

## Using Microsoft's *Immersive Reader* Tool to Enhance Students' Listening Comprehension

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*Listening is a fundamental aspect of acquiring a foreign language, yet it is a challenging skill for many language learners to acquire. Not only must learners grasp pronunciation nuances, rhythm, and intonation, but they also need to understand the meaning of the passage or conversation they are hearing. This article recommends using transcription of listening passages with Microsoft's Immersive Reader tool to help foreign language learners attain higher listening proficiency levels. Specific examples of using Immersive Reader with Arabic language learners are given, and student feedback is provided.*

**Keywords:** *Listening Comprehension, Bottom-Up Processing, Phonemes, Skill Development*

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### INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is a complex process that requires the mastery of various skills, with listening comprehension being a cornerstone. Listening is complex, requiring the listener to capture and correctly interpret nuances in pronunciation as well as contextual cues (Goh & Taib, 2006). This skill is challenging for many students at DLIFLC, who must attain the required level of listening proficiency on the DLPT to graduate. One way to help students in honing their listening skill is using transcription of listening passages with Microsoft's Immersive Reader tool. Although it is an application designed to improve reading and writing for individuals of all ages and abilities, I used Immersive Reader in my classes to improve the listening comprehension skills of my students.

Listening comprehension is a complex process that involves decoding auditory input, understanding meaning, and interpreting context. Transcriptions of passages introduced after a listening activity provide learners with structured linguistic input, offering opportunities to encounter authentic language in controlled contexts (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Showing the

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transcription of listening passages after the listening activities can be useful in promoting active engagement and interaction in the learning process. This method fosters learner autonomy and boosts confidence, as students actively engage with language input (Field, 2008). This practice also offers repeated exposure to target language structures and vocabulary, which helps internalize linguistic patterns and develop automaticity in listening comprehension. According to Lourdes and Ghandi (2019), transcriptions of listening passages introduced after listening activities help reduce linguistic complexity and help create a dynamic learning environment, accommodating diverse learning preferences and proficiency levels. Educators can scaffold listening activities to develop comprehension strategies and linguistic awareness. Linguistic input is presented in a structured format and learners can engage with the transcription while listening to audio recordings, deepening their understanding and helping them identify key linguistic features (Hartshorn & Stephens, 2023).

## **USING SCRIPTED TEXTS IN LISTENING ACTIVITIES: AN EXAMPLE WITH ARABIC STUDENTS**

Arabic belongs to the Semitic languages family and is a cursive language, written right to left. Cursive writing is a style of penmanship where letters in a word are connected, generally for the purpose of faster writing. Connecting words in writing can confuse students during listening. Also, Arabic has prepositions that are attached to the nouns that they qualify, and some prepositions consist of only one letter/sound. In addition, the word “and” in English is one letter in Arabic that also attaches itself to the nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs that follow it. Consequently, learners of Arabic experience considerable difficulty in distinguishing the sounds in word boundaries while listening, which, in turn leads to miscomprehension. Students encounter additional difficulties in deciphering 12 similar sounds that do not exist in English, i.e., alif “ā” and ayn “‘ayn”, ha “Ḥā” & haa “Hā,” qaaf “Qāf” & kaaf “Kāf”, ta “Tā” & taa “Ṭā”, dal “Dāl” & dhad “Ḍād,” siin “Sīn” & saad “Ṣād.”

### **Microsoft’s Immersive Reader**

I have been using the Immersive Reader for a year in two classes. When planning a listening activity for my class, I ensure that students have the necessary support to enhance their comprehension skills. To achieve this, I prepare the transcription of the listening passages in Immersive Reader.

Immersive Reader enables color coding in the transcription, automatically coloring each part of speech a different color. Nouns are coded in purple, adjectives in green, verbs in red, and prepositions and relative pronouns in black (see Figure 1). I use this color coding to address common challenges faced during listening activities and offer immediate support to clarify misunderstandings. It should be noted that Immersive Reader itself does not create the transcription of audios. The teacher can either transcribe the text or can use a tool to do so (e.g., Microsoft’s Transcribe tool); either way the transcribed text must be imported into Immersive Reader.

### Using Immersive Reader for Listening Activities

In my listening comprehension classes, the listening activities take place in the following order:

1. I put students in pairs/small groups
2. I give students the comprehension questions to preview
3. Students listen twice to the audio to find the answers to the questions
4. Students discuss the answers in pairs/small groups
5. Students work with a member of a different group to compare answers
6. All groups share their answers with the class, which allows me to identify their listening challenges
7. I replay the passage, but this time while projecting its transcript onto the interactive whiteboard using Immersive Reader
8. I use the color-coded transcript provided by Immersive Reader to explain the sounds/phonemes that students misunderstood (based on their earlier incorrect answers)

The following examples illustrate how I use Immersive Reader to explain specific listening challenges students face with Arabic. The Immersive Reader effectively illustrates *nunation* in Arabic in the accusative case, particularly with adverbs. Nunation refers to diacritical marks indicating grammatical case and indefiniteness, as with the adverb **جيداً** meaning *well* (Figure 1 #1, marked green). This visual cue is particularly helpful for learners, as it enhances their understanding of the distinction between nunation **اً** (an)—a diacritic—and the Arabic letter *nūn* (ن), a consonant as in the noun **ملايين** *millions* (Figure 1 #9, marked purple). Hence, the Immersive Reader serves as a valuable tool in bridging the gap between auditory input and Arabic script.

**Figure 1**

*Color-coding of Parts of Speech in Microsoft's Immersive Reader*

هل تعرفين شخص يرسم **جيداً** 1؟  
أنا أدرس اللغة العربية لأن انا أريد أن أشتغل في الشرق الأوسط .  
نريد أن نفهم كيف يفكر العرب. أنا اسمي مرجان وأدرس 2 اللغة  
العربية بسبب أحب ثقافة العرب واسرتي 3 نتكلم العربية.  
أدرس اللغة العربية لأن المنطقة مهمة جدا. أريد أن أفهم مشاكل  
المنطقة.

عدد الدارسين للغة العربية كان قبل الهجمات الإرهابية في 11 من  
سبتمبر قد اقترب من ٥٠٠٠ **دارس** 4 على مستوى  
الولايات المتحدة. وبدأ من عام ٢٠٠٤ وبعد أن انشأت الخارجية  
الأمريكية 5 برنامجاً لمساعدة 6 تدريس اللغة العربية تضاعف 7 هذا  
العدد عدة مرات وخصصت 8 لذلك ميزانية بملايين 9 الدولارات.

Note. This authentic audio conversation contains errors and is transcribed as such; the instructor pointed errors out to students and corrected them during class.

Another crucial aspect highlighted in the Immersive Reader is the conjunction و “Wāw” and, which is attached to the following word, as with the verb وأدرس and I study (Figure 1 #2, marked red), and with the noun وأسرتي and my family (Figure 1 #3, marked purple). This demonstrates how conjunctions are seamlessly connected to the verbs and nouns in Arabic. Many learners struggle with this concept, as Arabic script does not use spaces between conjunction و “Wāw” and the word that follows. Immersive Reader provides clear visual segmentation, ensuring that students can identify these elements and understand their functions when they read the transcript while listening to the sound file.

In Arabic, nouns are not pluralized after the number ten. For example, *one student* is expressed as طالب واحد, while *twenty students* is expressed as عشرون طالب, using the singular form of the noun; this often presents an additional challenge during listening activities, as students expect a pluralized noun. This phenomenon is exemplified in the transcription where the noun **دارس** student (Figure 1 #4, marked purple) follows the number 5000 **دارس** ٥٠٠٠. The Immersive Reader helps learners recognize that nouns remain singular even after large numbers except for the numbers from three to ten, which require the pluralized nouns.

When students listen to a passage while reading the transcription in Immersive Reader, they develop better phonemic awareness and accuracy in pronunciation. Arabic has 12 sounds that do not exist in English, and Immersive Reader helps students identify these phonemic differences. For instance, in distinguishing similar sounds such as س (Sīn) and ص (Ṣād) or أ (Alif) and ع (ʿAyn), which can significantly affect listening comprehension, when misunderstood. The verb خصصت specified (Figure 1 #8 marked red) contains the sound ص (Ṣād) and is confused with the noun مساعدتي assistants, which contains the sound س (Sīn) (Figure 1 #6, marked purple). Also, the verb تضاعف multiply (Figure 1 #7 marked red) contains the sound ع (ʿAyn) and is confused with the adjective الأمريكية American (Figure 1 #5 marked green), containing the sound أ (Alif).

This engaging combination of auditory input and transcription in Immersive Reader on the interactive whiteboard helps students comprehend the listening activity more effectively and easily, which in turn, helps them gain confidence in their listening abilities and pronunciation. This multi-sensory learning approach not only strengthens students’ listening comprehension but

also supports their overall language development by integrating auditory, visual, and interactive learning strategies. As I conduct listening comprehension activities 12 to 15 hours per week with the Immersion Reader, my students gain sufficient practice in the classroom with this strategy to utilize it on their own when I assign them additional tailored listening activities as homework.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

Four students were surveyed about using the transcription of audios in Immersive Reader with listening activities. All four students found this strategy very engaging. They added that this strategy helped them distinguish sounds in word boundaries, improve their listening comprehension, pronunciation, and their transcription and summarization skills, and increased their confidence in listening. In sum, it helped them navigate the complexities of listening more effectively, leading to improved comprehension and retention.

## CONCLUSION

Student feedback offered valuable insights into the benefits of using transcriptions of audios in Immersive Reader during listening activities. Instructors can optimize the efficacy of transcriptions of audios by integrating them into their teaching and using Immersive Reader to craft interactive, engaging activities that help reinforce listening comprehension. The different colors in Immersive Reader help students distinguish the sounds in word boundaries. Immersive Reader also helps learners analyze sentence structures and understand how different parts of speech and grammar elements interact in a sentence. When reading a sentence with multiple nouns, adjectives, and verbs, students can immediately recognize their functions, further reinforcing their comprehension. This is a tool that is easily accessible and can also be utilized for reading or grammar skill-building, in addition to listening.

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