter stories more appropriate to students' proficiency levels. This was because some students spent a lot of time looking up unknown words in the dictionary as they were not able to guess the meanings off the pictures or context.

## **Conclusions**

The development of theoretical framework that guided the study throughout was very useful. This framework was not only used to inform the study but also used as a learning tool for students to understand the listening process and how this process transfer to other skills over time. Looking at the higher scoring students experiences with the task; listening was indeed an active process of understanding and constructing meaning from what learners are listening. When this is done well, transfer of skills happened in the background or at the same time even sometimes the students may have not been aware of this process. The successful students were able to "constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfil the task requirement" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1989, p. 19). Therefore, helping students to develop language learning techniques before giving them the actual task, discussing how the learning process works and how listening and other skills improve, and also

providing support along the way greatly assists them to significantly improve their language skills and achieve higher marks.

The use of YouTube for the self-independent work/task which was described as “worldwide literacy practice environment” that is informal and convenient for English language learners and teachers (Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou, 2004, p. 83) was a key contributing factor for the positive impacts mentioned above. It was difficult to draw a fine line between the development of listening skills and other transferrable skills such as improvement in pronunciation, reading skills, vocabulary growth and even speaking skills. This may be because students were listening, reading, taking notes, and viewing - repeating these several times, it was not easy for them to exactly pinpoint the actual process. Although this was not the intention of this study, it might be useful for other researchers who are interested in studying the cognitive side of the learning process.

Independent learning was evident in higher achieving learners. They needed guidance at the beginning of the self-independent work period but when they knew what they must do to perform well, they did not seek help and independently executed the task with great outcome. Those who achieved lower marks, did not seek help, and did not achieve good grades. This shows that in order for the learner to become an independent autonomous learner, they need to seek help and be supported along the way until they figured out themselves what needs to be done to perform well. Independent learning style can certainly be transferred to other learning areas and will be useful for them to achieve their desired goals at University and beyond. In the case of the higher achieving students they were responsible for their language development; developed transferable language learning skills; they took advantage of the opportunities available for them to learn the language independently; they chose their path for learning once they figured how to learn; and students were successful at self-guided learning. This is in line with Benson and Voller (1997) and Watkins and Wilkins’ (2011) descriptions of the development of learner autonomy.

### **Practical Suggestions for Teachers**

The two teachers have a few practical suggestions for the fellow EFL teachers based on the outcome of this research project. To help ELF learner to develop and improve their language skills, it is useful to quickly and effectively.

- increase students’ awareness on cognitive processes of listening and mindful listening.
- train learners to perform this processing as Nunan suggested (1998)
- turn away from what we can call mindless repetition.
- Find out what students are using to learn English outside the classroom (eg., YouTube)
- let students know that learning is to be engaged in what we are doing. It is about being present to what one is learning (Weiler, 2017)
- learning how to learn is just as important as learning what to learn.
- developing students learning techniques will have longer lasting effect on the student.
- when students have figured out ‘how to learn’, it then assists them to transfer skills and become independent learners.

To help students understand the learning process, encourage them to take notes of what they are learning and create mind maps. This exercise was especially useful in this project because it greatly aided students to develop their vocabulary, reading and retelling of stories. Also, to achieve the above, teachers' support is critical. Teachers need to motivate students to engage in self-directed learning and understand the learning process, especially when students are working tasks such as self-independent work.

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