

The Effect of Text Familiarity on Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract—Listening is an active process in which a listener selects and interprets information which comes from auditory and visual clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express. It involves both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. Linguistic knowledge relates to knowledge of phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, discourse structure, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, whereas non-linguistic refers to knowledge of the topic, the context and general knowledge about the world and how it works. This article investigates the effect of text familiarity on listening comprehension. The paper focuses on two main issues. First, it investigates the effect of text familiarity on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Second, it investigates the influence of text familiarity on some aspects of the language. Sixty students who were studying in English Translation at the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran participated in this study. After comparing the pretest and posttest scores, it was indicated that Iranian EFL learners got substantially higher scores after the treatment. The findings showed that text familiarity has a considerable impact on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

Index Terms—text familiarity, listening comprehension, Iranian EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening plays a significant role in the lives of people. Of the four major areas of communication skills and language development—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—the one that is the most basic is listening. It is evident that children listen and respond to language before they learn to talk. When it is time for children to learn to read, they still have to listen so that they gain knowledge and information to follow directions. In the classroom, students have to listen carefully and attentively to lectures and class discussions in order to understand and to retain the information for later recall. Listening is not only the first of the language arts skills developed, it is also the skill most frequently used in both the classroom and daily life. Clearly, much of the educational process is based on skills in listening. Students have to spend most of the time listening to what the teacher says, for instance, giving lectures, asking questions, or telling directions. In a language classroom, listening ability plays a significant role in the development of other language arts skills. When students first learn a language, they generally have to listen to the words several times before they are able to recognize and pronounce those words. Listening can also help students build vocabulary, develop language proficiency, and improve language usage (Barker, 1971). Cayer, Green, and Baker (1971) find that students' ability to comprehend written material through reading as well as to express themselves through speaking and written communication are directly related to students' maturity in the listening phase of language development. Dunkel (1986) asserts that developing proficiency in listening comprehension is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking. Not only are listening skills the basis for the development of all other skills, they are also the main channel through which students make initial contact with the target language and its culture (Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

Despite the importance of listening practice in language instruction, English language classes in many countries still emphasize only the skills of reading and writing. This is especially the case of an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) situation in which the English language is taught as a subject at school and used only inside, but not outside, the classroom. EFL students are studying English in their home countries where English is not the dominant native language. Students who are from environments where English is not the language of the country have very few opportunities to hear the real language; these students therefore are not accustomed to hearing the language as it is produced by native speakers for native speakers. Consequently, students from the countries in which English is taught as a foreign language frequently have great difficulty understanding English spoken to them when they come into contact with native speakers of the language. A few problems that hinder listening comprehension are as follows: unfamiliarity of topics/texts, lack of socio-cultural, factual and contextual knowledge of the target language. Background knowledge plays an important role in interpreting meaning, as this forms a foundation for listeners to connect new information to their existing knowledge. Background knowledge relates to our real world experiences and

expectations that we have. In this study, the researchers investigate the effect of text familiarity on listening comprehension concerning two questions. First, it investigates the effect of text familiarity on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. Second, it investigates the influence of text familiarity on some aspects of the language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech in a second or foreign language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second or foreign language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic (Jack C. Richards, John Platt, Heidi Platt, 2000). One of the main reasons for getting students to listen to spoken English is to let them hear different varieties and accents --- rather than just the voice of their teacher with its own idiosyncrasies. In today's world, they need to be exposed not only to one variety of English (British English, for example) but also to varieties such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English, Indian English or West African English (Jeremy Harmer, 1998).

According to Strevens (1990), reading, listening, speaking and writing are four major skills in English study. They are closely connected and interact with each other. It's impossible to communicate if you do not listen well and people seldom write well without reading. Very often a language user involves in using a combination of skills. Our ultimate aim is to foster the students' ability to communicate. If their listening is poor, it will have a negative effect on the fulfillment of the other requirements for reading, speaking and writing. Therefore it's important for teachers to help students to improve their listening comprehension. However, careful observation of school English teaching practice has found that the teaching of listening skills is still the weak link in the language teaching process. Despite students having mastered the basic elements of English grammar and vocabulary, their listening comprehension is often weak. Through systematic study of basic English teaching stages at university, it has been recognized that while students' integrated skills in reading, writing and translating, have been improving, their listening and speaking capabilities have been left behind. The key factor that has been recognized in the preliminary studies is students' limited listening comprehension.

Foreign language listening comprehension is a complex process and crucial in the development of foreign language competence; yet, the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognized relatively recently (Rost, 2002). Since the role of listening comprehension in language learning was either overlooked or undervalued, it merited little research and pedagogical attention in the past. But at present, some researchers have devoted some time to listening and believe it to be an important skill in teaching and learning. For instance, Nunan (1998) believes that, "listening is the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. In fact over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening" (p. 1). Listening has been given little attention in the English language classroom. This could be due to the fact that there has been a lack of research interest into listening. Furthermore, listening has often been considered as a passive skill which learners just "pick up". Teachers believe that exposing students to spoken language is sufficient instruction in listening comprehension (Miller, 2003). Previous research has identified a few problems that hinder comprehension to take place. Anderson & Lynch (2000) state that one of the reasons why the listener fails to process incoming speech is that the speech contains words or phrases that the listener can hear adequately but is unable to understand because of serious problems with the syntax or semantics of the language. This is a common problem faced by students as the topics that they have to listen to often contain new or unfamiliar words. Another problem is the lack of background knowledge on the topics discussed. Lack of socio-cultural, factual and contextual knowledge of the target language can also present an obstacle to comprehension because language is used to express culture (Anderson & Lynch, 2000). This indicates that background knowledge plays an important role in interpreting meaning, as this forms a foundation for listeners to connect new information to their existing knowledge. Background knowledge relates to our real world experiences and expectations that we have. This knowledge is very important when we consider the language processing problems of students. Listening then is not only concerned with identifying the linguistic features of the text but also with matching speech with what the listener already knows about the topic. In the process of listening, comprehension can only occur when the listener can place what he hears in a context. If the listener knows something about the speakers and his intention, comprehension is much easier. Familiarity with the text makes listening easier for the listener as he is able to relate to his own background knowledge (Gebhard, 2000).

Long (1990) highlighted the need to investigate how background knowledge affected auditory comprehension in L2. Results from a survey, recall protocols, and a checklist administered to 188 students enrolled in university Spanish courses showed that background knowledge could help L2 listening comprehension, and that linguistic knowledge played a prominent role in comprehension when appropriate background knowledge was not available to L2 listeners. However, she also found that students who possessed very good linguistic knowledge overextended the pre-stored background knowledge onto a new set of data that were clearly incongruent. That is, she noticed that activated background knowledge could result in dysfunctional effects on comprehension, which indicated that good listeners had a tendency to abandon linguistic knowledge in favor of the familiar schema. Similarly, Chiang and Dunkel (1992) provided two lectures regarding Confucius and The Amish for 388 Chinese listeners in order to assess the effects of prior knowledge of lecture topic and speech modification on the listening comprehension. They found that Chinese EFL

listeners scored higher in their post lecture multiple-choice comprehension test that contained both passage-dependent and passage-independent items, when they listened to the familiar-topic lecture (Confucius) than when they listened to the unfamiliar-topic lecture (The Amish). However, a significant effect of prior knowledge was found only on the passage-independent items, which resulted in an interesting insistence that only passage-independent items can provide a measure of a listener's prior knowledge for language comprehension. Learners' performance on passage-dependent items did not differ significantly whether the familiar or unfamiliar topic was presented. The effect of prior knowledge itself on comprehension of information from the passage remains unclear.

Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) conducted a research project relative to the interaction between topical knowledge and L2 listening comprehension. Arguing that the effect of background knowledge itself on listening comprehension remains unclear when it is related to L2 listening ability, she extended the research of Long (1990) and Chiang and Dunkel (1992) by adding proficiency level as a variable. Ninety first, second, and third quarter university students of Spanish classes (three levels of proficiency) participated in this study and the immediate written recall-protocols were administered. The results showed that topic familiarity affected the scores of the recall measures, and that the means of the course-level groups had a consistent increase in comprehension scores across the three levels. However, the results also indicated no interaction between the two variables, topic familiarity and course level (L2 listening proficiency), revealing that all students, regardless of their course levels, scored higher on the familiar passage.

The effect of prior knowledge on lecture listening comprehension was also measured by Hansen and Jensen (1994) and Jensen and Hansen (1995). Hansen and Jensen (1994) hypothesized that a test could be biased in favor of listeners with prior knowledge. Two lectures (history and chemistry) were prepared for listening tests and 235 university level L2 learners were recruited. Of the 235 learners of L2, only 30 learners reported prior knowledge of the non-technical lectures (history lecture) and only eight learners reported the experience of studying the topic of chemistry. When prior knowledge was added as a predictor of performance on the listening test, Hansen and Jensen found that prior knowledge of the history topic did not improve listening scores, whereas prior knowledge was a significant factor to the prediction of test takers' performance on the chemistry test. Later work about the effect of prior knowledge on the 11 lectures, Jensen and Hansen (1995) posited that the accessibility of prior knowledge on specific topics in lectures is determined by listening proficiency. Results from multiple regression correlations revealed that listening proficiency of 128 university level L2 learners had a significant main effect for all 11 lecture performances, whereas prior knowledge had statistical significance for 5 of 11 lectures. In addition, the examination of interaction between listening proficiency and prior knowledge for lecture listening showed that 10 out of 11 lectures have no significant interaction, which indicated no support to the hypothesis that listening proficiency moderates the effect of prior knowledge. An interesting finding in this study was that the effect of prior knowledge was more likely to show up for technical lectures than for non-technical lectures although the effect size was small. Jensen and Hansen concluded that prior knowledge does not significantly attribute to L2 academic lecture comprehension, and that further investigation would be needed to investigate the reason prior knowledge is more likely to affect technical lecture comprehension.

Hohzawa (1998) found, by studying 58 Japanese English learners, that listeners with high prior knowledge understood more familiar text than unfamiliar text and more proficient L2 listeners understood more than less-skilled listeners in either familiar or unfamiliar text. Students were assigned to a background-information group (experimental group) and to a no background-information group (control group). A proficiency test was given to measure their prior knowledge about the topics of three news stories. Students in the experimental group discussed the content of the stories briefly after the introductions to the news stories were provided. Collected scores from a written recall-protocol and a comprehension test revealed that students who lacked background information tended to produce more instances of inaccurate recall of the text or distortions, which was similar to findings of Markham and Latham (1987).

III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to identify the problems of Iranian EFL learners in listening to a text. The researchers conducted this study to investigate whether listening comprehension of EFL learners could be improved by the background knowledge or not. Listeners use both bottom-up (linguistic knowledge) and top – down processes (prior knowledge) to comprehend a text (Vandergrift, 2002). Therefore, knowing the context of a listening text helps the listener to reduce the burden of comprehension. The researchers were also interested in finding out if text familiarity affects listeners' language output. This was done to understand the effect of familiarity with a text on the comprehension of that text. This study aimed at facilitating the listening comprehension of texts for Iranian EFL learners. There are two main questions for this study:

- 1) What is the effect of text familiarity on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?
- 2) How does text familiarity affect language output?

The participants of this study are sixty students who were studying in English Translation at the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran. Students have at least one listening comprehension course for four hours in a week. Their listening comprehension is tested in both the mid-term and final examinations. If texts are familiar for learners, they would be able to cope with them easily. However, if they have no background knowledge on a specific text, they may not be able to show their listening comprehension. So, teachers should focus on providing the listeners with specific knowledge required for comprehending the listening text rather than just focusing on linguistic aspects.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Subjects

This research was conducted at the Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran. The participants of this research were students of the English Translation Group from Islamic Azad University of Lahijan, Iran and they are currently in semester two. New Interchange 2 is one of the university courses for these students and it is taught over a period of 15 weeks. Classes are held every week. Students from two English Translation classes participated in this study. The participants of this study were sixty students of English majoring in English Translation. They were students between 17 and 22 years of age.

B. Materials and Procedures

The purpose of this research is to investigate the effect of text familiarity on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. An unfamiliar listening text was chosen for learners. The selected listening text was entitled "Pollution." This listening text was taken from the New Interchange book. The choice of the listening text was significant because it should be both unfamiliar in content to the learners and at the same time appeal to them. If learners listen with a purpose and listen to their interesting materials, they will be motivated to listen and pay attention to them. Due to the fact that listening performance is strongly affected by motivation and memory effect, the texts should be both interesting and short. Four teachers were chosen to determine the suitability of the content of the listening texts for this study. This listening experiment was conducted over a three-month period. All the tests and treatment lessons were conducted during the New Interchange 2 class for four hours per week. Planning for the listening experiment was as follows: Week 1: Pre-test/Week 2: Treatment Lesson/Week 3: Treatment Lesson/Week 4: Treatment Lesson/Week 5: Post-test.

The students listened to a text entitled "Pollution." In the pre-test, they answered 10 questions related to this passage. There were four multiple choice questions, five True/False questions and one open-ended question. Multiple choice questions were chosen because the scores are determined and reported objectively. Multiple choice questions should focus on the important aspects of the text and the answers be derived from the text without much reliance on student's prior knowledge (Mead & Rubin, 1985). Open-ended comprehension question acts as activators of knowledge as they give the students the freedom to select and organize relevant information (Oded & Stavans, 1994). Sixty students from two different classes participated in this study. All these students had completed the New Interchange 1 in their first semester. Before the experiment was conducted, these students were given a placement test to determine their proficiency level of English. The results showed that the students from both classes are of the same proficiency level. A week later, the pre-test was conducted. Since this pre-test was conducted in both classes at the same time, both the researchers and the teacher discussed the procedures involved in conducting the pre-test. They gave clear instructions to the students. Students listened to the tape twice. This was very important for learners to retrieve information for the second time they had missed out the first time. The teacher was reminded to stop playing the tape at the end of each part in order to give the students enough time to complete writing their answers. In this test, students listened to a text which contained information that they were not familiar with. The test was conducted simultaneously in both classes.

After the pre-test was administered, the treatment lessons were conducted over four weeks. The materials for these three treatment lessons were obtained from the same book as the listening passages. These passages were selected based on the students' proficiency. Each lesson was conducted for four hours a day for three successive weeks. The students did the required activities in pairs or groups. The activities in the treatment lessons activated learners' background knowledge. As listeners rely on their background knowledge for comprehending a text, it is beneficial for them to activate their background knowledge before the listening task takes place (Lingzhu, 2003). Activities such as pictures, maps and diagrams help learners comprehend unfamiliar texts (Nunan, 1999). In the treatment lessons, learners are given a lot of visuals to understand the concepts involved in pollution. Word association was used to determine what prior knowledge learners bring with them before they listen to a text. The final type of activity suggested by Lingzhu (2003) is giving ideas or suggestions. This activity encourages the use of words and phrases that students already know and thus motivate them to listen. Four weeks later, and after three treatment lessons, the post-test was administered. Both classes had the post-test at the same time. The same listening text entitled "Pollution" was used for the post-test and the students had to answer the same questions that they had answered earlier in the pre-test.

V. FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSES

In order to investigate the effect of text familiarity on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension, the scores from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed. The written responses were analyzed to check the quality of language output in the posttest. These analyses showed that text familiarity helped learners to understand the listening text. To answer the first question, learners' scores in the pre-test and post-test were analyzed. A t-test was conducted to find out if there was a significant difference between the learners' pre and post-test scores. The written responses of the subjects in the open-ended question were analyzed to find out if there was any improvement in the learners' answers in the post-test. This procedure was done to investigate the effect of text familiarity on language output. After the pre-test, an interview was conducted with four students to find out if they had faced any problems during the listening test. The purpose of this

interview was to understand the effect of unfamiliarity with the text on the listeners' comprehension of Iranian EFL learners.

A. *The Effect of Text Familiarity on Listening Comprehension*

In the pre-test, the students were required to answer ten questions. There were four multiple-choice questions and six close-ended questions, which carried 16 marks. The open ended question in the final section carried 4 marks. Therefore, the highest possible score in the pre-test was 20 marks. The mean score in the pre-test was 4.11 with a standard deviation of 1.94. The minimum score obtained by the subjects was 8, while the maximum score was 17. The post-test was administered 3 weeks after the pre-test. The subjects were required to listen to the same text and answer the ten questions that they were given in the pre-test. Results show that there is a significant improvement in the subjects' scores. The mean score for the post-test was 4.15 with a standard deviation of 1.15. The minimum score obtained was 12, while the maximum score was 18. The results show that the higher mean score in the post-test is significantly different at $p < 0.01$. This significant improvement in the post-test is attributed to text knowledge that the subjects gained from the treatment lessons. In the pre-test, subjects were unable to determine answers to the comprehension questions as they faced a lot of barriers in the form of new vocabulary and pollution concepts. As they tried to overcome this, the process of interpreting the text was interrupted. Therefore, they could not identify the main ideas and information in the lecture that they needed to answer the comprehension questions. Successful comprehension in listening takes place when the listener has schematic knowledge, knowledge of the context and systemic knowledge (Anderson & Lynch, 2000). In the treatment lessons, the subjects had the opportunity to deal with key vocabulary items that were presented in the same context as they would hear in the lecture. Knowing the reasons of pollution gave the subjects a chance to put into practice their newly acquired knowledge on this text. This familiarity of text enabled the subjects to successfully identify the facts and details of the pollution, as well as details that support these main ideas. This ability facilitated their understanding of the text which explains why they performed significantly better in the post-test.

B. *The Effect of Text Familiarity on Language Output*

In order to measure improvement in language output, students' written answers in the pre and post-tests were examined qualitatively. Answers to the open-ended question were examined in order to find out if there was an improvement in the use of new vocabulary and phrases in the post-test. The background knowledge gained from the treatment lessons would be reflected if their answers in the post-test showed a better understanding of the text of pollution. All the written responses in the pre and post-test were examined for any differences in the quality of the language used. However, four subjects' answers are discussed in this section as they showed a major improvement in language output. The open ended question in the listening experiment was: *What is the definition of pollution? (4 marks)*

The four students' answers for the above question are presented below.

Question: What is the definition of pollution?

Answer: Pollution is the process of making air, water, soil etc dangerously dirty and not suitable for people to use.

Student 1: Ali

Answer in pre-test: Pollution affects our nature.

Answer in post-test: It has a negative effect on nature, human beings, and plants.

Ali has shown a better understanding of the concept of pollution in post-test because of appropriate vocabulary and ideas to define the word.

Student 2: Zahra

Answer in pre-test: no opinion

Answer in post-test: Pollution is an unwanted change in the environment by substances or forms of energy.

Zahra did not have any opinion about pollution in the pre-test. In the post-test, she could define the word pollution using the appropriate vocabulary that she had learnt before.

Student3: Hossein

Answer in pre-test: Is dangerous thing for everything.

Answer in post-test: Pollution is harmful materials or effects in the environment. It includes bad air such as carbon dioxide going into the air and making it smog.

Hossein has had an improvement in his post-test answer. Because he has used the terms such as harmful effects, carbon dioxide, and smog that he had already learned in the treatment lessons.

Student 4: Mohammad

Answer in pre-test: It causes harm, disorder, and discomfort.

Answer in post-test: Pollution is the entrance of contaminants into a habitat that causes harm, disorder, and discomfort to the living organisms in the habitat.

Mohammad has actually indicated his ability in understanding the term pollution in post-test. He has correctly identified the main ideas in the listening text.

Through examining students' answers, we see that their performance in post-test was much better than that of in the pre-test. This is due to the fact that they have gained new knowledge from the treatment lessons. In the post-test, learners were able to relate the gained knowledge to new input they had to process. As we know, prior knowledge helps

the students to interpret the text more meaningfully. Because of this, the post-test answers show a significant improvement in the use of both vocabulary and knowledge related to the listening text.

VI. CONCLUSION

On the whole, the findings of this research showed that background knowledge has an important effect on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. If the EFL learners provided with background knowledge, they will be able to understand unfamiliar texts easily. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that appropriate instructions are necessary for improving listening comprehension. Teachers should focus more attention on their teaching methods and the listening processes rather than the listening test results. The other implication is that text familiarity is an important aspect in listening comprehension process. Learners with background knowledge can perform the listening activities much better than those who lack it. Background knowledge helps the learners to match new information with what they already know about the text. Teachers should prepare learners for the listening stages. The next implication of this study is that learners should be provided with the opportunity to use language for communication in a meaningful context in the class. To sum up, this research has indicated that text familiarity is a necessary factor in the comprehension of unfamiliar texts. The findings of this study would be beneficial for teachers, curriculum planners, testers, and text book writers to plan their materials and classroom activities based on a more effective approach to the teaching and learning of Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

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