

## **HELP OPTIONS IN ENGLISH LISTENING WEBSITES: HOW FUNCTIONAL ARE THEY?**

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### **Abstract**

The descriptive study aimed to identify the availability of various types of textual help options (transcripts, subtitles/captions, glossaries, online dictionaries, grammar points, cultural notes, and feedback) made accessible in 11 English listening websites to assist language learners when comprehension problems occur as well as to make input more comprehensible. It also described how 78 learners of the intermediate level of English used the help options during independent study sessions. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from judgmental evaluation checklist, learning journals and group interviews transcriptions. The data analysis showed that the evaluated English listening websites provided limited types of help options. The most frequently found help options was the transcript. This feature was considered to be the most useful and frequently used help options the subjects used to assist comprehension. It was usually read by the learners after listening to aural texts, when they found difficulties in comprehending the texts, or when they wanted to check for specific information in the texts. Other types of help options frequently made available were glossaries and feedback. Yet due to limited listening strategy training, the learners' use of textual help options, especially the transcript, was often inefficient in the context of listening practice.

**Keywords:** Help options, English listening website, listening comprehension, learning strategy.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Resourcing is one type of listening strategies useful for obtaining knowledge and skills and overcoming listening comprehension problems (Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Vandergrift 1999). It is an important strategy to be investigated, especially in the context of online language learning that facilitates language learners with many types of textual help options made available to assist the comprehension of aural texts. Yet not much is known about how learners use textual help options in an online language learning context or when they use English listening websites to perform intensive listening tasks and how textual help options influence language learning and learners' perceptions of online language learning. According to Garrett (1995), learners often ignore the availability of help options and do not use these support features even when they undoubtedly need to use the resources. This may have been caused by learners' failure to use resourcing strategy during online listening. In fact, infrequent use of resourcing strategy during web-based listening has been reported (Ivone, 2015). Yet it was not known whether this was caused by the nature of English listening websites or whether the learners were not well informed of how to use the available help options in English listening websites as resources for assisting listening comprehension.

Help options are sometimes refer to as 'meaning aids' (Hubbard, 2001), "help facilities" (Pujolà, 2002; Grgurović & Hegelheimer, 2007), 'guidance support features' (Hegelheimer & Tower, 2004), 'help aids' (Cárdenas-Claros, 2005), 'multimedia support resources' (Chun, 2001), and 'optional resources or on-line help' (Liou, 2000). Pujolà (2002, p.241) refers to help options or help facilities as "[...] resources of the program which assist the learner in performing a task". Because multimedia environment such as websites provides audio, visual, and audio-visual input, help options made available in websites may take the form of audio, visual, as well as audio-

visual forms. Help options commonly found in English listening websites, however, are textual, in the forms of transcripts, subtitles/captions, glossaries, online dictionaries, grammar points, cultural notes and written feedback.

The use of help options in multimedia listening practice has its merits and shortcomings. Hubbard (2001) and Rost (2007) suggest that help options can enhance input and make it comprehensible. They can also assist learners when comprehension problems occur (Grgurović & Hegelheimer, 2007; Jones, 2003). Moreover, Rost (2007) suggests that help options can be used to provide “interventions” by encouraging motivation and developing the ability to make input comprehensible for the learner’s own level of proficiency. However, using help options can also interrupt the comprehension process because learners are forced to focus their attention to form instead of meaning (Hubbard, 2001). It is more advisable, therefore, for learners to use textual help options to verify comprehension, not while they are trying to comprehend aural texts (Hulstijn, 2003) and not before they have performed effective listening strategies such as predicting and monitoring (Vandergrift, 2011).

The literature on the use of help options in multimedia listening have shown to be inconclusive. In a study on the potential of subtitles and transcripts for assisting aural comprehension, Grgurović and Hegelheimer (2007) found that the participants interacted with the subtitles more frequently and for longer periods of time than with the transcripts, but none made use of the dictionary available. However, learners did not often make use of the available help options when they experienced comprehension breakdown. It can be concluded, therefore, that although all groups that made use of input modifications demonstrated learning gains overall, the key issue was to encourage learners to use the help options provided. Moreover, the study recommended that help options in a multimedia learning environment should be designed to be more life-based, because in the language learning context learners displayed tendencies to do what they usually do in real life. Thus, in the study, learners chose subtitles more than transcripts when they faced listening comprehension breakdown because they were comfortable with the subtitles, which were often provided when they watched TV programs and movies in their daily lives. In line with this, Vandergrift (2011) further suggests that help options be embedded into the structure of a multimedia program so that they perform as effective tutor. Moreover, learners should also be given training on the appropriate use of help options so that these features can enhance comprehension.

Inconsistent findings are also reported on the use of help options in relation to listeners’ linguistic levels. Liou (1997, 2000) examined how 20 EFL college students at a Taiwanese university interacted with online help functions, i.e., L1 and L2 transcripts, background information, dictionary for idiom and word search, pause function, rewind function for current sentence and previous sentence repetition. The participants were divided into effective and ineffective groups based on listening proficiency, direct student observation, and instructors’ records. It was found that effective listeners used L2 transcripts more frequently, while ineffective listeners used the replay function more often than transcripts. Furthermore, the ineffective group used help options twice as often as the effective group. In contrast, in a study by Pujolà (2002) involving 22 beginner EFL students, the use of textual help (such as dictionaries, cultural notes, transcripts, subtitles, replay controls, feedback and expert modules) increased as the decoding levels increased. Specifically, the higher level decoders used the replay and rewind functions more than the other decoder groups (average, lower, and poorer groups). However, it was difficult to draw a firm conclusion as some of the participants in the lower groups never used textual help at all.

Informed by the findings of previous studies on help options in multimedia listening, the study was conducted to identify the availability of textual help options in English listening websites and how learners use them. The two research questions to be answered in the study are:

- 1) What are the textual help options made available in English listening websites?
- 2) How do learners use the textual help options in online independent listening environment?

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

For the purpose of answering the research questions, the descriptive study was conducted in two stages: website evaluation and empirical evaluation. In the website evaluation stage, judgmental evaluation was conducted to identify the availability of textual help options in 11 English listening websites. The websites were selected for intermediate learners of English enrolled in a listening comprehension course. Two activities from each website were selected to fit the level of the learners and the topics discussed in the course. An evaluation checklist was used to record the data collected from the websites.

The next stage was the empirical evaluation. Seventy-eight first year second semester English department students enrolled in an intermediate listening comprehension course participated in the study. The participants were assigned to practice listening independently outside class by completing the selected activities from 11 English listening websites. They reported the process and results of the independent study tasks in learning journals. They were also invited to voluntarily participate in group interviews to discuss the issues that emerged from the analysis of the learning journals.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the judgmental evaluation checklist, learning journals, and group interview transcriptions. The learning journals were used to collect information on the learners' experience during their web-based listening independent study sessions. Three learning journals were submitted during the study, on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> week of the semester. The participants were allowed use English or Indonesian to write the journals. The group interviews were conducted on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> week of the semester to allow the participants to give additional information that can be used to supplement that collected from the learning journals. The group interviews were conducted in Indonesian. The qualitative data collected from the learning journals and group interviews transcripts were analysed manually based on the procedures suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Dörnyei (2007) which included transcribing the recorded data, performing initial and second-level coding, triangulating the data, synthesising the data, and then interpreting the data.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings and discussion of the findings are presented to answer the two research questions in the study. First, the availability of textual help options in English listening websites is presented and briefly described. This is then followed by description and discussion of the learners' use of textual help options available in these websites during online independent listening sessions.

### **3.1 Findings**

#### **3.1.1 Textual Help Options in English Listening Websites**

Table 1 recaps the seven types of textual help options found in the 11 English listening websites evaluated in the study. It is shown in the table that all websites provide transcripts to the audio and video recordings. However, the way the transcripts are made available to learners varies. In general, there are three ways of presenting the transcripts. First, transcripts are presented as files that can be downloaded manually. This type of transcript can be found in sites 6, 8, and 11. Second, transcripts are presented along the recorded audio or video. This type of transcript is available in sites 4, 5, 6, 9, and 10. Third, transcripts are presented upon learners' request by clicking a button or a tab. The last type of transcript is made available in sites 1, 2, 3, 7, 11.

Another textual help options most frequently found in English listening websites is feedback. All of the evaluated websites, except for site 9, provide feedback on learners' performance in completing listening related tasks. Most of the feedback, however, only indicates whether learners' answers are right or wrong (found in sites 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11). Sites 4 and 10 show the correct answers upon request. Site 3 is the only site that provides short explanation on the right answers.

Table 1. Availability of textual help options in English listening websites

No.	Site	Transcripts	Subtitles/Captions	Glossaries/Vocabulary Notes	Online dictionaries	Grammar Points	Cultural Notes	Feedback
1.	The English Listening Lounge	✓						✓
2.	English Language Listening Lab Online	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
3.	Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab	✓		✓			✓	✓
4.	English as a Second Language	✓		✓				✓
5.	Adult Learning Activities	✓						✓
6.	Breaking News English	✓						✓
7.	English Learning Exercises	✓		✓				✓
8.	BBC Learning English	✓				✓		✓
9.	Interesting Things for ESL Students	✓	✓		✓			
10.	EnglishClub.com	✓		✓			✓	✓
11.	British Council Learn English Central	✓			✓		✓	✓
Total		11	2	5	3	1	4	10

Online dictionary is available in three websites. Sites 2, 9 and 11 provide links to an online dictionary; however, the links are not made available nor clearly visible throughout sites 2 and 11, users have to make extra efforts to find this type of help option within these sites. Site 9, on the other hand, provide information on how to use the online dictionary at the bottom of every page. The online dictionary is presented quite differently in the three websites. For example, in site 2, it is presented as a link to an external online dictionary website and learners have to access this site in order to use the dictionary. The online dictionary in sites 9 and 11 is easier to use, because it was embedded into the page and can be used without having to open another browser tab or window. Glossaries can be found in sites 2, 3, 4, 7, and 10. Glossaries are presented in the form of list of words and their meanings. In sites 2, 3, 4, and 10, examples of the use of the words and expressions in are given. Cultural notes are made available in four sites (sites 2, 3, 10, and 11). Among the evaluated sites, only two sites present subtitles (sites 2 and 9). This is to be expected as not all sites provide videos for online listening activities. Site 8 is the only site that provides explanation on the grammar points used in the aural texts.

### 3.2.2 Learners' Use of Textual Help Options

There are five types of textual help options available in the evaluated English listening websites that the participants in the study found useful, i.e. transcript, feedback, dictionary, glossary, and grammar notes. The learning journals and group interview transcriptions show that transcripts were shown to be essential in assisting learners in comprehending aural texts as well as in

performing listening tasks. The transcripts provided in English listening websites assisted the learners in at least three ways: they were useful for supporting the comprehension of aural texts when the learners could read them after listening to the texts, when they found difficulties in comprehending the texts, and when they wanted to check for specific information from the texts. Moreover, for some learners, the transcripts made some listening related tasks easier to perform. The participants' perceptions regarding the importance of transcripts in English listening websites are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of learners' perceptions of help options ( $n=149$ )

Common perspectives	LJ	GI	Other perspectives	LJ	GI
Appreciated characteristics	f	f		f	f
Useful transcripts	9	8	Can use online dictionary	1	0
Answers and immediate feedback provided	5	4	Useful grammar notes	2	0
Can learn grammar	3	2	Useful glossaries	1	2
Sub-total	17	14	Sub-total	4	2
Criticised characteristics	f	f		f	f
Transcripts unavailable	6	1	Non-interactive feedback	1	0
			No explanatory feedback	1	1
			Experienced difficulty in using online dictionary	0	1
Sub-total	6	1	Sub-total	2	2
Expected characteristics	f	f		f	f
Transcript should be available	3	3	Immediate feedback	1	1
Feedback provided	2	5	Explanatory feedback	0	1
			Add glossaries	2	0
			Add subtitles	2	0
Sub-total	5	8	Sub-total	5	2

Note. LJ = learning journal; GI = group interview;  $f$  = frequency of comments;  $n$  = total number of comments.

Learners' reported the use of transcripts in different ways, for instance:

When I listened to the recording I also read the transcript to try to understand the texts better (S4-GI2A);

First, I just listen, then listen and read (S3-GI2A);

I listened first, if there were things I did not understand, I read the transcript, then I listen to the

recording again (S7-GI2B);

To complete the tasks, I tried to do them by myself, but sometimes I read the transcripts to help me comprehend the texts (S18-LJ2).

Transcripts presented simultaneously with the listening texts and tasks may tempt learners to read while listening to the texts, or to complete the tasks by reading the transcripts. For example, a student wrote:

Sometimes, I did not understand the conversations, but there were transcripts, so I read and answered the questions using the transcripts (S55-LJ2).

Another stated,

I did not have to replay the recording in week 9, because I could read the story while listening I could easily understand what the speaker said (S57-LJ2).

The learners revealed that at times they were listening to the text while reading the transcripts – not because they needed to, but because the transcripts were available. Therefore, it was suggested that transcripts be made available upon request, as a student wrote in her learning journal:

I hope the transcripts were made available after the students completed the task by themselves. Only after the completion of the task, learners should be shown the answers and transcripts (S31-LJ2).

When transcripts were not available, some students found difficulties in comprehending the texts because they could not verify what they heard, especially when there were unfamiliar words in the texts. For instance, one student wrote,

There were some topics that were difficult for me to understand without the assistance of transcripts. Maybe because there were many words that were unfamiliar (S75-LJ1).

Another student reported a similar problem:

Even though the short stories were interesting, they were too difficult because there were no written texts to check the vocabulary. In my opinion, there should have been written texts, so that I could learn the vocabulary correctly. The story was challenging, I had to replay the story four times, and I wanted to repeat it again, because I still couldn't understand. Please, provide a written text for every listening activity (S64-LJ2).

Besides transcripts, glossaries were found useful because they informed learners of the meaning of words and key concepts about the topic. The following students wrote,

The transcripts were useful, but I liked it better when there were glossaries because I could improve my vocabulary knowledge (S59-LJ2).

I liked not only the activities but also the glossaries of words which were rarely used. For example the word “happen” meaning to occur or take place, in the context of the sentence meant have possibility to do something. This improved my vocabulary knowledge (S72-LJ3).

One student was impressed by a more interactive glossary and stated in the interview:

S2: I liked the texts in medical, what was that? Medical service or medical something. There were unfamiliar words, but as the cursor was put over the words, something appeared below the words...

I: The meaning of the words?

S2: Yes, the meaning of the words. So we didn't need to open a glossary, just put the cursor over the word. This simplified the process, especially because I often feel too lazy to open a dictionary. (Excerpt from group interview 3A)

Note. S = student, I = interviewer

The language points available in “The Flatmates” also received very good comments as the participants found the explanations on language forms very useful for improving their knowledge of the language. For instance, a student wrote,

I really liked the activities in the last week. Although the conversations were simple and short, there were language points that improved my knowledge (S47-LJ3).

Similarly, another student mentioned,

The last week was interesting because not only I could listen to a series of stories but I could also learn from the language points and new words I encountered (S71-LJ3).

Another type of help option that a number of the participants suggested should be made available was a dictionary that they could access any time they needed to. Learners who used their own computers or laptops to participate in the independent study program were able to access their own dictionary, as shared by a student:

Because I had an electronic dictionary installed in my laptop, when I needed to, I just opened it (S9-GI-1B).

However, other students did not have this resource, and had to rely on an online dictionary.

### **3.2 Discussion**

Web-based listening tasks should be presented with a variety of scaffoldings to assist learners of different proficiency levels and learning styles in comprehending aural texts. Help options in the evaluated English learning websites were often presented as accompanying texts. The participants in the current study frequently used accompanying texts as aural comprehension scaffoldings, yet problems were reported regarding the availability and quality of the accompanying texts in the English listening websites. An accompanying text is a type of scaffolding supported by the current Internet technology which is often presented as help options (Robin, 2007). Cárdenas-Claros and Gruba (2010) listed the potential benefits of help options for language learning because learners can read along from transcripts, subtitles, and captioned materials, and access cultural notes. In this study, the learners highlighted the importance of transcripts when they experienced comprehension problems. For example, a student wrote in his learning journal:

I did not understand the story in “Medical Advice” but after I read the transcript I found it very funny (S44-LJ3).

It was after reading the transcript that this student fully understood the text, otherwise he might not have been able to complete the listening task that was based on the text. Other participants also reported their frequent use of transcripts to support aural comprehension.

The availability of textual input could backfire if it is not presented strategically. The findings revealed learners’ suggestions to make transcripts available upon request. This was a sound suggestion because as some students were tempted to use the transcripts as an easy shortcut by reading them instead of focusing on listening to the texts. Hubbard (2001) warns of the appeal of help options that he refers to as “meaning technologies” in representing tempting shortcuts for task completion. This enticement should be minimised because listening practice should not be replaced by reading-while-listening activities which cause learners to rely heavily on textual input and fail to develop their listening skills. Consequently, the availability of transcripts should be better controlled so as to prevent reading while listening.

The participants thought the web-based listening materials were easier compared to the materials they had in their classroom tutorials because the essential help options, such as transcripts, were available and because the learners had control over how to use these features. In class, they were not provided with access to the transcripts of the aural texts; therefore, they could not use help options when they had problems comprehending the texts or when there were unfamiliar words or expressions to check. On the other hand, in the online learning environment, the learners could access the additional resources whenever they needed. Consequently, the availability of textual input is central in the web-based listening environment because it gives learners control over how and when to use the features to suit their needs and interests.

Another reason textual input is important in web-based listening is that sometimes unfamiliar accents make words or expressions more difficult to identify. In this study, textual input in the form of transcripts or subtitles was used by the students to verify unfamiliar words and expressions. For example, a student wrote,

I hope there'd be subtitles for those people with different accents, but not for all words, perhaps just some words differently pronounced or spelled by native English speakers (S72-LJ2).

The learners developed more confidence in their ability after a period of time, and they would require less textual input to help them comprehend the aural input. A student shared her experience in the third learning journal:

I just realised that my listening skills had improved when I did the tasks in week 12 "Medical Advice". I watched a video during the pre-listening activity. The video presented tips on how to deal with angry customers. Thought there were no subtitles, I could understand it. I did not find any difficulties (S35-LJ3).

Although current Internet technology supports many types of help options, the findings of the judgmental and empirical evaluations suggested that the evaluated English learning websites did not display the best possible use of these features. The findings confirmed that learners relied heavily on transcripts because they are provided in almost all of the websites. Other types of help options should have been made available because learners also found them useful. For example, when the learners came across new words or expressions, sometimes they needed to access the assistance of glossaries or dictionaries. The empirical evaluation findings showed that the participants found glossaries that focused on explaining key concepts about a topic or the meaning of words with multiple meanings useful. In the group interviews, the learners mentioned using dictionaries because they found many new words and expressions in the texts. However, most of the evaluated websites did not provide links to an online dictionary thus learners had to rely on their own dictionary. In consequence, the learners sometimes ignored the problem and did not look up the meanings of new words either because they did not have access to a dictionary or did not know how to access an online dictionary.

In addition to providing scaffolding, help options in a multimedia language learning environment are useful for enhancing input, for example, Rost (2007) stated that in a multimedia environment help options can create more opportunities for processing input. When learners are listening to a text they may come across unfamiliar words. They can check the words in the transcripts. They can then look them up in a dictionary or glossary for meanings. When they want to know how the words are used they can check the grammar notes or cultural notes if they are available. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) claimed activities which combine "need", "search" and "evaluation" to complete the tasks are best for learning words because, 1) the target words are essential for task completion (need), 2) there is a deliberate attempt to find the meaning of the target words (search), and 3) learners should make a decision on the correct meaning of the words based on the context in which they are used (evaluation). These activities lead to focus on form (FonF) because to complete the learning task, attention is given to understanding words in context (Long & Robinson, 1998). FonF is highly recommended in CALL tasks and Chapelle (2001) listed it as one of the six main components of CALL task appropriateness. However, the findings of the judgmental evaluation show that the opportunity to FonF was not sufficiently supported in the evaluated websites. A possible explanation is that the inadequate number and limited type of resources accessible within the evaluated websites and unavailability of strategy training in utilising these resources might have limited the opportunities for learners to FonF while completing the listening tasks. The availability of help options which support FonF activity would therefore balance the many FonFs tasks commonly presented in English learning websites, such as matching words with their meanings or completing sentences with some missing words.

By providing sufficient help options, English listening websites can provide learners with the assistance they need to complete the listening tasks as well as to improve their language accuracy. Many studies stress the importance of some degree of FonF to promote accuracy in second language acquisition (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998; Spada, 1997). The findings of the current study are in line with the results of previous studies, that is, the participants reported that they learned new words and expressions while performing listening tasks. Moreover, they not only learned the meanings of new words and expressions by looking them up in a dictionary or glossary, but they also learned how the words are pronounced. By using the available help options while performing the tasks, learners are given the opportunity to improve not only their listening ability but also their pronunciation and grammar accuracy. This is another reason website developers should include sufficient help options on their listening websites.

Although the potential benefits of help options in an online learning environment are apparent, it does not mean that learners will necessarily benefit from them. In fact, research suggests that second language learners rarely use help options (Cárdenas-Claros & Gruba, 2010) due to poor design practices (Cárdenas-Claros & Gruba, 2010; Grgurović & Hegelheimer, 2007; Pujolà, 2002). The findings of the current study support the claim that poor design practice contributes to the poor use of help options, for example, learners reported hesitations and difficulties in accessing the online dictionary and one student never used the transcripts because she did not know that they were available. Help options should be easily accessible for ease of use so that learners can use them at all times and within one click of a button (Cárdenas-Claros & Gruba, 2010). Moreover, the location, type and sequence of help options also need to be considered because they influence usability.

In addition to help options that focus on vocabulary and grammar, it is suggested there should be another that caters for cultural understanding. Learners in the study showed particular interest in learning about culture in general; this was one of the reasons they were interested in the web-based listening materials because they found that they learned a great deal about other cultures this way, therefore they asked for more cultural content in the listening texts. Additional cultural notes, therefore, would make the cultural content more salient so that learners would notice it more. However, this type of help option was not available in the evaluated websites.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Studies on textual help options in a multimedia environment are still in their infancy and in need of extensive as well as intensive exploration to incorporate the many different types of multimedia help options, as well as learning styles, listening proficiency levels and learning goals. Current research to some extent provides suggestions on the types of textual help options that should be provided in a multimedia listening environment and why listeners use these options; nevertheless, there is much more to learn about how listeners use these help options to improve aural comprehension effectively.

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