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Reading with Your Ears

- A comparative study of reading and listening to Mark Haddon's
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

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Abstract

“Reading with Your Ears” is a comparative study of comprehension in reading a text versus listening to an audio book. The text excerpt is from Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and has been read or listened to by seventh-grade students. The results show that the readers understand more from the text since they can read at their own speed and see the pictures in the book. The listeners, on the other hand, seem unaccustomed to listening and have troubles focusing.

Key words: reading comprehension, audio books, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

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Introduction and Purpose

This study aims to show what differences there are in comprehension in reading compared to listening to the same text. The result will give valuable information about second language learning through reading as opposed to listening. The purpose of this essay is therefore to explore how well it works to use audio books when practicing English, and what aspects need to be considered.

Even though audio books have been available for a couple of decades, it is not until recently that they have become popular for the general public. At first they functioned mainly as help for people with reading difficulties. Nowadays, audio books function as a substitute for the traditional book at times when people cannot hold the physical book in their hands but still want to read, such as when driving the car, when they are out running etc. To make it more practical and accessible to more people, as Benjamin Cheever says, the media of audio books has developed from cassettes to CD's to mp3 files (Cheever 26).

In an educational context this trend has not been followed; audio books are used only for pupils with reading difficulties, if used at all. The reasons often have to do with a lack of money or time. However, as the results of the national tests show, the receptive abilities, i.e. reading and listening comprehension, are the weakest among our students¹. Audio books could be an important aid to increasing these proficiencies.

¹ Sources: Report 257:28, report 290:30 and report 325:52.

Method

This is an essay about comprehension of texts in traditional reading versus listening to an audio book. Such a comparative analysis would not be complete without a survey in a group of students, which has been carried.

The target group of the survey is a 7th grade class in a compulsory school in Halmstad, Sweden. The group consists of 14 pupils. They have been divided into equally large groups that have either listened to or read the chapters from the novel.

The chosen texts are chapters 3, 173 and 227 from the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2004). The corresponding chapters from the audio version of the novel have been used for the listening group. The novel is about Christopher, a fifteen-year-old boy with Asperger's Syndrome. The only information given to the target group in advance is that Christopher finds his neighbour's dog killed in the garden and decides to solve the mystery while writing a book about it. Hence, the pupils know nothing about the fact that Christopher has Asperger's; a feature that affects the novel remarkably. Examples of this is that the language appears a bit immature at the same time as Christopher analyses specific topics deeply, such as star constellations. Furthermore, his behaviour throughout the story can seem slightly odd due to his asocial personality.

The survey focuses on three areas: the pictures, the impact on comprehension and perception of characters in reading versus listening. The pictures are interesting since they are not translatable into audio, and the listeners therefore miss that aspect. On the other hand, the audio version includes a recorded reader who may make a difference in the listeners' comprehension. The pupils' perception of characters may also differ due to the sense through which the novel is experienced. Differences in comprehension in reading as opposed to listening will be discussed, and earlier research will also be considered.

Background and Context

Listening Compared to Reading

To clarify the purpose of this essay and facilitate the reading of it, some terminology needs to be defined. Also, some important features of Haddon's novel are introduced to increase the understanding of the purpose of the essay. These features are connected to the differences shown in the results of the study further down.

Reading comprehension is a term which can be defined in quite various ways. In their book on reading comprehension, Joanne F. Carlisle and Melinda S. Rice state that the general definition is "an individual's understanding of a written text" (17). Similarly, when speaking about listening comprehension, this refers to an individual's understanding of an oral speech, such as, in this case, an audio book. Shu-Hsien L. Chen states that the ability to read, and thus comprehension, has to do with vocabulary, meaning and fluency (Chen 22). That is, the reader must recognize the words and know what they mean, make something out of the words composed into sentences, and finally be able to read the text with some fluency in order to remember what is read and make some sense of it.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is focalized through Christopher, and as the narrator his language is very influenced by his Asperger's Syndrome. The autistic author Temple Grandin declares that one common feature of people with autism or Asperger's is that they create the world as pictures in their minds (Grandin 3). Haddon has used this, and the novel contains a lot of images of different kinds, in order for the reader to understand Christopher's way of thinking better. From a more literary perspective, as Gérard Genette states, paratextual features, such as illustrations, are added to a text to increase the reading experience (Genette 1-2). Harry Alder says similarly that pictures work as a help for the author or narrator to deliver his message, but also to make the comprehension easier for the reader (Alder 118).

The Syllabus

Since this study has been conducted in a Swedish compulsory school, it is interesting to look at the Swedish syllabus for the subject English at the middle school.² The syllabus gives information about the goals and criteria for passing the course, i.e. what is being taught and focused on. It also defines the objectives that the pupils should have attained after fifth and ninth grade respectively, i.e. when the Swedish national tests are conducted.

The goals aim to deepen the pupils' English skills in the areas of oral and written as well as reading and listening proficiency. The subject is supposed to give the pupils a background to "the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today's international society" (The Swedish National Agency for Education). It is mentioned that the pupils encounter English in a variety of contexts, such as on TV, in written texts and on the Internet. These are media that provide images, text and audio and thereby appeal to several senses.

The audio book, which is focused on in this essay, demands only the attention of one sense, i.e. hearing. Furthermore, audio exercises practices the pupils' listening comprehension, but also the oral proficiency, since the pupils are given role models in the recorded readers. Grover and Hannegan declare that listening to audio books develop the pupils' reading comprehension in terms of vocabulary, fluency and language acquisition (Grover and Hannegan 16). Thus, listening should be beneficial for English learners in school and a good way of developing their overall English acquisition and thereby reach the goals set for their education.

Moreover, since pupils have different learning styles, it might be the case that audio books do not suit everyone in the classroom. However, listening demands time and practice. Pupils can become better listeners if this skill is practiced. Audio books are a good complement and variety to the other elements involved in their education.

² *The Swedish National Agency for Education*. English syllabus, compulsory school. (2000). Web 4 May 2010.

Results and Discussion

The survey focuses on three aspects. First, how the pictures in the novel are dealt with in the recorded version is looked at. Second, the different aspects that may impact on comprehension are examined, such as the recorded reader's voice. Third, it is observed how the students describe the different characters in the novel. All aspects are studied from the perspective of how the answers differ between the pupils who read and those who listen to the chapters from Haddon's novel.

The Pictures

One aspect of the study is the pictures as a paratextual feature in the novel. This study aims to investigate how the pictures are translated in the audio book. How the pupils comprehend the text depending on whether they can visually see the images or not is also examined.

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the pictures add to the realistic feeling of Christopher as a narrator with Asperger's Syndrome, as mentioned above. When making an audio version of such a novel, there is obviously a problem that must be dealt with in relation to these images. There is simply no way to fully translate a visual picture into audio. The closest would be an attempt to explain them, but that leaves too much room for the listener's own imagination at the same time as that interpretation is restricted by the frames given, and thus the description is quite useless. The pictures might as well be left for the listener to imagine solely, which is the case in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*; the chapters including pictures are simply read as if there were no images. This gives the result that the listener misses a piece that the reader is given, which might be crucial for the comprehension of details. Moreover, if images are used to a great extent, as is the case in Haddon's novel, the overall understanding of the story could also be affected.

In chapter 3, it is mentioned that Siobhan (who is Christopher's extra teacher at school, though this is not explicit in the text) has drawn pictures of faces for him to look at and interpret, in order to eventually increase his understanding of other people's facial expressions (Haddon 2-3). There are seven pictures of faces that are represented visually for the reading students but, obviously, not for the listeners. The recorded reader of the audio version says that Siobhan "drew a picture of a face, and I knew that it was a sad face" (Haddon, disc 1, track 3) about the first picture. Hence, the picture is not described other than that it shows a sad face, which is the only clue that the listener receives. The happy face is described only as "a happy face" (ibid), and then there are "other faces" (ibid) that Christopher is unable to interpret.

The target group is asked to draw what they believe these faces look like. The purpose is to examine how the listeners perceive the pictures, and what they mean for the understanding of the story. All of the pupils who read have identical answers to what the book contains, since they can see the pictures and thereby know exactly what they look like. The answers from the pupils who listen, on the other hand, differ. Two pupils drew one happy and one sad face as an answer, showing that they have understood that there are several pictures involved which represent different emotions. Another pupil drew a very sad face with a tear in the corner of the eye, showing that she has heard that there was a picture of a sad face, and another pupil drew a happy face. About half of the group draws pictures of not only faces but stick figures with bodies, which shows that they do not focus on the fact that the recorded reader only speaks about faces, and thereby this information is lost as well. Almost all of them make more detailed drawings than those in the book, which might be a result of the terminology. The pictures in the book (see Haddon 2-3) would probably be described with the word 'smileys' by most people, whereas the term 'faces' represents a more humanlike image.

The listeners' face pictures have noses, ears, hair or even glasses. These are all features that make a face look more human.

Whether the pupils have grasped the idea of the pictured emotions or not is further examined when they are asked why Siobhan has drawn the faces. Among the reading students, two of them answer that Christopher needs help in understanding people's emotions, which is the reason implied in the novel, and two do not know. The other three connect the drawings with the character Siobhan, stating that she cannot speak, that she wants to make Christopher confused, or that she thinks it is fun because he knows so little about feelings. He does become confused by the faces, so that interpretation is not far from what the reader is told, although it is not Siobhan's purpose.

The listeners seem to have a problem in understanding the reason for the face illustrations. Those who answer connect it with the dead dog or that Christopher is sad. Two of these pupils are the same as those who drew a sad and a happy face, as mentioned above. The conclusion is that these students do not completely understand the idea of the pictures operating as a help for Christopher in his interaction with other people. They do make the connection between face expressions and emotions, but more in terms of Christopher himself and his feelings rather than the character in relation to other people in his world.

Question four continues on the matter of the faces, asking why Christopher throws the paper away. The answers show that the pupils who read either think that Christopher is mad at Siobhan who made him feel stupid, or that he did not understand the pictures of the faces. These answers are both quite near what the narrator actually says; Christopher throws it away since he does not get much help from it but becomes confused. The listeners' answers describe the reason as being that he is scared (of what is not mentioned), or that he is angry and sad because the dog was murdered. The answers do not have so much to do with the actual pictures as with Christopher's feelings in relation to other events.

In conclusion, the pictures seem to help the students with their comprehension since the readers are closer to the answers implied in the novel than the listeners. Another reason to the comprehension differences might be the lack of focus among the listeners. The pupils may not be entirely concentrated on what is read to them, so they may miss pieces that would give them the possibility to answer the questions more precisely. When they are unable to answer with any certainty, the pupils simply write down what they think could be true.

Another aspect that adds to the difference in comprehension is when the pupils simply do not understand the words. This, together with a lack of focus, becomes clear when investigating the understanding of chapter 173.

The question for chapter 173 examines how well the pupils understand the topic in the text. In the printed version, there are several pictures of the star constellation Orion, with lines drawn between the stars to show how it is possible to form different shapes out of the way the stars are placed in space (see Haddon 156). The listeners cannot see this visual information, but simply hear the text and the pictures are not mentioned at all. Thus, a quite important aspect of the chapter is missing in the audio version.

The readers generally understand the meaning of the chapter; their answers are all connected to stars and constellations. Whether this is because they understand the words or because they can see the pictures and thereby comprehend the context probably differs between the pupils; some have a richer vocabulary than others and can most likely understand the text as such. However, the overall answers indicate that the pictures are certainly a good help for those who have access to them.

The pupils who listen, i.e. those who cannot see the images, do not completely understand the text. They hear and understand some parts of it, and what they hear becomes their idea of the chapter. Plants in the garden are indeed mentioned, as one pupil states, but the chapter is mainly about constellations. One main cause for the listening comprehension

problems is the missing pictures. The listeners might hear and recognize the word star, but become confused by the expression “constellations”. Even though they have a wordlist with the Swedish translation as a complement, they are busy listening and cannot focus on the wordlist at the same time. Thus, their limited vocabulary could be compensated by the visual pictures if they had the full text of the novel, and thereby the pictures, as a complement.

In conclusion, the pictures are indeed helpful for the comprehension of the novel, at least for the English pupils in this study. The readers deliver answers that are close to what is implied in the novel, whereas the listeners seem to guess at some points. Having access to the images, however, certainly helps the comprehension of the story, so in order to develop the language it might be a good idea to at least have the pictures as a complement to the audio book, if not the whole text.

Impact on Comprehension

A significant aspect of this study is the recorded reader’s impact on the listeners’ comprehension. The recorded reader contributes with a voice and tone when reading, which guides the listener’s interpretation of the story in one way or another. Features such as speech speed, tone and emphasis are observed in this study.

The speed of speech is, as Willy A. Renandya and Thomas S.C. Farrell declare in an article on listening to audio books, the biggest concern in listening (Renandya and Farrell 2). Studies show that this is what confuses English as second language learners the most. Moreover, speech is inconsistent, i.e. some parts are said slower than others and thereby perhaps experienced as more emphasized. The articulation is not always clear, and words are automatically modified when spoken. People constantly drop letters when talking, even when recording audio books. This is natural in native speech but can cause problems for lower intermediate to intermediate second language learners (Renandya and Farrell 2).

The dropped sounds are clearly a problem at some points for the listeners in this study. Some listeners think that chapter 173, which is about stars and constellations, as mentioned above, is about a hunter named Ryan. The passage in the novel is about the constellation “Orion [which] is called Orion because Orion was a hunter and the constellation looks like a hunter” (Haddon 156). For pupils who are not that advanced in listening, what they hear when listening to the audio book can indeed sound like “Ryan was a hunter”. This is evidence for the speed of speech being too fast and the articulation of words not being clear, at least not to these English learners. When considering the phrase “Ryan was a hunter”, it is obvious that when hearing this, the beginning O drops and Orion becomes Ryan to their ears.

The problem also has to do with the recorded reader’s emphasis and intonation, as William Irwin says in his article “Reading Audio Books” (Irwin 363). The recorded reader of the audio book provides another voice, tone, emphasis and speed than the listener would imagine while reading to themselves silently. Thus, the recorded reader’s voice adds an interpretation in the way he reads. The listener is no longer alone with the text and thereby completely free to interpret and comprehend it whichever way he chooses, but has some restrictions through the recording (Irwin 363).

The listeners’ sentence “Ryan was a hunter” provides that a listener’s interpretation and comprehension can be affected by how an audio book is read. In the audio version of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the recorded reader takes a small pause after the phrase “because Orion was a hunter” (Haddon, disc 3, track 19), before finishing the sentence by speaking about the constellation. The pupils are misled by the short pause, which becomes crucial to their interpretation of the whole chapter. The pause of no longer than half a second decides what the pupils assume the whole chapter, which is one minute and 23 seconds long, is about. Together with the dropped O in the word Orion, the pauses gives the impression that what the chapter is about is someone named Ryan who was a hunter. Hence,

the emphasis that the recorded reader uses when reading is absolutely determining for the English learner who is not that used to listening. For the more experienced listener, though, this might pass by without him even noticing the pause, but just taking it as a part of the language melody.

Moreover, the listener is using a sense that might not be as trained as their sight. If reading the text, it is impossible to interpret the word as something else than Orion, since the reader can visually see the written letters. The listening difficulties may. However, partially be a result of an educational focus on other aspects. The national tests are testing ninth-grade pupils' English proficiency on the areas oral, receptive and written ability. As the results of the ninth-graders who took the test in 2004, 2006 and 2008 show pupils have most difficulties when taking the receptive ability tests, i.e. in reading and listening comprehension (see table 1).

Table 1 Percentage of Pupils in 9th Grade That Have Not Achieved the Goals in the National Tests in English.

	Part A oral ability	Part B receptive ability	Part C written ability
Spring term 2004	4,0	8,7	5,1
Spring term 2006	4,2	7,4	5,8
Spring term 2008	3,1	7,0	4,2

Sources: Report 257:28, report 290:30 and report 325:52.

The table above illustrates that part B is where the highest percentage of the pupils fail, meaning that the receptive ability has been the weakest among Swedish students in 9th grade for the past six years. The receptive ability, as mentioned, includes reading and listening comprehension. There has been a slight improvement in the pupils' oral ability over the same period, going from a failure rate of 4,0 % down to 3,1 %, so it is possible that the focus in school has been on practicing English talking skills, while the receptive abilities have not been as emphasized. The results of the 2008 tests, which are the most recent, show that there

was an overall lower percentage of failing pupils that year. More students pass the tests, but the receptive ability is still the weakest.

The overall trend in Swedish schools nowadays seems to be that the pupils are supposed to be able to use the language they learn in an everyday context. The syllabus says that “[t]he subject aims at developing an all-round communicative ability and the language skills necessary for international contacts” (The Swedish National Agency for Education). This means all four proficiencies mentioned are important, but perhaps focus lands on the oral ability since it is supposed that the students will use it more – e.g. in encounters with English speaking people – than for example their writing skills.

However, listening comprehension would supposedly be just as significant, given that the pupils have to listen to the other participant in their future dialogue. It is indeed of great importance that the pupils talk a lot during their English lessons, but let us not forget that they will have to listen to authentic English, too, in order to develop their language and become better English speakers. This is where the audio books can be useful. Listening to an audio book gives the pupils a role model in the recorded reader, whose voice with its authentic English accent will figure as a teacher. The pupils can thereby increase their vocabulary and at the same time practice intonation and accent by listening and imitating. When reading a text silently, the pupil has no one but himself to rely on that the pronunciation and interpretation of the words are correct, unless there is a teacher by his side.

Moreover, as Chen states, when listening to a recorded narrator in this close and focused way, the narrator must know the language spoken very well and articulate clearly in order for the listeners to hear and understand what is said (Chen 24). Hence, a good narrator is a good model of reading, and can facilitate the practice of English pronunciation and the acquisition of vocabulary. The English learner can imitate the sounds, and obtain a feeling for the

language. Nevertheless, this demands that the listener actually pays attention to and is aware of what is said, and also that he can distinguish words or expressions to imitate.

The reader whose voice is recorded needs to be talented as well. There are several ways of reading a text, and there is probably a big difference in how a Swedish seventh-grade student and a recorded reader of an audio book read a novel. When recording an audio book, it is impossible for the reader not to influence the reading, or rather listening, experience. He contributes with a voice, tone and emphasis in a way that might differ a lot from the way the listener would have imagined it if reading the text. An example is the way the recording deals with the voices of characters.

In the audio version of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the recorded reader reads all dialogues except one with the same voice. There is no difference in the way Christopher, the man and the woman he meets sound, but when it comes to the Indian man in the little shop in chapter 227, the recorded reader actually adapts his dialect and imitates an Indian accent. Thus, the listener is given a clue about the character that the reader of the text version might not think about (Haddon disc 5, track 5).

In order to examine how the recorded reader's voice influences the listener, for instance through imitating an accent, the students were asked to describe the little man in the shop. The purpose was to see if the pupils who listen can recognize as well as understand the Indian accent the recorded reader spoke with when reading the Indian man's lines, which would give them a hint on how to portray the man. The pupils who read would of course not have this clue. Hence, the audio book could show a dimension that the traditional novel does not have.

The little man in the shop is described as "an Indian man" in the novel (Haddon 228). The term is probably a bit confusing for the pupils who read, some of who write "an Indian", which could be referring to a person of Native American heritage. One pupil writes that "[h]e is from India", showing that she understands the expression. Some other pupils describe how

they perceive the man, using words such as “enjoying [sic!]”, “rather rude” and “stupid”. The pupils who listen show a greater variation in their answers here. Descriptions such as “a singing man”, “[h]e was a little bit angry”, “green man” and “an indianman [sic!]” occur. One pupil describes the character as a scared, homeless person. The singing man and the green man referred to are other characters mentioned in the novel. Most likely, the pupils do not hear that there are several characters involved, but think they are one. The singing man, for example, is only mentioned in one sentence, where the Indian man is mentioned as well (Haddon 228).

However, the majority of the pupils who participated in this survey as listeners did not pick up the hint given of the accent. They have studied different English accents earlier, so they would be able to recognize the Indian intonation, but there has probably not been enough focus for them to hear it. The text piece with the Indian man is at the end of the survey, so they might have been tired of listening. On the other hand, almost every pupil understands that the item Christopher buys from the Indian man is a map. Since that part is in direct contact with the accent piece, it cannot be entirely true that the pupils miss the Indian accent due to tiredness. After all, they grasp the idea of a book referred to as “*LONDON AZ Street Atlas and Index Geographers A-Z Map Company*” (Haddon 229), which is a quite long name, or simply called “the A to Z” (ibid), which does not say much about the item without the context. Thus, the pupils are able to concentrate enough to understand that Christopher buys a book, but they miss the recorded reader’s imitated accent and can therefore not describe the man precisely. Of course, it is not wrong to say that he seems angry or annoyed, as some pupils think, but his most obvious feature in the audio version would presumably be his Indian accent.

To sum up, there are many aspects involved when listening. There is indeed the impact of the recorded reader through his voice, tone and emphasis, but there is also the listener’s

commitment and devotion to the story as well as listening experience and concentration on the action.

Listening is an activity that is often seen as passive, while reading is seen as active. According to Irwin, this is not completely true. He states that if listening takes less energy, there should be more energy left for comprehension and interpretation. Irwin states that listening is indeed active (Irwin 363). Matthew Rubery agrees in his article on audio books and traditional reading, saying that it is the reception of words that determines the activeness, regardless if it is through reading a text or listening to it (Rubery 69). Yet, it takes energy and focus to learn. The students must contribute by concentrating while they are listening in order to understand and learn from the text.

There are some problems with the actual act of listening, though. As Renandya and Farrell state, when listening, there is not the same possibility to go back in the text as when reading (Renandya and Farrell 2). It is possible to stop the audio book and rewind, of course, but it is not easy to determine how far to rewind. If he simply keeps going back to the beginning of the track, the listener can find himself anywhere in the text and therefore lose track of the story. Even though it disturbs the reading to go back in a text and re-read, it disturbs the listening even more to do the same with an audio book.

Throughout the survey, it generally seems harder to stay focused when listening to the audio book than when reading the novel, which can have different causes. As mentioned, it has to do with the speed of speech in the recording, pupil comprehension of English, and an overall interest for the story. The answers show what the pupils focus on while listening, and what they have not comprehended.

An example that shows the varying degrees in concentration is the answers to where Christopher is physically located in chapter 227 (Haddon 221). All of the readers have answered more or less correctly, i.e. something similar to that he is at a train station. The

pupils who have listened present a bit more variation in their answers. There are two pupils who do not pay attention at all and therefore leave no answers to the question. The majority of the rest write “train station”, except for one who says “England”, and one who defines the place as being Christopher’s bed. (England is of course a correct answer, but the question is meant to be a bit more specific than that.) The latter pupil is misled by a simile; Christopher states that he had his eyes closed, so it was all dark and the only sounds he heard were those in his head. “And that made it better because it was like the little station wasn’t there, outside my head, but I was in my bed and I was safe” (Haddon 221). The listener mentioned only hears that Christopher is in his bed, and does not understand the simile. Several clues are given that the character is actually at a train station, but it does not matter as long as the pupil cannot stay focused enough to hear all of it.

Focus or concentration is an overall factor that contributes to the listeners’ limited understanding. The survey as a whole made it obvious that the pupils are not used to listening, at least not without looking at the text at the same time. They do not understand everything that is said, and therefore they have a hard time staying focused and as a result they give up listening. Even though they hear bits of the story, there are difficulties in making sense out of it and really comprehending the idea of the different chapters. An example of this is the listener who states that Christopher is in his bed, whereas he is actually at a train station.

Besides not being used to listening, there are students for whom listening just does not suit them. Students have different learning styles; there are those who learn best from watching, listening or creating. For the students who are auditory learners, i.e. learn best through the sense of hearing, it might be a good idea to use audio books, but for those who are visual learners it can feel like a burden. Still, using audio books will more than likely give them an opportunity to practice their listening ability and thus to become better listeners.

Just as Carlisle and Rice explain, good readers tend to read more and thereby develop their skill (Carlisle and Rice 22). Their motivation is often high and they have an energy for and an interest in reading. Through reading lots of books of various levels of difficulty, the readers increase their reading comprehension and language as well as reading fluency. Poor readers, on the other hand, feel less motivated to read and therefore do not practice it as much. As a result, the poor reader does not develop his reading comprehension to the extent that the better reader does. The gap between the two increases. It can be assumed that this would be the same for listeners; if practicing listening to audio books, the ability to understand what is heard will increase. This gives the poor readers a chance to catch up in literacy with those who are good at reading (Carlisle and Rice 22). As Chen argues, the listening experience might also create motivation for the poor reader to read more traditional books (Chen 23). Moreover, in an article on listening to audio books, Mary Burkey discusses that just as a reader must learn his reading style, the listener must give the listening a chance to learn his own listening style (Burkey 26). In order to do this practice is needed through continuous listening. The traditional second language learning books with their associated CDs used in school might not be enough to stimulate the auditory learning, but native speakers' audio books can be helpful if used. Also, as Sharon Grover and Lizette D. Hannegan say in their article about integrating audio books in the curriculum, having listened to several audio books, the listener becomes used to different recorded readers' voices and accents (16). This gives the pupil an advantage in real conversations with English-speaking people from all over the world. The syllabus declares that the students should be prepared for English speaking situations, which is a goal that the audio book can be a good aid to achieve (English syllabus).

Perception of Characters

A secondary aspect examined in the survey is how characters are perceived through reading versus listening. That is, how do the English learners understand and describe the characters? The students' perception of the several characters throughout the three chapters of the novel is examined, and whether there is a difference in how the characters are perceived depending on what sense is used.

It is a general opinion among the students of the survey that listening is easier than reading. Irwin declares that “[t]he natural presumption seems to be that listening is easier than reading” (360). As Irwin says, if the act of listening demands less energy, then the pupils should have energy left to comprehend the parts of the story that are not explicit actions, such as descriptions and characterizations. The narrator Christopher gives the readers and listeners impressions through telling the story. Furthermore, for the listeners the understanding of the narrator Christopher's personality is more than likely coloured by the recorded reader's voice. Hence, there might be a difference in how the readers and the listeners describe Christopher, as well as how they perceive the other characters involved.

When the pupils describe Christopher, an interesting aspect is his age. The pupils who read are uncertain and set his age to somewhere between “over eight” and twenty, and not all of these pupils give an age. All of the pupils who listen, on the other hand, believe that Christopher is fifteen years old, which is the actual age stated in the novel (but not in the part they listen to). How can it be that all of the pupils answer the exact same thing in one group, but the others show more diversity?

Focusing on the text as such and the aspect of listening to or reading it, some people could argue that the recorded reader's voice influences the student's choices. Rubery declares that listening to an audio book creates closeness between the voice and the listener, especially as the listener has no face expression or body language as help but only the voice to depend

upon (Rubery 71-2). If the students feel close to Christopher it is easy to imagine him as a friend in their own age group. However, the recorded voice is an adult's, so Christopher cannot be younger than the pupils, considering how boys' voices develop and become deeper around that age.

The adult voice perhaps gives the text a more mature tone than when reading silently alone. The voice might very well correspond to what the target group thinks a fifteen-year-old sounds like. If the recorded reader would have been an elderly man, the result may have been different. This suggests that who recorded reader of an audio book is matters, as Grover and Hannegan say; the voice must suit the story and, in this case, the narrator (16).

In the printed book the pictures and the simple language may add to Christopher's immaturity for the readers. They do not know that the language is due to Christopher's diagnosis and therefore it is easy to relate to his age. The readers miss the aspect of the recorded reader's adult voice which seems to have an impact on the listeners.

Again, the readers do not agree on the main character's age. Two of them believe that Christopher is around twenty years old, which is older than the pupils themselves and also than the age that the listeners set. It is possible that because the reader learns that Christopher first met Siobhan eight years ago, this reference to time impacts on their way of thinking about his age (Haddon 2). Christopher would be around twelve years old then, according to these students. The students thereby distinguish Christopher's age when the events in the story occurred and his age when writing about it.

There are differences between the two groups in describing the other characters involved too. When describing the man and the woman whom Christopher meets at the train station, the pupils who read seem to have a big advantage in having the text to look at. All of these except one retell what is written in the text. The differing answer reflects on how the characters are portrayed through their actions, i.e. what can be interpreted about their

personalities through how they behave towards Christopher. The man is generally more described than the woman, which most likely has to do with the fact that he is more closely portrayed in the novel as well. For instance, the man's clothes are mentioned in detail, whereas the woman's features are described only through her guitar case, which has a sticker attached to it that is printed in the book (Haddon 223-6).

The sticker says "Howl Records", and one pupil comes to the conclusion that both of the characters probably work for a company named Howl Records, implying that they know each other. None of the other students show this type of spontaneous reaction to the picture, so it does not seem to make a difference in this case. However, it might add to the insight that the woman has a guitar case at all (whereon the sticker is), since five out of the seven pupils who read understand that she has the case, whereas only two out of the seven pupils who listen understand that she has it.

The listeners generally grasp only a few of the characters' features, such as "a green man", "guitar case" and "diamond patterns". Their descriptions are not as detailed as the readers'. Most likely, the listeners have troubles focusing on listening and do not understand all of what is heard. There is also a problem in not being able to go back in the text in the same way that the readers can when something is unclear or when the listeners' concentration is not high enough to understand.

The problem appears again when the pupils come across the character Toby. Figuring out who Toby is seems to be rather complicated for some of the pupils. It says a bit later in the text that Toby is Christopher's pet rat, but since the pupils have not read that part when they answer the question they are a bit uncertain. Of course, there is the possibility that the students go back and correct their answer when they realize what it says in the text, but it does not seem to be the case. The readers understand that Toby is a rat or a mouse. The listeners, on the other hand, answer either that Toby is a rat, a mouse or the more general "an animal".

The term animal shows that they do not completely understand what kind of animal or even which size Toby is. A girl adds “a dog?” to this answer, showing that she is unsure. However, it is mentioned in the novel that “Toby was missing because he was not in my pocket” (Haddon 221), so it should be easy to recognize that Toby is rather small. The sequence “And then I saw two mice and they were black because they were covered in dirt. And I liked that because I like mice and rats. But they weren’t Toby, so I carried on looking.” (Haddon 223) should be a clue to what Toby is. However, the pupils’ concentration determines if they hear and make sense of the sequence, and, ultimately, if they understand who Toby is. If the pupils are not focused enough to hear that the pocket or the mice are mentioned, it is indeed hard to decide what size Toby is. Again, it seems to be a question of concentration that decides how much the pupils comprehend during the listening session.

The level of concentration is, of course, not static when listening. The chapter where Toby is mentioned is the longest of the three included in the survey. It should not make a difference, though, with short pauses inserted where the students get time to answer the questions. However, since they have listened for a while when coming to the part where Toby is mentioned, it might be that the pupils lose concentration because they do not understand what is said. They hear a lot of talking but nothing makes sense, and therefore they give up listening. Again, the point of not being used to listening can be argued.

As a result, reading the novel seems to make it easier to understand the characters involved. One reason could be that it is easier to go back in the text when the pupils do not understand a passage or are not focusing enough, than it is to stop the audio version and go back and listen again. Another reason is that the listeners are not as used to listening as the readers are to reading, at least not with this amount of text. The listeners hear some words and draw their conclusions from that, whereas the readers have access to the text in a physical way that gives them the whole context.

Summary and Conclusion

The aim of this study is to show what differences there are in comprehension in reading compared to listening to the same text. That means that I have investigated whether there are dissimilarities in how English learning pupils in a Swedish compulsory school comprehend a text depending on if they read it silently or listen to a recorded reading. The study highlights and discusses several aspects of this.

First, images included in a novel are not possible to translate into audio and thus, the listener misses a piece of the experience of the novel. However, the lack of images can be somewhat replaced by the fact that the listener has a voice who interprets the text to some extent. The recorded reader adds to the listening experience with a voice, tone and emphasis that the pupil who reads the novel must imagine. The voice can have a positive impact on the comprehension, as the example of the listeners who could tell Christopher's age correctly shows. It can also have a negative impact, as in the example with the hunter Ryan.

Second, the recording gives the audio book the advantage of being correctly read, i.e. there is a competent English speaker who presents the story, as opposed to the English learner who perhaps has problems in pronouncing all of the words. Whether this makes a difference in the understanding of the text or not is not completely clear, though. The pupils who read understand more from the story and give more developed answers than the pupils who listen. The listeners show problems in concentrating on the actual listening, which might be the result of not being accustomed to the activity. Over time, as research shows, the problem can be solved by letting pupils listen more to audio books (see e.g. Carlisle and Rice 2002 and Grover and Hannegan 2005).

Third, when considering the perception of characters, there is a clear advantage in reading. The pupils who listen do not pick up hints given by the recorded reader, and they have more problems in describing the characters that appear in the story. It may be beneficial

for the readers to be able to go back in the text and have the opportunity to read as slowly or fast as they like. The listeners depend on the speed of the recorded reader's speech, which sometimes they are most likely not able to follow.

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this essay has been to examine how well it works to use audio books in an educational context, i.e. if the medium is useful when learning English. Another purpose has been to examine what aspects need to be considered when using audio books in school. That is, what aspects are there to be aware of in order for the education to be successful?

The conclusion is that the students need to practice listening in order to be able to stay focused when listening to extensive text pieces. It would also be helpful for them to have the pictures in the book as a complement. Moreover, audio books can most likely be a useful tool for students to have the opportunity to practice listening and developing their listening style, in the same way that they develop their reading style. On the other hand, not all students learn best from listening; teachers should alternate between using audio books and visual texts as well as other resources.

A suggestion for further research is a similar study as this made in a larger group of students of different ages. It would provide additional information on the different areas discussed here, as well as highlight new aspects. For example, variables amongst the students such as age and gender could be examined.

It would also be interesting to further examine how pupils perceive characters. Since the listeners of this study presented Christopher's age correctly, there could be a connection between recorded reader and narrator. Exploring how the features of the voice affects the perception of the narrator could be an angle for further research within the field of audio books in education.

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Appendix 1 Questions to the Text

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

I am a ___ *boy* ___ *girl*

I have ___ *read* ___ *listened*



Chapter 3

1. Describe Christopher. What is he like? How old is he?

2. Siobhan has drawn pictures of faces to Christopher. Why?

3. What do the faces look like? Draw what you think!

4. Why did Christopher throw away the paper with the drawn faces?

5. Who do you think Siobhan is?

Chapter 173

6. What is the chapter about?

Chapter 227

7. Where is Christopher?

8. How does he feel?

9. What kind of signs (skyltar) does he see?

10. Who is Toby?

11. Two persons (a woman and a man) help Christopher. How are they described?

12. What does Christopher see in the train carriage (tågvagnen)?

13. Describe the man in the little shop.

14. What does Christopher buy in the shop?
