

EVALUATING DUTCHPOD101 AS A LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOL: A FALSE BEGINNER'S PERSPECTIVE ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION AND LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the DutchPod101 website by Innovative Language, assessing its effectiveness in helping learners achieve a basic understanding of both written and spoken Dutch. The study focuses on the experience of the author, who, as a false beginner with some prior exposure to the language but little recent practice, uses the platform to reacquaint themselves with Dutch. The research examines the site's content delivery, instructional quality, and the balance between written and spoken language skills. The findings indicate that DutchPod101 offers a robust range of tools for vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension but lacks depth in grammar instruction and interactive conversation practice. The paper concludes with recommendations for enhancing the learning experience and suggestions for future research into the efficacy of language learning websites.

Keywords: *Language learning, DutchPod101, Dutch, Innovative Language*

INTRODUCTION

Innovative Language Learning, LLC was established in 2005 and has been a prominent developer of interactive and authentic language learning resources. The company offers a wide range of products, including websites, mobile apps, downloadable software, and audiobooks. It is viewed as a global leader in language education technology. Innovative Language Learning is available in more than 40 languages and is an important developer in mobile language education. For learners, Innovative Language Learning provides an engaging and easy-to-follow system. The program offers short, entertaining audio lessons, an interactive learning center, and a supportive community of fellow learners. The approach caters to individuals at all proficiency levels, allowing users to learn at their own pace through various resources, including mobile apps, which provide flexibility for on-the-go learning. By 2020, the company had delivered over 2 billion lessons, recorded 14 million app downloads, and gained 14 million YouTube subscribers. While certain content is available for free, subscription plans range from \$4 to \$23 per month, offering a range of access options to fit different learning needs. The platform also provides various YouTube videos in its most popular languages, enabling potential users to preview content before subscribing (Innovative Language, n.d.)

Innovative Language Learning currently offers various languages, including widely spoken options such as French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, and Chinese. The platform provides content suitable for learners at all skill levels, structured into nine proficiency tiers ranging from introductory and beginner to advanced. Lessons primarily revolve around audio or video clips, which serve as the central teaching tools, accompanied by supplementary study materials. Subscribers receive new language material weekly, accessible via a web platform or mobile applications for iOS and Android. Innovative Language allows learners to tailor their experience based on their proficiency, choosing specific pathways or exploring lessons in any order. Pathways are organized by themes, such as verb conjugation or health-related vocabulary, while comprehensive pathways cover fundamental language skills. Additional vocabulary tools include a customizable word bank, where learners can save terms from lessons, and pre-made vocabulary lists for immediate study. Lessons maintain a consistent structure, typically comprising dialogue, vocabulary, lesson notes, and lesson transcripts. Most sessions begin with two podcast hosts facilitating a discussion, presenting sample dialogues, and breaking down the content. Key vocabulary terms and phrases accompany each dialogue, with repetition techniques employed to enhance retention. Lessons are delivered through a combination of videos, audio, and text, ensuring a well-rounded learning experience (Tan & Cristiano, 2024).

Active engagement is of great importance in the learning process. Listening to lessons can aid in understanding basic concepts, but achieving deeper knowledge requires participation in all activities, including quizzes and vocabulary repetition. One notable limitation of the Innovative Language Learning platform is the lack of speaking practice. Although phrases are repeated after the speaker during lessons, this approach may be less effective for developing conversational skills. This is due to the absence of real-time feedback or interactive conversation. Similar to many language learning apps, the content is best suited for beginners and intermediate learners. Advanced learners may need to explore supplementary resources to further refine their language skills (Wetherbee, 2022).

Language learning platforms have become an integral part of modern education, catering to diverse needs across the globe. Among these platforms, DutchPod101, part of the Innovative Language Learning network, offers an immersive, structured approach to learning Dutch, a language spoken by over 23 million people worldwide, primarily in the Netherlands and Belgium. The language still has some influence in Indonesian society in areas such as law and history. DutchPod101 provides users with an extensive library of lessons, ranging from basic vocabulary to advanced conversation skills, making it a useful option for learners at various levels (DutchPod101, 2024).

The effectiveness of DutchPod101 may vary based on the learner's abilities and needs. For example, some learners may have been exposed to the language but have not actively studied it in years. This category of learners, often termed false beginners, presents a unique challenge. Although, they possess some foundational knowledge of the language, their skills are likely to be underdeveloped. For this group, a language learning platform must strike a delicate balance, providing enough material to refresh their previous knowledge while helping them make progress toward fluency. This study evaluates DutchPod101's effectiveness in helping learners achieve a basic understanding of written and spoken Dutch. The author, who

has a false beginner level of proficiency in Dutch, aims to review the platform's utility for learners looking to reacquaint themselves with the language and build foundational skills. Specifically, the study examines the structure and content of the platform, the ease of use, and how well the resources contribute to the learner's comprehension of Dutch in both written and spoken forms.

As language learning continues to move online, evaluating the effectiveness of various platforms is of importance. This is especially true for less commonly studied languages such as Dutch. Although, there are various resources available for learning English, platforms that focus on less common languages are often under researched. DutchPod101 presents a comprehensive option that appeals to learners at all levels, but its effectiveness has not previously been studied.

This research addresses the gap by analyzing the platform's structure and content, focusing on its ability to aid learners who have some background in Dutch but require targeted resources to reach proficiency. The results will not only be useful for prospective learners but also inform educators, linguists, and content creators in the development of more effective online language learning tools. Furthermore, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of DutchPod101 can help learners make more informed choices about their language study strategies.

This study investigates the following research questions:

1. How effective is DutchPod101 in helping false beginner learners achieve a basic understanding of written and spoken Dutch?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of DutchPod101 as a language learning platform for learners reacquiring Dutch after a period of inactivity?
3. To what extent does DutchPod101 support the development of core language skills (vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, and speaking) for false beginner learners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, language teaching has concentrated on developing language skills within the classroom, aiming to equip students for real-world language use. However, it is well acknowledged that classroom-based learning has inherent limitations, offering a narrow scope of learning opportunities or "affordances" confined to a limited range of discourse and literacy practices. In contrast, the modern availability of the internet, technological tools, media, and the widespread use of English in both physical and virtual social networks has significantly expanded opportunities for meaningful and authentic language experiences beyond the classroom setting (Richards, 2015).

Studies suggest that podcasts function similarly to public libraries by providing users with direct access to materials on their devices. They are particularly effective tools for language learning, as they not only improve listening skills but also inspire and motivate learners. Additionally, podcasts facilitate interactive learning experiences, supporting students at various stages of language acquisition (Indahsari, 2020).

Incorporating audio resources into education is an effective strategy for actively engaging students in the learning process. Typically presented in electronic formats, these resources can be categorized in various ways. For instance, an audio clip is a brief segment that often accompanies explanations of diagrams, tables, or illustrations. In foreign language education, audio clips are particularly valuable for improving listening comprehension, offering examples of pronunciation, educational dialogues, and text readings. The integration of video materials alongside audio resources further enhances the educational experience by fostering a deeper understanding of the content, increasing student engagement, and promoting better interaction between teachers and students (Tursunovich, 2022).

Abdulrahman et al.'s (2018) research aimed to examine the impact of podcasts on students' listening comprehension in an EFL classroom. The study involved 60 high school students from Indonesia, with 30 students placed in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. The results indicated a significant difference between the groups, as the experimental group outperformed the control group. Podcasts significantly influenced the students' listening comprehension, with students describing them as authentic, engaging, and beneficial. The podcasts offered interesting listening exercises and meaningful tasks that increased their motivation to learn English.

Başaran and Cabaroğlu (2014) investigated participants' perceptions of self-efficacy in relation to motivation and expectations. The quasi-experimental study utilized a pretest-posttest design with 187 university students. Before and after a 12-week podcast-based language program, participants completed the English Self-Efficacy Scale. The results revealed a statistically significant improvement in participants' perceptions of their listening comprehension, speaking, and reading skills. Notably, self-efficacy perceptions related to writing showed significant enhancement. However, no significant improvement was observed in perceptions of reading and understanding advanced-level stories. The program was considered elementary, and its duration was deemed insufficient for enhancing high levels of self-efficacy.

In Farshi and Mohammadi's (2013) study, 30 university students with limited English vocabulary knowledge, classified as intermediate learners, were sent video podcasts via email. Afterward, each participant completed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, either electronically or in hard copy, to share their overall experience. The data was analyzed using SPSS. The results showed that the students had a very positive attitude towards the podcasts and were highly motivated to improve their English vocabulary through this method. However, the participants noted challenges such as limited access, slow internet connections, and content filtering as significant obstacles.

Kargozari and Zarinkamar's (2014) research aimed to investigate the impact of using podcasts on vocabulary acquisition. The results showed that participants in the experimental group, who used podcasts, performed better in vocabulary learning than those in the control group, both in terms of quantity and quality. Using podcasts as educational tools for vocabulary acquisition proved to be much more effective than traditional methods. Incorporating podcasts in language classes seemed to enhance learners' progress, as indicated by a significant increase in post-test scores among participants in the experimental group.

To examine students' attitudes towards using podcasts for language learning, a sample of 30 high school students from Indonesia was selected. The researchers used a questionnaire to collect data. The results showed that a large number of students strongly supported the effectiveness of podcasts in improving their listening skills. The students found podcasts engaging and enjoyable because of their entertaining features, which helped boost their enthusiasm and motivation to continue learning the language (Asyifah & Indriani, 2021). Self-study language training software packages are widely available and marketed as comprehensive language learning solutions. However, there is a lack of clarity regarding their effectiveness and the best conditions for their use. The specific language training method used in Nielson (2011) resulted in minimal proficiency gains for only a few learners. The findings of the empirical study were important, as they aimed to explore the outcomes when independent learners used commercial self-study materials. The limited progress observed indicated that this approach was unlikely to be effective in improving overall language proficiency, particularly for beginners.

Podcasts provide students with authentic and comprehensive materials, motivating them to actively participate in language learning. Additionally, podcasts can be accessed at home or on the go through mobile devices. They help expand students' vocabulary and grammar, improving their communication skills in a foreign language. Carefully selected online resources complement language learning programs, deepening students' understanding while promoting their communication abilities and knowledge sharing. As modern and effective tools, podcasts support self-directed learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach, focused on a review of DutchPod101 based on the author's personal learning experience. The author, a false beginner in Dutch, engaged with the various content and platforms over a six month period. Learning did not take place on a strict schedule. The evaluation was carried out in several stages, starting with the exploration of the content available on the site. The author reviewed a range of lessons, including vocabulary instruction, audio podcasts, grammar explanations, and video lessons. The focus was primarily on the absolute beginner and beginner levels, as these aligned with the author's proficiency. Progress was tracked using DutchPod101's built-in review tools, such as quizzes, flashcards, and vocabulary retention tests. These tools allowed the author to assess their understanding and track improvement over time. The methodology also included a focus on listening comprehension. For listening skills, the author engaged with a variety of audio lessons, including dialogues and conversation-based podcasts, to assess how well the platform supported comprehension at different speeds and complexity levels.

The user experience was evaluated, looking at the ease of navigation, interface design, accessibility of learning materials, and overall engagement. These factors were considered in relation to the platform's capacity to keep learners motivated and facilitate continuous progress. The combination of content review, progress tracking, and personal evaluation of the user experience provided a comprehensive overview of DutchPod101's effectiveness for a false beginner. The study used a combination of sources, including the free trial of Dutchpod 101, YouTube videos posted by Dutchpod 101, Dutchpod 101 podcasts and the Dutchpod 101

course available on the UdeMy platform. The content was at an absolute beginner and beginner level. Finally, a Cambridge IGCSE Dutch (0515/02, Paper 2, from May/June 2021) reading exam was taken to test suitability as a tool for test preparation. There was no funding available for this study and the author received no incentives from DutchPod 101 or innovative languages.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A prominent feature of DutchPod101 is its vocabulary instruction. The website's systematic approach to teaching common words and phrases, often reinforced through associated, relevant contexts, helps learners quickly expand their lexicon. The inclusion of flashcards, quizzes, and review exercises makes it easy to retain new vocabulary. For a false beginner like the author, this approach proved to be especially useful in reactivating previously known words and gradually building on that base.

However, grammar instruction was somewhat lacking. Although the platform provides explanations of basic sentence structures and verb conjugations, it does not offer an in-depth focus on Dutch grammatical nuances. For example, word order, verb placement in subordinate clauses, and the correct use of prepositions were not explored comprehensively. This omission limits the learner's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences independently or understand more complex written texts. Therefore, DutchPod101 is better suited for building vocabulary and comprehension rather than providing detailed grammatical education.

Another issue with the written aspect is the contextualization of grammar. Although some lessons present vocabulary in sentences, the explanations tend to be brief. There is often minimal follow-up on how these structures operate in different contexts. For learners aiming to master written Dutch, this could present challenges when attempting to construct their own sentences or understand more complex written materials, such as news articles or short stories. The platform excels in the listening comprehension area, providing a vast number of audio lessons in the form of podcasts, dialogues, and audio-based conversations. The lessons cater to various levels of fluency, with beginner-level dialogues well suited for learners of low proficiency. This focus on listening comprehension is particularly useful for learners who are trying to refresh their language skills after a long break.

However, there is a noticeable gap in speaking practice for those that do not subscribe to the premium plus package. Although the dialogues and listening exercises are useful for improving listening skills, the lack of interactive conversations or opportunities for real-time feedback on pronunciation limits the development of active speaking skills.

One of the main strengths of DutchPod101 is its variety of learning materials. The website offers audio, video, and written content, catering to different learning styles and levels. The flexibility of the platform allows learners to progress at their own pace, making it accessible for a wide range of users. The site also offers a mobile application, making it easy for users to learn when convenient. However, the website can be a little difficult to navigate in regard to finding lessons. This is due to the large choice of learning resources available on the site.

Although the platform has many strengths it also has some notable limitations. Most prominently, grammar instruction is a little underdeveloped. This could impede learners who are aiming for more than just basic proficiency. Additionally, the site lacks features in relation

to speaking, which is important for building conversational fluency. Finally, although the platform's focus on listening comprehension is valuable, it could benefit from more structured practice in speaking and conversational skills. Many of the quizzes used to check comprehension were at a very basic level. These did not feel like a good test of a learner's comprehension.

In regard to the IGCSE mock reading exam, under test conditions the author scored 27 out of a possible 45 marks. According to various sources, this would equate to a possible C grade if all components scored within this range (Cambridge, 2014; Cambridge, 2015). This would be equivalent to a high A1 or low A2 band on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) scale. This result relates to the lessons taken through DutchPod 101.

The findings from this six-month qualitative evaluation of DutchPod101 reveal both significant strengths and notable limitations that align with broader research on podcast-based language learning platforms. The results demonstrate that while DutchPod101 excels as a vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension tool, it falls short in providing comprehensive language instruction necessary for balanced proficiency development.

The platform's effectiveness in vocabulary instruction corroborates findings from previous studies (Kargozari & Zarinkamar, 2014; Farshi & Mohammadi, 2013) that highlight podcasts' superior performance in lexical development compared to traditional methods. The systematic approach to teaching common words through contextualized flashcards and review exercises proved particularly beneficial for false beginners, supporting the reactivation of dormant vocabulary while facilitating incremental expansion. This aligns with Abdulrahman et al.'s (2018) findings that podcasts provide authentic and engaging materials that enhance motivation and comprehension.

Similarly, DutchPod101's strength in listening comprehension reflects the broader literature on audio-based language learning resources (Tursunovich, 2022; Indahsari, 2020). The variety of audio lessons, from simple dialogues to more complex conversation-based podcasts, effectively supported comprehension development across different complexity levels. This finding reinforces the notion that podcasts function as accessible "public libraries" of authentic language input, providing learners with extensive exposure to natural speech patterns and pronunciation models.

However, significant pedagogical limitations can challenge the comprehensiveness of podcast-based learning platforms. The inadequate treatment of Dutch grammatical structures, particularly complex features like word order in subordinate clauses and preposition usage, represents a fundamental weakness that limits learners' ability to achieve functional proficiency. This suggests that while podcasts excel at input-focused skills (listening and vocabulary), they may not provide the structured, systematic instruction necessary for mastering productive language components.

The notable absence of interactive speaking practice opportunities, particularly in non-premium tiers, represents another critical limitation. This gap contradicts the communicative language teaching principles that emphasize balanced skill development and meaningful interaction. The lack of real-time feedback mechanisms and conversational practice

opportunities may impede learners' ability to develop functional speaking competence, potentially creating a significant imbalance between receptive and productive skills.

The platform's strength in providing flexible, multi-modal learning experiences aligns with contemporary expectations for self-directed language learning tools. The availability of mobile applications and diverse content formats addresses different learning preferences and schedules, reflecting the modern learner's need for accessible, on-demand educational resources. However, the navigation difficulties experienced highlight a common issue in comprehensive learning platforms. There is a balance needed between offering extensive resources and maintaining intuitive user experience design.

The superficial nature of comprehension assessments identified in this study raises questions about the platform's ability to accurately gauge and promote deeper learning. Basic-level quizzes may provide false confidence rather than meaningful evaluation of comprehension skills, potentially hindering learners' awareness of their actual proficiency levels.

These findings have important implications for both learners and developers of podcast-based language learning platforms. For learners, DutchPod101 appears most effective when used as a supplementary tool focused on vocabulary building and listening skill development, rather than as a standalone comprehensive language learning solution. The platform's limitations suggest that learners seeking balanced proficiency development would benefit from combining podcast-based learning with more structured grammatical instruction and interactive speaking practice opportunities.

For platform developers, the results highlight the need for more sophisticated integration of productive skills and systematic grammar instruction within podcast-based learning environments. The challenge lies in maintaining the engaging, accessible nature of podcast learning while incorporating the structured practice necessary for comprehensive language development.

In the reading examination, the author achieved a score of 27 out of a possible 45 marks. Based on the Cambridge International Examinations grade thresholds for the Dutch (Foreign Language) (0515) syllabus from May/June 2015, this score corresponds to a possible Grade C. This performance is indicative of a proficiency level that aligns with the high A1 band or low A2 band on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale. At this level, the individual is considered a basic user of the language and possess the capacity to comprehend and employ familiar, everyday expressions and fundamental phrases.

The use of general language learning platforms, such as DutchPod 101, is well-suited for developing the core skills required for this level of proficiency. However, to advance beyond this level, it is imperative to supplement these resources with a more targeted and structured approach.

CONCLUSION

DutchPod101 is an effective tool for false beginners aiming to reacquaint themselves with the Dutch language. Its strengths lie in its vocabulary instruction and listening comprehension exercises. These help users refresh and build upon their knowledge. However, the platform's limitations in grammar instruction and speaking practice mean that it may not be

sufficient for learners aiming to reach a higher level of proficiency in Dutch. DutchPod101 is useful as a supplementary tool, but could benefit from improving several areas.

This qualitative evaluation of DutchPod101 provides valuable insights into the capabilities and limitations of podcast-based language learning platforms for false beginners. The study confirms that such platforms can effectively support vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension development, offering flexible, engaging alternatives to traditional classroom instruction. The systematic approach to lexical development and extensive audio input opportunities represent significant pedagogical strengths that align with established research on effective language learning practices.

However, the findings also reveal critical limitations that constrain the platform's effectiveness as a comprehensive language learning solution. The inadequate treatment of grammatical structures and absence of meaningful speaking practice opportunities create significant gaps in the learning experience that may impede balanced proficiency development. These limitations suggest that podcast-based platforms like DutchPod101 are best positioned as valuable supplementary tools rather than standalone solutions for language acquisition.

The study's methodology, while limited by its single-participant design and focus on one proficiency level, provides a foundation for future research. Longitudinal studies with larger, more diverse participant groups could offer deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of podcast-based learning across different proficiency levels and learning contexts. Additionally, comparative studies examining how podcast-based platforms perform alongside traditional instruction methods could inform more effective blended learning approaches.

Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of DutchPod101 in comparison to other language learning tools. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking learners' progress with the platform could provide deeper insights into its long-term efficacy for learners at different proficiency levels.

For language learners, particularly those at beginner levels, DutchPod101 and similar platforms offer valuable opportunities for vocabulary development and listening skill enhancement. However, learners should be aware of the need to supplement podcast-based learning with additional resources that address grammatical competence and speaking practice. The platform's strength in providing accessible, engaging content makes it an excellent starting point for language learning journeys, but comprehensive proficiency development requires a more balanced pedagogical approach.

As the field of computer-assisted language learning continues to evolve, the challenge for developers remains in creating platforms that maintain the accessibility and engagement benefits of podcast-based learning while addressing the comprehensive instructional needs of language learners. The findings from this study contribute to our understanding of these challenges and point toward the need for more integrated approaches to digital language learning platform design.

Declaration

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