Using web resources to support teachers and students with the teaching and practice of listening comprehension

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Abstract

There is consistent evidence which shows that technology can and does improve attainment in almost all subjects. However, many teachers, who belong to the "digital immigrant" group, are not as plugged in with ICT as most of their students –"digital natives"–, and often feel scared to work with a new medium they are not familiar with. Two are the goals of this paper: the first one is to show how beneficial the use of ICT can be in our classes, specially in the teaching of listening skills, and the second one is to describe how to make the most of free, easy–to–use links to teach and practice L2 listening both inside and outside the classroom walls. All in all, we want to present the use of these tools as a challenge which is not so difficult to achieve and which will facilitate both our teaching and our students learning process and practice to a great extent.

Key words: L2, teaching, practice, listening comprehension, web resources, ICT

Resumen

Existe buena evidencia de que el uso de las nuevas tecnologías (TIC) puede mejorar, y de hecho mejora, los resultados obtenidos en la mayoría de las materias de estudio. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los profesores que pertenecen al grupo de "inmigrantes digitales" no están conectados con las nuevas tecnologías como lo están sus estudiantes –"nativos digitales"– y frecuentemente se muestran reacios a trabajar con un medio nuevo con el que no están familiarizados.

Dos son los principales objetivos de este artículo: en primer lugar demostrar lo beneficioso que resulta el uso de las nuevas tecnologías en el aula, muy en especial en la enseñanza de la destreza auditiva, y en segundo lugar describir la forma de sacar el mayor partido a los enlaces gratuitos aquí presentados para la enseñanza y la práctica de la destreza auditiva tanto dentro como fuera del aula. En resumen, queremos acercarnos a las TIC como un reto que no sólo resulta más sencillo de lo que pensamos, sino que a su vez va a facilitar en gran medida tanto el proceso de enseñanza– aprendizaje como la práctica en la lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: L2, enseñanza, práctica, destreza auditiva, recursos web, TICS.

1. Introduction

Listening comprehension plays a critical role in both communication and in language acquisition. However, despite this crucial role, in the areas of Second Language Acquisition Research and Second Language Teaching, it has always been the most forgotten and least researched of the four macro–skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening). Thus, until the 1970´s, listening was almost ignored and information about this skill came from the L1. Moreover, until not so long ago, listening was not considered as a separate and independent skill in itself, with its own characteristics, purposes and micro–skills, but as an activity of means by which the other macro–skills could be taught and acquired; thus, in Cook´s words, listening has been largely considered as a way of "learning" language rather than as a way of "processing" language (Cook, 1991:81).

Fortunately, the role of listening comprehension in second language acquisition and language teaching has moved forwards lately, not only because its relevance in the communication process is widely accepted, but specially because current research has given it a more prominent role. Thus, listening is nowadays considered as a skill on its own with its own characteristics, as an active –rather than passive– and very complex skill which deserves special treatment and a special teaching methodology (cf. Field 1998 2008; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Gómez, 2008c).

Listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity. It is a complex, active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger sociocultural context of the utterance. Co–ordinating all of this involves a great deal of mental activity on the part of the listener. Listening is hard work, and deserves more analysis and support. (Vandergrift, 1999:168)

In teaching and learning foreign languages, it is precisely the listening skill one of the most difficult to teach and acquire, and that is why proficiency levels tends to be very low (Gómez, 2005 & 2008b). In order to overcome this difficulty, to improve our students´ listening skills and prepare them to be real listeners who can cope with real listening situations, the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) have become an excellent help for both teachers and students as we will analyse in detail throughout this article.

On the one hand, teachers can have access to an unlimited amount and variety of great quality materials, which will help them cope with the different students´ preferences, interests, needs and learning styles (Gómez, 2008a, 2008d, 2008e, 2009). On the other hand, our students are what Prensky (2001) call "digital natives", i.e., a generation who are very familiar with this "new language" of computers and have therefore positive attitudes towards the use of ICT in the classroom, something which will consequently influence their motivation and achievement in the language process:

Our students today are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. So what does that make the rest of us? Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are, and always will be compared to them, Digital Immigrants. (Prenski, 2001).

As the use of ICT is a key factor in all fields of modern education, this article will focus on the teaching and practising of L2 listening comprehension through the new technologies and thus it will analyse in detail not only the advantages in comparison with previous materials used so far (section 2), but also it will show us where to find this valuable material (section 3) and step by step guide on what to do with it and how to use it both inside and outside the classroom walls (section 4). The article will be rounded up by some final considerations in the conclusion chapter (section 5).

2. Past and present in the teaching of listening comprehension.

For many years, audio tapes have been a very useful material most teachers have chosen for their everyday teaching. However, these tapes played by what was considered the "ideal playback machine for teachers´ use" (Rixon, 1986:132) are being used less and less and are therefore giving way to the new technologies, a step beyond which represent the big improvement and the new trend in the teaching and practising of listening comprehension nowadays (cf. Gómez, 2008a, 2009).

Computers support a meaningful learning environment for listening comprehension by combining visual, auditory, and textual information with interactivity.

The computer and interactive technologies will allow teachers to select materials of all kinds, support them as learners´ needs dictate, and use the visual options of screen presentation or the interactive capabilities of computer control to help students develop good listening techniques (Garrett, 1991).

Several are the advantages that have been claimed for multimedia materials (cf. Gómez,2008a, 2009). Tony Lynch summarises them in his book Teaching Listening Comprehension and points out the main strengths are that they offer students greater choice and control and allow them to adapt the materials according to their own needs and preferred learning styles in the areas of content, mode (video/audio), activity, task type, difficulty, support (subtitles/hypertext), sequence, time and pace and advice (Lynch, 2009:9).

The following table is very representative as it provides an excellent overview of the characteristics of different media used for listening comprehension so far:

Text	Audio	Video	Computer
The **text/tapescript** shows …	The **soundtrack** adds …	The **video image** adds …	The **computer** adds …
words spoken	voice(s)	speakers' bodies – gestures – facial expressions	learner control – precision of replay – flexibility of support – choice of media (DVD, iPod)
'stage directions' – accompanying actions – emotion in the voice	prosodic elements – intonation – pitch – stress – accent(s) audible context – sounds off – 'atmosphere'	visible context – general setting – actions/movement – deictic reference	support options – subtitles (first or second language) – hotlinks to word glosses – slower rate online hyperlinks to – dictionary – encyclopedia – corpora

Information available for use in comprehension

relative scarcity   *relative wealth*

Table 1. The relationship between different media in listening comprehension. Lynch, 2009:8

3. A sampling of Web–Based resources for teaching and practising listening comprehension

This section covers a selection of websites which we consider most useful and a good starting point for teachers and students of English as a foreign language. You just need internet connection and all this material can be used for free with just a click of a button. They are very easy to use and most of them have a set of clickable buttons, so that is why the use is very friendly and straightforward. A list and a brief description of each link are included here; nevertheless, we encourage the reader to take sometime to check in detail all these web pages as they all have lot to offer.

- http://news.bbc.co.uk is an extraordinary resource to watch the World News. It also offers us the written version of the news, so we can both listen and read or use the audio or the written texts with different purposes. For those who just want to have a quick overview of what is happening in the

world, they can watch a short summary of the news by clicking on the option "One Minute World News".

- http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm offers reports on World News and information on American Culture and History which students can either read, listen to it or do both, so as an independent learning tool, this site has ample opportunities for students. Particularly interesting is the programme called "Words and Their Stories", in which a five minute feature about American English words and expressions is broadcasted.

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/. If you prefer listening to the radio instead, you just have to enter this site and click on the loudspeaker icons, as shown in figure 1
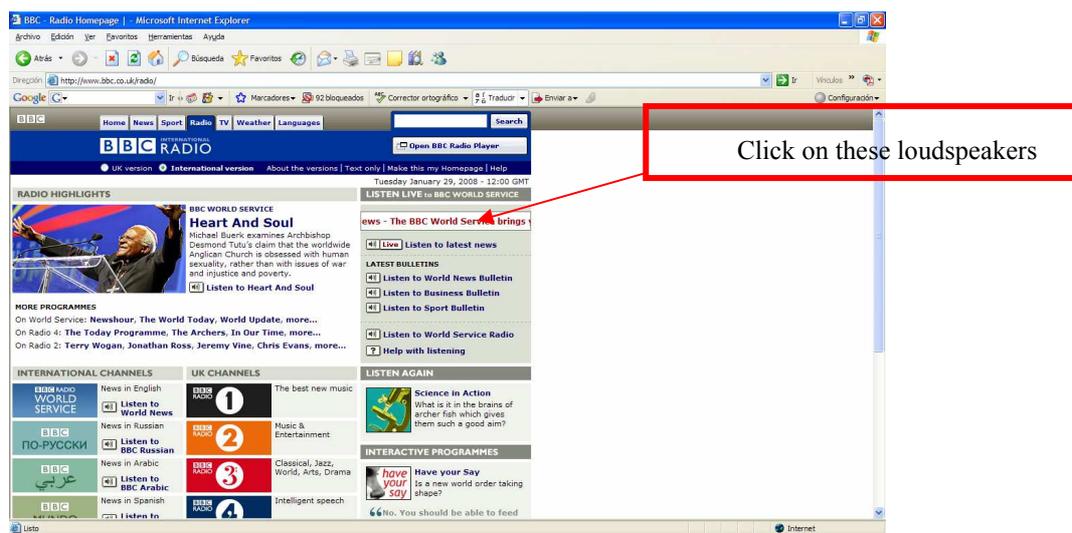

Figure 1. Listen to the radio by just clicking on the icons

- However, if you prefer a different radio station, you can find your favourite one by entering http://www.radio–locator.com/?xyz=2 .

- http://www.lyrics.com , http://www.azlyrics.com , http://www.lyricsworld.com . Any of these three links gives you the lyrics for almost every song, a very useful tool if we want to use music in our listening sessions.

- http://www.youtube.com This is undoubtedly the most visited webpage for videos. Students are very familiar with it, so they will know very well how to use it. You can find almost anything here by just typing the topic of your choice on the search box, as shown below[1].

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[1] Note from the Editor of Encuentro: A good free programme for downloading videos is aTubeCatcher. A very good site of videos for teachers is www.teachers.tv (it is referenced in Encuentro links).
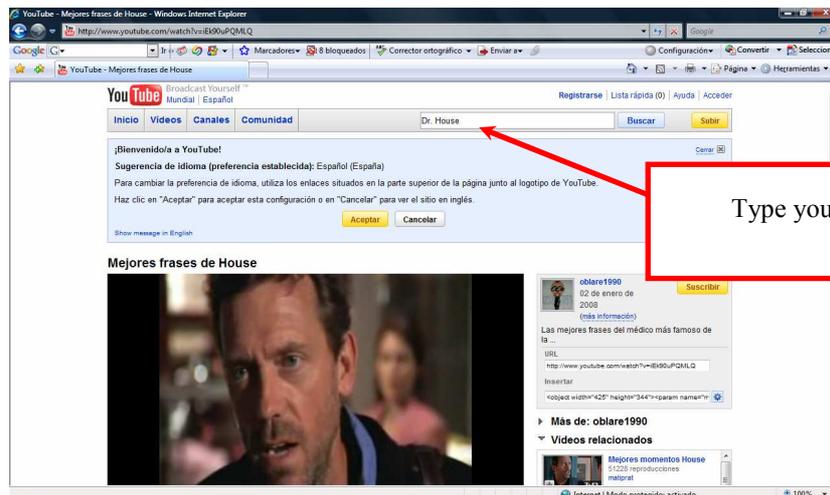
Figure 2. Searching for videos on www.youtube.com

As explained before, the paralinguistic information is very important to facilitate listening comprehension, and films are a great resource for that, not only because we practice the listening skills, but also because students love and enjoy them. We all have a film we or our students particularly like for various reasons, but sometimes just playing a film is not enough for our listening lesson and further exercises and practice is required. That is why we can take advantage of the following links to complement or create activities around the film.

- http://www.script–o–rama.com offers us both full transcripts and scripts from films, a very useful material which provides not only a written version of the audio material, but also an excellent sociopragmatic information that we can use in many different ways (cf. Grant y Starks, 2001 and Rose, 2001).

- http://www.movieweb.com/videos provides us with very detailed information about films which can be used for pre– or post–listening activities, such as information about actors, summary of the film, pictures of the characters and different scenes, videos, trailers, the official film web page, the soundtrack of the film, etc.

- On top of this traditional material, when talking about new technologies and listening comprehension, one of the first words we become familiar with is "podcast", the ultimate innovation in audio material, not only for its quality but also because they can be saved and shared very easily. Podcasts can be found all around the web, but you can find specific podcasts directories, such as http://www.apple.com/es/itunes where you can find millions of podcasts about any topic of your choice by just typing the key word on the search box. Other podcast directories are Podcast Alley (http://www.podcastalley.com/) and Podcast Pickle (http://www.podcastpickle.com/). Alternatively, you can go for specialised web sites which host podcasts specially designed for ESL learners. Among our favourites we find http://www.eslpod.com or http://www.podcastsinenglish.com, where you can listen, download the podcasts and have access to a learning guide with complete transcripts, additional vocabulary, extra explanations, cultural notes and comprehension questions.

All these links we have listed so far are very useful as they offer us a great variety of authentic material that is frequently listened to by both native and non native speakers of English. However, using this listening material in the L2 classroom implies extra work for teachers as no help or instructions on how to use it or what to do with it is provided. Therefore, teachers have to choose the material according to the students´

level, design the listening comprehension exercises, and do have to cope without the help of a transcript. All in all, these are very time–consuming tasks for a teacher to carry out and could discourage them from using these resources. Nevertheless, and this is the bright side of this article, we also find on the web ready to use listening lesson plans with questions and answers, tapescripts, translations, pre– , post–listening and vocabulary exercises, so that teachers can benefit from all the advantages of this free, varied and authentic material and still do not have to struggle that much in preparing the listening session.

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish, for instance is the BBC section specially designed for learners of English L2. Here you can find a great variety of material to practice the four communicative skills. As far as listening is concerned, we can find very useful material on different topics with transcripts, printable worksheets and other helpful resources that can be downloaded for free.

- http://www.esl–lab.com, on the other hand, is a virtual language laboratory in which extracts are classified according to different levels of difficulty. This website provides us with vocabulary, pre–, during– and post–listening interactive activities plus a full tapescript for each exercise.

- http://www.elllo.org is similar to the previous one, but one of the main strengths is that we can listen to English speakers from all around the world, so we can practice accents in English as well.

- http://www.EnglishListening.com is a functional link, not only for the quality and variety of material, but also because we can choose the activity according to our specific needs (the level, the accent, the topic, etc), and furthermore, it provides very useful information for the teacher, such as a short description of the passage and the speaker, and some other useful details such as length, difficulty, etc, plus the question and answer section and a full tapescript of the extract. As we see in figure 3 below, we have everything on the same window, thus, we just have to choose from the options given and click on the play button to listen.
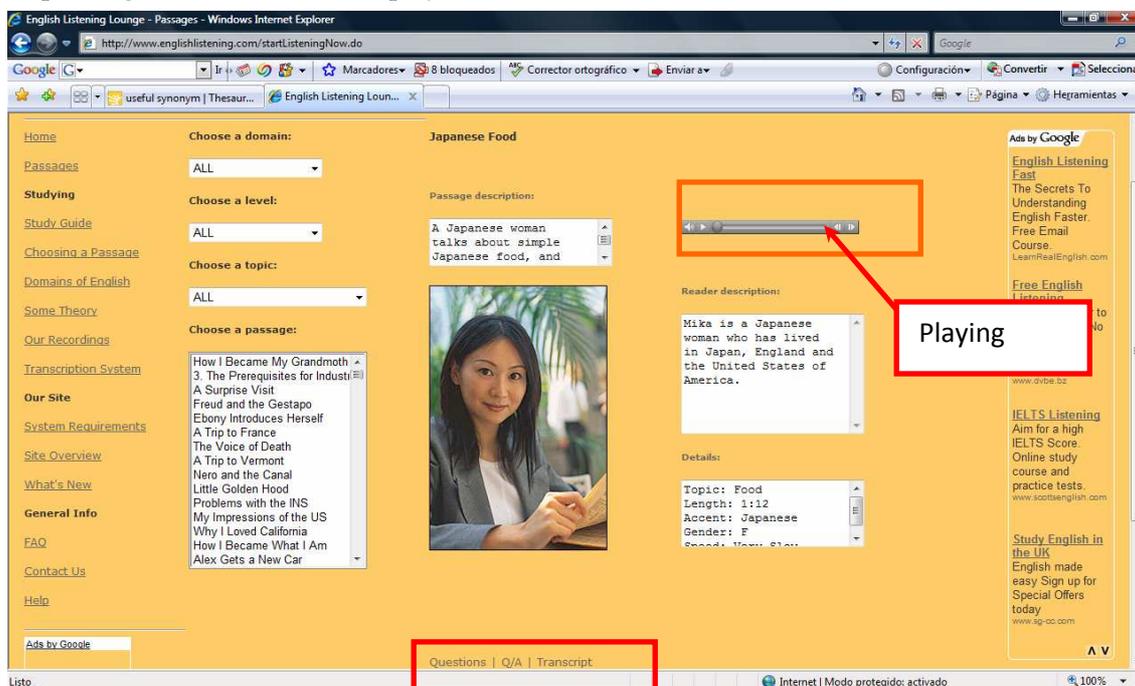

Figure 3. An example of an online language lab: www.englishlistening.com

- http://www.dailystep.com is a web site created by Jane Lawson to help her students improve listening and speaking skills more quickly outside of class time. The audio lessons just take 5 –10 minutes and it is an excellent way to practice listening on a daily basis, as lesson plans are organised around weeks. The audio can be downloaded and can be listened to in different speeds by clicking on the "slow speed" button, as shown in figure 4 below.
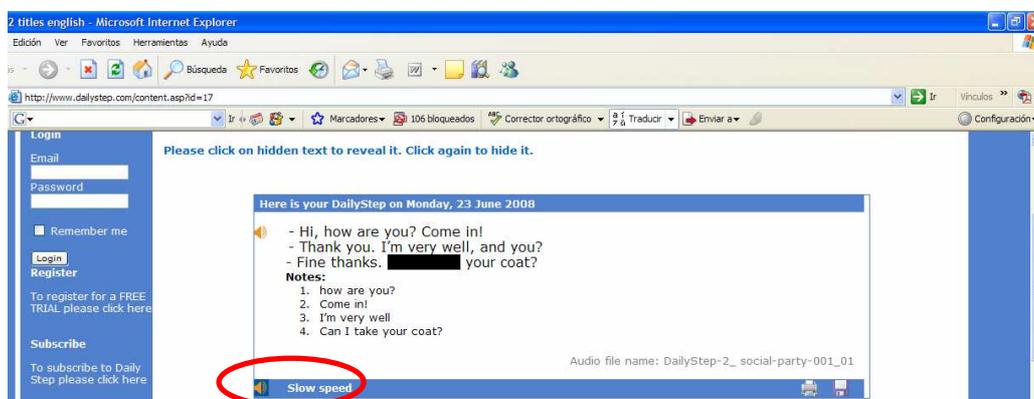

Figure 4. www.dailystep.com offers the possibility to listen to the extract at different speeds

- http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish–central–skills–listening.htm is also a very comprehensive web page for English teachers and learners. Apart from the access the reader has to a wide variety of listening material (articles, stories, poems, etc), and listening exercises and transcripts which can be downloaded, this web page let us integrate listening with the other skills, as links are provided to access reading, writing or vocabulary activities on the same topic.

- http://www.dy–tech.info/hotpot/quiz_page.html is an extremely friendly–user web resource if we want to work with videos. The link offers us a great variety of extracts taken from different films together with interactive fill–the–gaps exercises, useful hints and answer key. This way teachers do not have to bother to look for a specific extract of a film nor design the listening comprehension exercises as everything is already there to be used.

- Dictations are another type of activity that we can use in our listening sessions. According to Rost (1990), the use of dictations in the language class constitutes an exceptional exercise to practice listening skills, not only because they provide listening practice, but also because they help us to identify where our comprehension broke down. The link http://www.dictationsonline.com offers you a wide variety of graded English dictations (from elementary to advanced) that you can listen to and then check your text with the written version at the end. This will not only let the teacher rest his/her voice, but will also allow students to listen different people speaking with different accents. Another excellent dictation website is http://www.listen–and–write.com.

- Pronunciation is also a key issue in developing listening skills. By entering http://www.howjsay.com we can listen and download the pronunciation of any word. And if we need further pronunciation exercises, we will find many at http://www.fonetiks.org. Alternatively, accents in English can be practised at http://www.eviews.net.

- http://www.eslpod.com is one of the best resources for podcasts specially designed for ESL learners. You can listen to them, download them and have a learning guide with complete transcripts,

additional vocabulary, extra explanations, cultural notes and comprehension questions, a very easy and ready–to–use resource, as shown in figure 5 below

Figure 5. An example of a podcast from www.eslpod.com

- ESL podcasts together with print self–study materials can also be found and downloaded from the British Council archive by entering http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish–podcasts.htm and http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish–central–skills–listening.htm

- http://www.archiecomics.com/podcasts also offers us a very original set of activities with podcasts and comic strips which illustrate the listening extracts, learning guides with full transcripts of the lesson, glossaries, sample sentences, comprehension questions and answers, and cultural notes.

This is a selected list of tried and tested websites which we find particularly useful for our everyday teaching, and that we consider would be a good starting point to start with and become familiarised with the use of ICT in teaching listening comprehension, but do not forget that there are many other resources on the web awaiting for us.

4. Getting the most out of this material

As we have seen throughout this article, the quality and quantity of material we find on the web is very high and the real cost is very low (cf. Gómez, 2008a, 2009). Thus, we just need to have a computer, internet access, a set of headphones or loudspeakers and a "player" which is normally installed in every computer to use all these resources.

Now that we know where to find the material, we will see how to use all this web pages and listening material, what to do with it and how to make the most of them for both teaching and practising second language listening comprehension.

First and most important, we can use this material to teach listening comprehension inside the classroom, so we can fully create our own lesson plans from the Internet. If we have a coursebook and we need to follow the coursebook listening material, we can use this as extra digital material to practice listening both inside and outside the classroom, i.e., for students´ homework or school holidays.

What do we do with all this material? How do we organise and work with it?. We can save all these interesting web sites we have listed in the favourite section, so we can have direct access to listening material very quickly by clicking on "add to favourites", as shown in figure 6 below.
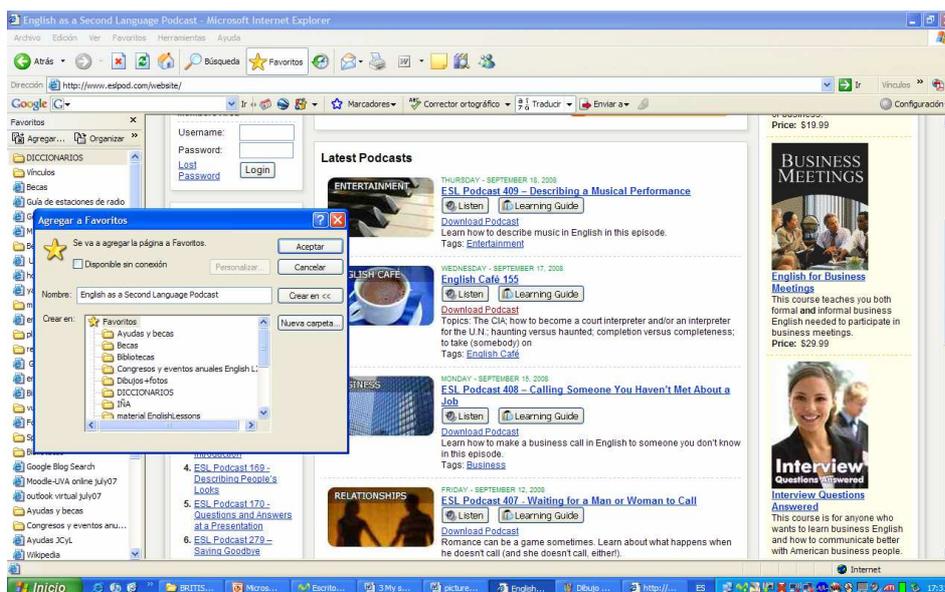
Figure 6. How to add a web link to the favourite section

We can also create our own folder or audio library where we can save our digital files. Podcasts and audio files can be very easily downloaded in our computer, Mp3 player, ipod, mobile, or any similar device. We just have to right–click, select 'save as' or 'save link as' and specify the destination to which we would like to save the file. The extracts can be organised according to level of difficulty, topics etc. as shown in figure 7 below
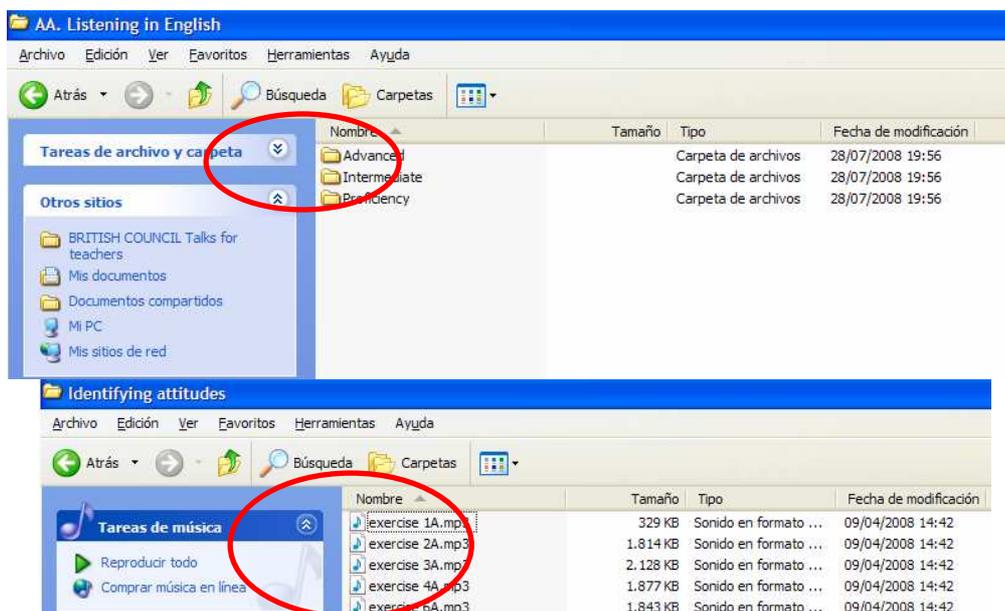

Figure7: How to organise your audio documents in your audio library

We can also share this material with our students and other teacher colleagues by sending the extracts through e–mail, transferring it to their Mp3 player or by publishing it on our web page, blog or e–learning platform, as shown in figures 8 and 9 below. By clicking on the link, they will be able to listen to it or download it wherever they want.
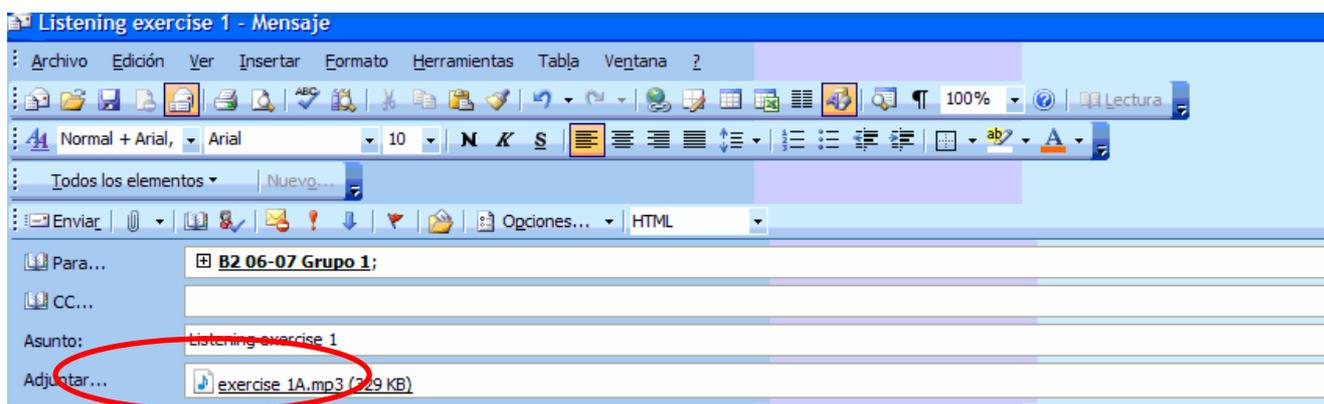
Figure 8: audio files as e–mail attachments

Figure 9. Audio files posted on Moodle (e–learning platform)

And last but not least, the other big revolution implied in the use of ICT in teaching listening is that they do provide us with many opportunities for practice. Thus, saving the files on the students´ devices (memory sticks, mp3/mp4 players, mobile phones, ipods, etc.) will let them practice the language wherever they like, whenever they like, for as long as they like, when they have nothing to do, if they are travelling to school or work, i.e. during 'dead time'. This will in turn not only have a big impact on the improvement of their listening skills but will also promote autonomous learning, a key concept in modern education which implies accepting responsibility in the learning process, taking initiatives in planning and executing learning activities and regularly reviewing the learning process and evaluating its effectiveness (cf. Holec, 1981; Little, 1991)

5. Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have seen why new technologies represent a valuable support for both teachers and students with the teaching and practice of listening comprehension in a foreign language.

The quantity, quality and variety of material available is limitless and can be adapted to all our students´ preferences and needs. Moreover, having ready–to–use listening lesson plans with questions and answers, tapescripts, translations, pre– , post–listening and vocabulary exercises will definitely make our lives much easier.

In the teaching of a foreign language, listening skills are very difficult to teach and to master. A good material, a good methodology and a good amount of practice are the key ingredients for success. Throughout this article we have analysed how ICT support these three crucial factors.

As a final thought, and following John Cotton Dan´s words "Who dares to teach must never cease to learn", therefore, as digital immigrant teachers we need to become aware of the advantages ICT have for our everyday teaching and approach this new challenge with confidence in our everyday classes.

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