

The Role of Pre-listening Activities on EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Listening plays a significant role in daily communication and educational processes. In spite of its importance, listening has long been the neglected skill in second and foreign language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. However, on account of the entire challenges EFL learners encounter in classrooms due to the listening complexity, some pre-listening activities as supports in the procedure of teaching listening are proposed by experts in the field. This research investigated 80 male and female learners in 2 groups of 40, who were selected randomly, to determine whether pre-listening activities have a significant effect on listening comprehension of English texts. It also investigated whether there was a significant difference between male and female learners on pre-listening activities in terms of their effects on the comprehension of English texts. To do this, subjects first took a TOFEL test, which served as a pre-test, to make it possible to have homogeneous learners in a control group and an experimental group. In the experimental group, some pre-listening tasks, through which the learners received general prior information about the content of the listening texts, were performed. Then, they listened to and answered some multiple-choice comprehension questions which asked for the specific information in the listening texts. However, the control group's listening comprehension tasks were destitute of pre-listening activities. The results of the analysis of the data obtained at the end of the experiment revealed that the experimental group performed significantly better than the control group. It also showed that females outperformed the male group. In other words, the treatments appeared to have a significant effect on the performance of the experimental group (and especially female learners therein) in listening comprehension.

Key words: Pre-listening activities, listening comprehension, EFL learners, gender

Introduction

Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often it has been overlooked by its elder sister—speaking (Nunan, 1998). Listening activities may help students develop their listening comprehension. But it is hard to implement an effective listening program, in countries where English is taught as a foreign language. To be effective listeners, students need to build their background knowledge on subject before listening and to have a specific purpose for listening. To improve the students' listening comprehension, the teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice listening skills and to become actively engaged in the listening process. Before listening, students need assistance to activate what they already know about the ideas they are going to hear (Nunan, 1998).

The choice of pre-listening tasks gives the teachers a chance to grade the listening lesson for different abilities. Also, pre-listening activities aim to deal with all of these issues: to generate interest, build confidence and to facilitate comprehension. Although pre-listening has already been the target of scholarly investigation, there seems to be a dearth of studies regarding the effectiveness of pre-listening activities for learners of different genders in the context of Iran.

Literature Review

Communication contains two conversion processes of creating a meaningful message and recreating that message. To recreate the message from spoken language, it is needed for learner to have some shared linguistic knowledge with the speaker (Chastain, 1988). Anderson and Lynch (1988) have defined, “listening as the means to immediate oral production” (p. 64). Brown (1980) maintains, “Listening ability lies at the heart of all growth, from birth through the years of formal education. The better those learning skills are developed, the more productive our learning efforts” (p. 10). So, this skill is one of the crucial equipment by which a listener attempts to learn a second language.

Pre-listening

Pre-listening is the preparation stage for while-listening. The most important thing in this stage is to provide sufficient context to match what would be available in real life and to create motivation. This can be realized by helping learners become conscious of the purpose of the upcoming listening input. As some researchers claim, listening is always with a purpose of some kind because listeners are “limited processors” (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brown, 1990). The pre-listening activities are probably the most important aspect of any listening sequence because the success of all the other activities depends on the extent to which the teacher manages to give the students the necessary background, guidance, and direction to achieve (Chastain, 1988).

It would not be fair to students to draw them straight into the listening without introducing the topic or the type of activity they are going to work on, since in the real life there are not many situations when people are supposed to listen with having no idea about what they are going to hear. So, that is why students should be given a substantial pre-listening support. This pre-listening support will help them to become more confident and successful. Underwood (1989) declares that a pre-listening task can consist of a variety of activities, which can help the teacher to focus the students’ minds on the topic by narrowing down the things that the learners anticipate to hear and stimulating relevant previous knowledge and already known language. Ellis (1994) presents a number of tasks for pre-listening stage that can enable the students to gain knowledge that is needed for the listening task. This gained knowledge gives the students confidence that is necessary for successful listening. The tasks include: starting a discussion about the topic, brainstorming, game, and guiding questions. Field (1998) states that some kinds of pre-listening activities are now in vogue, i.e. brain-storming vocabulary, reviewing areas of grammar and discussing the topics of listening texts. Extended discussion of the topic can result in much of the content of the listening passage being anticipated. White (1995) also declares that an objective for the pre-listening phase is to contextualize the text, providing any information needed to help learners appreciate the text, providing any information needed to help learners appreciate the setting and the role relationship between participants. This becomes particularly important with authentic recordings (p. 249).

The language teacher can help the students to improve their listening skills in a variety of ways. According to Rivers (1981) to supply students with background for listening material we should give them, before they begin listening, explanations as to who is speaking to whom, the nature of their relationship and their expectations in the situations, also, with the wider availability of video tapes and films, students will have the additional aid to comprehension.

In the present research, an attempt has been made to determine whether pre-listening activities have any effects on the EFL learners' listening comprehension. It has also intended to survey the effects of pre-listening activities on male and female learners' listening comprehension. To do the research, the researcher provided the learners in the experimental

group with different pre-listening activities, by using different techniques during the teaching process, and then compared their performance with that of the control group learners.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on what has so far been mentioned, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the effects of pre-listening activities on the listening comprehension of foreign language learners in general?
2. What are the effects of pre-listening activities on male and female learners' listening comprehension?

Regarding these research questions, two null hypotheses were offered as follows:

1. Pre-listening activities have no effects on listening comprehension of foreign language learners.
2. Pre-listening activities and listening comprehension are not affected by the gender of foreign language learners.

Method

Participants

The subjects of this study consisted of 80 male and female learners of English as a foreign language in the fourth semester in Mashahir English language institute in Baft, Iran. They were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental and a control group. The two groups were at the same level of education, that is, intermediate. Both groups were proved to have the same level of listening proficiency at the beginning of the study. They were all native speakers of Persian.

Instrumentation

The first instrument used in this study was a TOEFL listening proficiency test (TOEFL Preparation Kit, 2003): In order to know the learner's homogeneity in listening comprehension before the study, a TOEFL listening proficiency test consisting of short conversation between two people with 20 multiple choice questions was used. A paper test and an answer sheet were given to the students. After hearing a short passage and the listening comprehension questions, the learners were to choose the best answer and mark (x) on their answer sheet. This test was given to both participants in experimental and control groups twice, once before the study as the pretest, and once after the study as the posttest.

The second instrument consisted of eight stories based on "Good news, Bad news" outlined by Barnard (1998). Students engaged in activities such as, matching items in column, answering multiple choice questions, true / false questions and ordering pictures.

Procedures

The learners were divided randomly in two groups they were assigned to one of the two conditions: (a) Not receiving the treatment (control group), and (b) Receiving the treatment (experimental group). Each group consisted of 40 students. The learners sat for a pretest, which showed they were homogeneous with respect to listening proficiency in English. Afterwards, in the control group, the listening program started without thinking or discussing about the topic. In other words, in the control group, the listening task started with regular approach. The experimental group was provided with pre-listening activities whenever they were to listen to something. After the completion of the training sessions, a posttest was given to the learners in both groups. The data gathered from the subjects under the study were analyzed by SPSS. To carry the statistical analysis of this study, first the scores of the listening proficiency test for the two groups were computed and the means of the two

groups were compared. Then, the subjects' scores in a TOFEL listening proficiency test as posttest were computed. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the data.

Results

After scoring the tests, the results were put to statistical analysis to provide answers for the research questions. The tables and figures below show the results:

Table 1, Descriptive statistics of learners' scores on the pretest

Group	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Experimental	40	9.00	30.00	19.81	6.47
Control	40	8.25	29.30	19.30	6.46

On the pretest, the mean score of the experimental group was a little higher than the score of the control group ($9.00 > 8.25$). This difference is also shown in Figure 1.

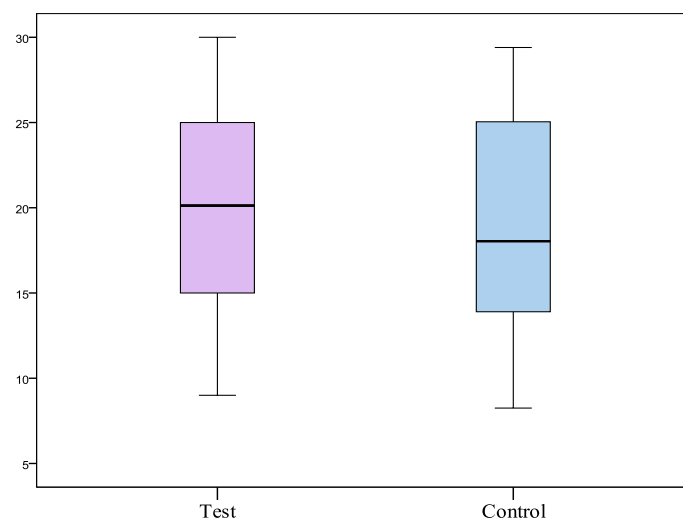


Figure 1: Descriptive statistics of learners' scores on the pretest

Table 2 presents the results of descriptive statistics related to the posttest scores of the two groups.

Table 2, Descriptive statistics of learners' scores on the posttest

Group	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Experimental	40	10.00	30.00	21.19	6.41
Control	40	8.25	29.30	19.38	6.43

Control	-0.079	0.26	0.046	-0.16	0.005	-1.89	39	.066
Experimental	1.28	0.54	0.086	1.46	-1.11	15.03	39	.001

The statistical amount of the t test and the level of significance value in the control group were -1.89 and .066, respectively, which shows a p value larger than .05. Therefore, there was a lack of difference in the scores of the control group learners before the performance of pre-listening activities and after the performance of pre-listening activities. However, the statistical amount of the t test and the level of significance value in the experimental group were 15.03 and .001 respectively. The conclusion could be that there was a statistically significant difference in the experimental group before the performance of the pre-listening activities and after the performance of pre-listening activities at the .05 level of significance. Thus, we can strongly say that the scores of the experimental group before and after the performance of pre-listening activities were different. Therefore, the gained results from the comparison of the two groups i.e. experimental and control groups after the performance of pre-listening activities indicate that using pre-listening activities has a significant value on "achievement rate" of EFL learners in the listening comprehension.

Investigation of the second assumption

In order to test the second assumption, the researcher computed the learners' scores before using the pre-listening activities and the learners' scores after the performance of pre-listening activities. Then, these two sets of scores were compared by using the independent-samples t test. The results obtained are shown in Table 5 below:

Table 5, Results of t Test for Comparing Pre-listening and Post listening Means

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t test for Equality of Means					
	F	$Sig.$	t	df	$Sig.$	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.479	.092	2.48	38	.017	.4	0.074	0.725
Equal variances not assumed			2.47	25.29	.02	.4	0.068	0.731

For using the independent t test, first the researcher investigated the variance equality of achievement rate in both male and female groups. This was done by the Levine's test. The results of the above table display that $F = 1.479$ and the significance value was .092. Therefore, it was found that the two sets of scores had equal variances. Then, in order to survey the differences in the achievement rate of males and females, independent t test based on equality of variances was used. The statistical amount of t test and the significance of p

value in this test were 2.48 and .017 respectively. Since the p value is less than .05, the null hypothesis of the equality of achievement rate of the male and female groups is rejected. Thus, we can strongly (with 95 percent confidence) say that achievement rate in male and female groups were different. The achievement rate in female group was higher than it was in the male group. Thus, it could be strongly (with confidence of 95 percent) claimed that the pre-listening activities for the female group were more effective than they were for the male group.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This research examined the effects of pre-listening activities on the EFL learners' listening comprehension. The results showed that students receiving pre-listening activities get significantly better scores in the listening comprehension test, as proved via statistical analyses. In other words, providing background information about the listening texts had positive effects on learners' listening comprehension since learners who received pre-listening activity scored higher than those who did not receive such activities. In fact, comparing and contrasting the statistical results obtained in the study led to the rejection of the first null hypothesis: "Pre-listening activities have no effects on listening comprehension of foreign language learners." Previous research in the literature corroborates the findings of the study (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Doff, 1988; Richards & Rodgers, 2003; Underwood, 1989). As these researches maintain, exposing learners to pre-listening activities, based on their level of proficiency, leads to a significantly better performance. They suggest that listening tasks, text gradation, and staging the listening progression should be taken into account while introducing listening materials to the intermediate learners.

The second null hypothesis was "Pre-listening activities have no effects on the listening comprehension of both genders." The results revealed a significant difference between male and female listening comprehension of the participants in the experimental group. According to the results, the mean score of females in the pre-listening comprehension test was much higher than that of male pre-listening group. According to Table 3, the t value was significant. Actually, the statistical amount of t test and the significance of p value in this test was 2.48 and .017 respectively. Since the p value was less than .05, the null hypothesis of the equality of achievement rate of the male and female groups was rejected. As a result, it could be argued that based on our observations, the pre-listening activities has a significant effect on the listening comprehension of the female subjects.

Finally, the conclusion can be made that pre-listening activities are an indispensable part of a listening lesson, and activating the schemata with visual supports which do not make mental burden heavy for EFL learners but, are at the same time intriguing, is effective in facilitating listening comprehension. In sum, the findings of the present research indicated that the pre-listening activities have significant effects on listening comprehension of the EFL learners. The findings also revealed that gender had a significant effect on the learners' use of pre-listening activities, with females outperforming males.

Suggestions for Further Research

In the lights of the findings of the present study, several possibilities exist for further study: The present study may serve to build up a thrust for further investigation to see whether the same results are obtained if pre-listening experiments are done in relation to other aspects of listening comprehension.

As this study was carried out with two groups of high school student at a private institute, it is suggested that similar experiments with a large number of subjects can be replicated taking into consideration the effects of topic, memory, and passage length on listening comprehension. Language teachers and syllabus writers are supposed to incorporate a range of pre-listening activities and change the weight of listening lesson from testing

listening into teaching listening, so that they could support language learners to enhance their listening performance.

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