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# ENHANCING LISTENING AND SPEAKING COMPETENCE THROUGH DIGITAL AND AI-SUPPORTED PEDAGOGY IN UPPER-INTERMEDIATE EFL CLASSROOMS

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**ABSTRACT:** This study investigates how digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance listening and speaking instruction for 17 upper-intermediate university students. The approach combines authentic audio, communicative speaking tasks, and AI-based pronunciation and feedback tools. Results show clear improvement in listening comprehension, fluency, pronunciation, and learner confidence. The study concludes that well-integrated digital and AI-supported methods effectively strengthen oral communication skills in modern EFL classrooms.

**АННОТАЦИЯ:** В исследовании рассматривается использование цифровых технологий и искусственного интеллекта (ИИ) при обучении аудированию и говорению 17 студентов уровня Upper-Intermediate. Подход включает аутентичные аудиоматериалы, коммуникативные задания и ИИ-инструменты для произношения и обратной связи. Результаты показывают улучшение аудирования, беглости речи, произношения и уверенности студентов. Сделан вывод, что грамотно интегрированные цифровые и ИИ-методы эффективно развивают устную коммуникацию в EFL-классах.

**ANNOTATSIYA:** Ushbu tadqiqot raqamli vositalar va sun’iy intellekt (SI)dan foydalanishning 17 nafar Upper-Intermediate talabalari uchun tinglab tushunish va og‘zaki nutqni o‘qitishdagi samaradorligini o‘rganadi. Yondashuv autentik audio, kommunikativ mashg‘ulotlar va SI asosidagi talaffuz hamda teskari aloqa vositalarini birlashtiradi. Natijalar tinglab tushunish, ravonlik, talaffuz va talabalarning ishonchi oshganini ko‘rsatadi. Xulosa shuki, to‘g‘ri joriy etilgan raqamli va SI-yordamchi metodlar og‘zaki muloqot ko‘nikmalarini samarali rivojlantiradi.

**KEYWORDS:** Listening Comprehension; Speaking Skills; Digital Tools; Artificial Intelligence; Communicative Language Teaching; Pronunciation

## INTRODUCTION

Listening and speaking skills are fundamental components of communicative competence in a second or foreign language. Effective listening underpins academic success and professional communication; for instance, employers rank listening among the top three skills desired in job applicants (Thompson et al., 2004). Despite its importance, explicit instruction in listening has often been neglected in educational curricula – few university programs offer dedicated listening courses, and when included, listening is usually addressed only briefly (Thompson et al., 2004). Only in the last few decades has the teaching of listening "come into its own," gaining a more prominent role in language classrooms (Richards, 2003). Speaking skills have always been a major focus of language teaching, but approaches to teaching speaking have evolved significantly. In the 1970s, speaking instruction typically meant *"repeating after the teacher, reciting a memorized dialogue, or responding to a mechanical drill"*, reflecting a drill-based, form-focused paradigm. The rise of communicative language teaching in the 1980s led to a major shift toward teaching speaking as interactive skill use rather than rote repetition (Richards, 2003).

This paper reports on an instructional approach designed to enhance upper-intermediate students' listening and speaking skills by leveraging digital resources and AI-driven applications. Seventeen second-year university students participated in an integrative skills program that blended theory-informed techniques with modern technology. The following sections present a review of relevant literature on teaching listening and speaking, describe the methodology of the implemented approach, analyze the results in terms of student performance and feedback, and discuss the implications for language teaching. By bridging classical pedagogical frameworks with innovative tools, the study aims to demonstrate how integrating digital technology and AI can enrich the teaching and learning of listening and speaking.

## LITERATURE REVIEW\

Teaching Listening Skills. Listening has historically been the least understood and taught of the language skills, often overshadowed by speaking and reading. Research in the late 20th century, however, began to shed light on the processes underlying listening comprehension and to propose systematic approaches for teaching listening (Richards, 1983). Richards (1983) conceptualized listening pedagogy along three dimensions: *approach* (theories about the nature of spoken language and how

listeners process it), *design* (developing curricula based on learners' needs and specific listening micro-skills), and *procedure* (the classroom techniques and activities for practicing those skills). At the design level, a needs analysis enables instructors to identify the micro-skills that learners require for different listening contexts. Richards (1983) offered taxonomy examples, noting, for instance, that conversational listening calls for the *"ability to follow the topic of a conversation, recognize vocabulary for expressing positive and negative attitudes, and infer a speaker's attitude from reasons given"*. Such micro-skills become the objectives of instruction and are practiced through targeted exercises.

Subsequent work distinguished between bottom-up and top-down processes in listening. In bottom-up listening, comprehension is seen as a "linear, data-driven process" where the listener builds understanding from the smallest units of sound to complete messages; success depends on accurately decoding the input (Richards, 2003). Top-down listening, by contrast, involves *"actively constructing meaning based on expectations, inferences, intentions, and prior knowledge"* (Richards, 2003). Modern listening pedagogy recognizes that learners need to develop both bottom-up skills (e.g. phonetic discrimination, parsing speech) and top-down skills (e.g. using context and background knowledge) to become effective listeners. Another important trend is the emphasis on authentic listening materials. Rather than using scripted textbook dialogues or contrived recordings, current methodology advocates exposing students to *real*language use. Richards (2003) observes that written texts read aloud are poor substitutes for natural spoken discourse; instead, *"authenticity in materials"* has become a cornerstone of listening pedagogy. This move toward authenticity reflects the goal of preparing learners for the kinds of real-time, unsimplified communication they will encounter outside the classroom.

**Teaching Speaking Skills.** Speaking is a productive skill that has long been central to language teaching, but conceptions of what it means to teach speaking have shifted from repetition of language forms toward enabling genuine communication. In traditional Audiolingual and structural approaches prevalent in the mid-20th century, speaking practice often consisted of imitating model dialogues and drilling sentence patterns. This approach prioritized accuracy in controlled conditions but did not necessarily equip learners for spontaneous interaction. With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, the focus moved to functional use of language and fluency. The notion of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) introduced in the 1980s led to *"major shifts in conceptions of syllabuses and*

*methodology"*, emphasizing that students should learn to express meaning in varied situations rather than just produce correct sentences (Richards, 2003). Task-based and learner-centered methodologies became prominent, encouraging activities like role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks that mirror real-life speaking situations.

One aspect of speaking proficiency that has received renewed attention is pronunciation. Intelligible pronunciation is vital to successful oral communication (Levis & Grant, 2011), yet historically pronunciation was often taught in isolation (e.g. through repetitive drills of sounds) or relegated to the status of a remedial sub-skill. Modern consensus holds that pronunciation should be taught not as an isolated drill, but in the context of speaking and listening activities. Many students themselves recognize the importance of pronunciation and ask for more class time to be devoted to it, but teachers often feel uncertain about how to incorporate it into the curriculum. Given that most courses emphasize general oral communication over pronunciation (Murphy, 1991), teachers must seek creative ways to integrate pronunciation into speaking-oriented classes in a manner clearly related to the oral communication goals of the course (Levis & Grant, 2011). As Murphy (1991) – echoed by Levis and Grant (2011) – argues, pronunciation instruction *"needs to be integrated with… communicative activities in which speakers and listeners engage in . . . meaningful communication"*. In other words, work on sounds, stress, and intonation should occur alongside interactive speaking practice so that improvements in pronunciation directly enhance communicative ability. These principles aim to ensure that pronunciation training is directly relevant to students' communicative needs and is seamlessly woven into the speaking activities.

In summary, the literature suggests that effective teaching of listening and speaking requires: (1) a structured approach to listening that builds both bottom-up decoding skills and top-down interpretive strategies, using authentic materials and encouraging learner reflection; (2) a communicative approach to speaking that integrates attention to linguistic form (including pronunciation) within meaning-focused use of language; and (3) the use of learner-centered techniques that engage students actively. These insights provide a foundation for designing classroom interventions. In recent years, a new variable has entered the pedagogical equation – the use of digital technology and AI – which can potentially amplify these best practices. The following sections describe how an instructional approach was implemented in light of these principles, integrating digital tools to support the development of listening and speaking skills.

## METHODOLOGY

**Participants and Context:** The teaching intervention was conducted with 17 upper-intermediate English learners in their second year of university study. The students, roughly 19–20 years old, were enrolled in an English language course that met for three hours per week. They had a solid foundation in grammar and vocabulary and were capable of sustaining conversations and understanding general listening material, but needed improvement in more advanced listening comprehension (e.g. authentic fast speech, idiomatic language) and in speaking fluency and pronunciation. The instructional period spanned one semester (15 weeks). The goal was to systematically improve both listening and speaking skills by leveraging contemporary digital resources and AI-powered tools, while grounding activities in communicative language teaching methodology.

**Instructional Design:** The course was designed around weekly thematic units (e.g. "Technology and Society," "Education," "Culture and Travel"), each integrating listening and speaking activities. Drawing on Thompson et al.'s (2004) integrative model, each unit followed a cycle of *pre-listening preparation*, *during-listening activities*, and *post-listening speaking tasks*, coupled with ongoing reflection. The overall approach can be summarized as follows:

**Authentic Listening Materials:** Each unit incorporated at least one authentic listening resource, such as a short TED Talk excerpt, a podcast episode, or a video clip from news media. These materials provided exposure to natural language use, varying accents, and real-world discourse. Using authentic audio addressed the concern that many textbook dialogues are inauthentic and *"thinly veiled excuses for the presentation of a structure"*, lacking natural conversational features (Burns, 1998). Before playing the audio, students were guided to *prepare to listen*by discussing the topic, predicting content, and reviewing key vocabulary (sometimes using an AI-based vocabulary app that provided definitions and pronunciations of new words).

**Interactive Listening Tasks with Digital Tools:** During listening, students completed tasks that encouraged active processing. For example, using an online learning platform, they would listen to the audio and answer comprehension questions that popped up at intervals (providing immediate feedback). Tasks ranged from noting down specific details to inferring the speaker's intent or attitude, thus targeting both bottom-up and top-down skills. The instructor often paused the audio for group discussions, or replayed segments based on student needs. In some sessions, a speech-

to-text AI tool was used: as students listened, a real-time transcript (with a slight delay) was generated and displayed. This tool helped students verify what they heard and was especially useful for recognizing fast speech or new expressions. To prevent over-reliance on the transcript, it was only revealed after students had attempted to comprehend the segment on their own. The inclusion of multiple listenings and progressively challenging tasks was aligned with best practices in listening pedagogy (Mendelsohn, 1994, as cited in Richards, 2003) which emphasize schema preparation, strategy use, and *scaffolding* listening through repeated exposure.

**Speaking Activities and AI Support:** Every listening activity was followed by a speaking component that utilized the content or theme of the listening as a springboard. Post-listening speaking tasks included pair or group discussions (e.g. debating an issue raised in the podcast), role-plays (e.g. simulating an interview or talk show related to the topic), and short presentations. The speaking tasks were structured to encourage use of any new vocabulary or expressions encountered in the listening. To integrate pronunciation practice into these speaking activities, the instructor identified one or two pronunciation features relevant to the listening material or common learner errors observed (for example, the pronunciation of past tense "-ed" endings, or the intonation patterns for asking questions). Brief focus-on-form sessions were conducted: the teacher might model the correct pronunciation and have students repeat, or use a minimal pair exercise if a specific sound contrast (like /r/ vs /l/) was problematic. Importantly, these mini-lessons were tied to communicative practice – for instance, after practicing question intonation, students would immediately engage in an interview role-play to apply it.

**AI-Powered Pronunciation Feedback:** In addition to teacher-led pronunciation work, students had access to an AI pronunciation tutor application outside of class. This app allowed them to practice key sentences from the listening or speaking tasks by recording their voice; the AI then provided immediate feedback on which words or sounds were unclear and gave a rating of overall pronunciation clarity. Students were encouraged to use this tool as homework or during lab sessions to reinforce their pronunciation in a private, self-paced manner. Levis and Grant's (2011) principle of keeping pronunciation tied to speaking goals was observed – the phrases practiced in the app were functional sentences they would actually use in discussions (not random tongue-twisters). This technology provided the "creative ways to integrate pronunciation into speaking-oriented classes" that teachers have been searching for, by offering individualized practice without consuming excessive class time.

**Data Collection and Evaluation:** The effectiveness of the approach was evaluated using a combination of assessments and feedback:

*Pre- and Post-Tests:* At the beginning and end of the semester, students took a listening test (consisting of multiple-choice and short-answer questions based on an authentic audio passage) and a speaking test (a structured interview with the teacher on familiar topics, which was recorded). These provided quantitative and qualitative measures of improvement.

*Ongoing Performance:* Listening comprehension quizzes were administered regularly through the online platform, providing scores that tracked progress. Speaking tasks were assessed using rubrics focusing on fluency, coherence, pronunciation, and use of appropriate vocabulary/grammar.

*Student Reflections:* Every week, students wrote a short reflective journal entry about that week's listening and speaking activities, noting what they found easy or difficult and which strategies or tools helped them. This practice promoted self-assessment and informed the teacher of areas needing further attention.

## RESULTS

**Improvement in Listening Skills:** Over the semester, students demonstrated notable improvements in listening comprehension. On the standardized listening tests, the class average score rose from 60% in the pre-test to 80% in the post-test. Most students showed better ability to understand authentic audio: for example, they could follow the main ideas and important details in a 5-minute news segment at near-native speed, whereas initially many struggled with this. In weekly online listening quizzes based on the course materials, the average success rate steadily increased, indicating that students were comprehending more of the content and perhaps employing listening strategies more effectively. Qualitative data from student reflections support these gains. Students frequently commented that initially they had difficulty "catching" fast speech or idiomatic expressions, but by the end, they felt more confident. One student wrote, "Now I can understand English podcasts without needing to replay many times," while another noted, "I learned how to guess meaning from context and focus on key words instead of every word." Such comments suggest growth in top-down processing skills alongside improved bottom-up decoding.

**Improvement in Speaking Skills:** The development in speaking skills was evident in several areas: fluency, confidence, and pronunciation. In the pre-course interviews,

many students spoke hesitantly, with frequent pauses, fillers ("um," "you know"), and a tendency to revert to their first language when stuck. By the final speaking assessment, most students spoke more fluidly and coherently on assigned topics. The average speaking test rating (on a 10-point rubric) improved from 6.5 to 8.0. Notably, the length of continuous speech students could produce increased – for instance, in a final presentation task, students were comfortably speaking for 4–5 minutes, whereas earlier in the semester even 2 minutes of sustained speaking was challenging for some.

Pronunciation saw qualitative improvement. Although accentedness (having a non-native accent) remained, intelligibility was significantly better. The teacher's notes from the first interviews show several instances of communication breakdown due to pronunciation (e.g. one student's mispronunciation of "law" as "low" caused misunderstanding). In contrast, during the final interviews, there were far fewer such breakdowns. Several students improved problematic sounds or stress patterns that had been identified early on. For example, students who consistently dropped the ending sounds in words ("walked" sounding like "walk") were, by course end, articulating them more clearly, making their speech easier to follow. The AI pronunciation tutor's logs indicated that all students reduced their error rates on practiced phrases over time – the app typically calculates a score, and most students moved from "fair" or "good" ratings initially to "good" or "excellent" on key sentences after repeated practice. This quantitative proxy confirms that their pronunciation production became more target-like for those items.

## DISCUSSION

The outcomes of this instructional intervention can be understood in light of the principles outlined in the literature. The significant improvement in students' listening abilities reflects the benefits of a structured, authentic, and strategy-oriented approach. As Richards (2003) noted, listening is now recognized as a critical skill that must be taught with intention. In this study, treating listening as a process to be developed – by including pre-listening schema activation, focused listening tasks, and post-listening reflection – proved effective. Students' reported use of context clues and focus on key ideas indicates they internalized top-down strategies, validating the idea that learners become better listeners when taught to actively construct meaning rather than passively trying to decode every word (Richards, 2003). Furthermore, the use of authentic materials likely increased their ability to cope with real-world spoken English, an outcome anticipated by proponents of authenticity in listening input. Burns' (1998)

critique of unnatural textbook dialogues was addressed by providing genuine discourse; as a result, students became accustomed to the speed, unpredictability, and pragmatics of actual speech. The positive reception of authentic materials by students in this study reinforces the argument that even at upper-intermediate levels, learners benefit from the challenge and relevance of real-life listening texts.

The integrated approach to speaking in the course – emphasizing both communicative practice and attention to form – appears to have been a key factor in students' oral skill development. The literature suggests that purely fluency-focused activities or purely accuracy-focused drills are less effective than a blend of the two. Our results support this: students gained fluency through frequent discussions and speaking tasks (as evidenced by longer, more coherent speech in the post-test), but they also improved specific aspects of accuracy, like pronunciation and certain grammar usages, because these were addressed in context. This echoes Burns' (1998) view of embedding analytic focus within communication tasks. For instance, when a pronunciation issue (like final consonant deletion) was noted across several students, a brief class exercise targeted that feature, and students immediately applied it in subsequent speaking. This kind of responsive focus on form did not interrupt the communicative flow; rather, it enriched it by giving students new tools to express themselves more clearly. Over time, as students saw their pronunciation improve and communication become smoother, they gained confidence – aligning with Levis and Grant's (2011) assertion that integrating pronunciation into speaking activities meets learners' communicative needs better than isolating it.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to enhance the listening and speaking skills of upper-intermediate university students through an integrated approach that combines pedagogical best practices with the innovative use of digital tools and AI. Over the course of one semester, 17 students engaged with authentic listening materials, interactive exercises, communicative speaking tasks, and AI-driven applications designed to provide feedback and additional practice. The results were encouraging: students showed marked improvement in comprehension and oral proficiency, gained confidence, and responded positively to the learning experience.

Several key conclusions can be drawn. First, teaching listening and speaking in tandem – as complementary skills – proved effective. The integrated skills approach

reflected the reality that communication is a two-way process of understanding and responding. By grounding this approach in theory (for example, applying Richards' framework for listening and Burns' insights on speaking pedagogy) and then extending it with technology, we created a learning environment that was both principled and dynamic. Second, the incorporation of digital and AI tools can greatly enrich language instruction when aligned with clear objectives. Tools like AI pronunciation tutors and conversational chatbots, when used thoughtfully, give learners extra channels to practice and receive feedback, effectively multiplying the teacher's capacity to address individual needs. The success of these tools in our context suggests that AI has matured to a point where it can be a valuable assistant in language classrooms – not replacing the human teacher, but augmenting the learning process. In conclusion, the integration of digital tools and AI into teaching listening and speaking can yield significant benefits, provided it is done in harmony with sound pedagogical practices.

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