Structure-based vs. Task-based Syllabus: The Effect of Type of Syllabus on Listening Comprehension Ability of Iranian University Students

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Abstract—The present study attempted to investigate the effect of typology of syllabus (structure-based vs. task-based) on the listening comprehension ability of two homogeneous classes (50 participants) during a whole academic semester. The homogeneity was attained through administration of a pre-test taken from Barron's TOEFL (Sharpe, 1996). The selected students were assigned to a structure-based and a task-based group. The subjects in the structure-based group were instructed through *American Kernel Lesson: Intermediate* (O'Neil et al., 1978), and the second group was instructed through *Expanding Tactics for Listening: intermediate* (Richards, 2005), representing the structure-based and task-based syllabus, respectively. Unlike the structure-based group, the task-based group demonstrated a considerable and statistically significant improvement in the post-test performance. The results of this study could be of pedagogic significance to syllabus designers, material developers as well as teachers.

Index Terms—Structure-based Syllabus (SBS), Task-based Syllabus (TBS), listening comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

For many years, the role of listening in English teaching programs was undervalued and neglected. According to Richards (2002), until 1970s listening was hardly mentioned in journals at all. However, this neglected status of listening was shifted after Krashen (1985) theorized that *comprehensible input* was very instrumental in triggering language development. The significance of listening was further accentuated with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Therefore, as in other areas of language teaching, listening was approached and studied from different perspectives. Rubin (1994) enumerates five of them: 1) text characteristics 2) interlocutor characteristics 3) task characteristics 4) listener characteristics and 5) process characteristics.

Despite the sizeable volume and the novel avenues of research opened for listening skill, it seems that the role of syllabus in teaching listening has been taken for granted. This is while the syllabus and the materials used for the purpose of teaching plays an essential role in the success or failure of any English teaching program. Nunan (1988) contends that the choice of a syllabus is a major decision in language teaching, and its part in the development of language teaching practices is indispensible. It is a truism to say that one of the most remarkable shifts in language education has been moving away from a structural syllabus to the one built around communicative tasks. Structural syllabus, as the name speaks for itself, is centered around structure of language. It focuses only on one aspect of language, namely grammar. However, task-based language teaching which is linked to CLT applies activities which involve real communication and the use of language for carrying out meaningful tasks. In fact, the meaningful language and tasks are considered as the important key for the learner's success (Richard & Rodgers, 2001, p. 223).

Reviewing through the pertinent literature, the researchers discovered a research gap of the role of syllabus and materials in listening-related studies. This study is, in fact, a small attempt in this direction: to look into the degree of efficiency of the two types of syllabi (SBS and TBS) on listening ability of a sample of Iranian university students. This study is crystallized around the following question:

Does the type of syllabus (SBS vs. TBS) affect the listening comprehension ability of a sample of Iranian university students?

II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

As said earlier, different strands of research have investigated 'listening' from various perspectives. In the ensuing

paragraphs, a brief account of the studies on listening is presented, followed by a description of structure-based and task-based syllabi.

Some of the studies on listening have given special weight and attention to the computational processes and cognitive dimensions involved in listening comprehension. Anderson's (1985) three-stage comprehension model of perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization inspired a good number of studies. Being influenced by this line of research, the various levels of cognitive processing (phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic) (e.g., Gardner, 1998), the ways and strategies of accessing the mental processes during listening tasks (e.g., Goh, 1997), and the factors influencing processing (e.g., Rubin, 1994) have been investigated.

Some studies have concentrated on the question of what distinguishes skilled from unskilled listening behavior. These studies are primarily concerned with the individuals' abilities in applying different skills and strategies (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). According to Goh (2002) and Vandergrift (2003), what differentiates skilled from unskilled listeners is the ability of combining various strategies (e.g., top-down and bottom-up strategies, along with metacognitive strategies) in a harmonious manner.

Along with the just-mentioned computer-analogous models and studies which particularly deal with inside-the head processes involved in listening comprehension, the social dimensions of listening have been studied as well. The scholars studying social dimensions have argued that listening does not take place in a vacuum and the human utterances must be interpreted with regard to the exigencies of their broader communicative context. The comprehension and interpretation of gestures and other non-verbal or culturally bound cues and nuances fall within the boundaries of social dimensions of listening (Harris, 2003). Carrier (1999) talks of the necessity of awareness of socio-pragmatic forces between the interlocutors. He contends that interlocutors need to be conscious of the status relationships between themselves, and how these relationships could affect the comprehension and freedom to negotiate meaning, particularly in the contexts where there exists unequal power relationship.

Anxiety and motivation as two influential psychological variables have also been investigated. The psychological dimension of listening is related to the language classrooms. Elkhafaifi (2005) did a study on the effect of anxiety on listening comprehension of learners. His study indicated there were significant negative correlations between listening anxiety and listening comprehension scores of learners of Arabic. Motivation as another psychological variable was investigated by Vandergrift (2005). He found a positive relationship among listening proficiency, use of metacognitive strategies and reported levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Testing of listening comprehension (e.g., Brindley, 1998) or the factors influencing listening test performance (e.g., Wu, 1998) have been investigated by the researchers interested in the assessment of listening.

Type of task has been another point of investigation for the studies on listening. A study by Brown et al. (1985) led them to conclude that output tasks should not rely exclusively on memory or writing abilities, and informative titles are capable of facilitating comprehension if listeners are directed to pay attention to them. Eykyn (1992) studied the impact of four tasks (multiple choice, choose-a-picture, French to English vocabulary lists, and WH- questions) on the recall protocol of novice high school French learners while watching authentic video material.

Reviewing through the literature, the researchers found no study addressing the role and effect of type of syllabus on the listening skill of L2 learners. This study was launched with the purpose of filling up this gap. As the present paper aims to look into the impact of two types of syllabi (structure-based& task-based) on listening skill, it seems warranted that a very brief account of them be provided to let the study be placed in an appropriate context.

A. Structure-based Syllabus (SBS)

Structural syllabus or grammatical syllabus, often recognized as the traditional syllabus, is centered around grammar. In this type of syllabus, the focus is on the outcomes or the product, and the content of language is a collection of the forms and structures such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, statements, questions, and so on (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). White (1988) asserts that structural syllabus is concerned with *what* should be learned, without considering who the learners may be or how languages are acquired. It specifies structural patterns as the basic units of learning and organizes these according to such criteria as structural complexity, difficulty, regularity, utility and frequency. The learner is expected to master each structural step and add it to his/her grammar repertoire.

B. Task-based Syllabus (TBS)

Task-based approaches to syllabus design and second language teaching, which focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity, and not on explicit teaching of grammatical rules, have attracted the attention of many researchers, language instructors and syllabus designers (Prabhu, 1987; Nunan, 1989). Task-based teaching has the goal of teaching students to draw on resources to complete some pieces of work (e.g., a process). In order to complete the tasks, the students draw on a variety of language favors, function, and skills, often in an unpredictable way.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants in this study were fifty intermediate EFL students majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Islamic Azad University of Izeh, with the age range of 18-25. The participants were both male and female, and were

enrolled in a listening comprehension course in the second semester of the academic year. They were selected based on non-random judgment sampling from among 84 students: at first a pretest was administered to discover the students' homogeneity in their listening comprehension scores, and fifty students whose scores were around the midpoint (i.e.,14) were selected as the participants of the study. Then, the selected students were numbered 1 to 50 and were divided into two groups (SBS and TBS) based on odd and even numbers regarding systematic random sampling. The study took a whole academic semester (12 weeks).

B. Instruments

The two tests, pre-test and post-test, were taken from Barron's TOEFL (Sharpe, 1996). The tests covered the four main language skills, but the study focused on the listening comprehension skill only. The listening comprehension had three parts with special directions for each part. Part A included short conversation, part B included longer conversations, and part C included several short conversations. All these conversations were followed by content-based questions.

As for teaching listening in the course of the semester, two books representing two different types of syllabi were employed: the first one *American Kernel Lesson: intermediate* (O'Neil et all, 1978), and the second one *Expanding Tactics for Listening: Intermediate* (Richards, 2005). Drawing on Widdowson's (1998) differentiation of "exercise" and "task", it could be claimed that the two books had a divergent set of "meaning", "goal" and "outcome". He argues that "exercise" and "task" differ in terms of these three elements. An exercise is premised on the need to develop linguistic skills as a prerequisite for the learning of communicative abilities. While a task is based on the assumption that linguistic abilities are developed through communicative activity. According to Nunan (1999), the essential difference between a 'task' and an 'exercise' is that a task has a non-linguistic outcome, while an exercise has a linguistic outcome. Seeing the two books through the perspective of "exercise" and "task" distinction, it might be claimed that since in American Kernel Lesson the language activities have a linguistic outcome and are in the framework of "exercise," it might be categorized as a book representing structure-based syllabus. According to Richards (2002), O'Neill's Kernel Lessons was a reflection of Chomsky's "transformational grammar" in a textbook and "seemed to offer an exciting new approach to grammar teaching…" (p. 9). However, in *Expanding Tactics for Listening* the language activities are *task*-type because the language activities are primarily focused on meaning, and "orientation" (Skehan, 1998) is from engagement in communicative activity to the development of linguistic skills.

C. Procedures

The pre-test was administered at the very beginning of the semester to determine the homogeneity level of the participants as well as the then proficiency of students in listening, and the post-test was given at the end of the semester in order to obtain the degree of listening proficiency of students after being exposed to two different types of syllabus and instruction. It was assumed that the comparison between pre-test and post-test of the students could reveal the degree of effectiveness of each syllabus during the semester. The reliability of pre-test and post-test was met based on Cronbach's Alpha as (r= .98) and (r=.96), respectively.

As said before, SBS group was instructed based on *American Kernel Lesson: intermediate* (O'Neil et al, 1978), and TBS group was taught based on *Expanding Tactics for Listening* (Richards, 2005). *American Kernel Lesson: Intermediate* consisted of 25 units. The listening tasks were preceded with a series of related pictures and a corresponding text, which was centered around certain grammatical points. In this book the selection and grading of the content was on the basis of the complexity and simplicity of grammatical items and specified structural patterns as the basic units of learning. And, the organization was based on criteria such as structural complexity, difficulty, regularity, utility and frequency. Each unit was revolving around one specific grammatical point which was meant to be enhanced through ample use of highly controlled, tightly structured and sequenced pattern practice drills.

The students were supposed to look at the pictorial context and make some guesses of the story they were about to listen to. Afterwards, the teacher played the audio program and the students were listening to the tape while looking at the pictures. After listening to the whole story, some students were randomly chosen by the teacher to recreate the story they had just listened to with a specific focus on the highlighted grammatical point of the unit. This stage was followed by letting the students compare their personal stories with that of the text.

Tactics for listening: Intermediate consisted of 25 units which presented the listening activities in a framework compatible with task-based teaching. The units had four sections. The first section, "Getting Ready," introduced the topic of the unit and presented key vocabulary for the unit listening tasks. This section was meant to activate the relevant schemata with the aim of facilitation of learning process on the part of learners. The next three sections, each entitled "Let's Listen," were linked to conversations or monologues recorded on cassette or CD and provided the students with a variety of listening comprehension tasks.

What needs to be mentioned here is that the two books used for this study had different criteria of grading and sequencing. It is quite obvious that in *American Kernel Lesson: Intermediate,* task complexity was the reflection of traditional linguistic grading criteria. However, in *Expanding Tactics for listening: Intermediate,* task complexity seemed to be the result of task factors themselves. According to Long and Crooks (1993), these task factors might be the number of steps involved, the number of solutions to the problem, the number of parties involved and the saliency

of their distinguishing features, the location of task in displaced time and place, the amount and kind of language required, the number of sources competing for attention and other linguistic, cognitive and social factors.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The major question to be answered in this study was whether the typology of syllabus could impact on the listening comprehension ability of the participants of the study in the course of an academic semester. As it is shown in Table 2, t-test was calculated at the confidence level of .95, and the results revealed a significant difference between TBS and SBS groups.

TABLE1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR BOTH GROUPS' PRE-TEST AND POST-TEST

Groups Descriptive Statistics	Structure-based group		Task-based group	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	22.44	23.60	21.96	28.08
N	25	25	25	25
Std. Deviation	6.04	6.36	5.28	9.10
Std. Error Mean	1.20	1.27	1.05	1.82
Range	20	23	20	32
Max.	34	37	35	47
Min.	14	14	15	15

TABLE 2.
PAIRED SAMPLES TEST

Groups	Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
TBS & SBS post-tests	-4. 48000	3.05669	.61134	-5.74174	-3.21826	-7.328	24	.001

It is worth mentioning that in this study the teacher tried her utmost to meticulously implement the directions of teaching methodology provided by either of the syllabi (provided by the books' teachers' guides). Therefore, the results obtained could be more confidently ascribed to the syllabus design of the books and their prescribed teaching methods. The results seem to be in line with the general theoretical notions of language teaching methodology and syllabus design that task-based syllabus and teaching method could be more effective than structure-based syllabus and grammar-based teaching agendas. Robinson (2001) and Long (2007) are of the opinion that traditional approaches to syllabus design which have centered on such units of analysis as words, grammatical structures and functions (synthetic syllabus) tend to ignore important findings within SLA, because these types of syllabi are based on the assumption of linearity of language acquisition, which has been questioned by many researchers in the past thirty years. Items in these types of syllabi are supposed to be learned one at a time, and are expected to be accumulated until the learner synthesizes them into a coherent syntax. In addition, as Ellis (1997) has argued, the order of items in a structural syllabus do not have psycholinguistic validity, in that as Bley-Vroman (1983) has argued the categories of a structural syllabus do not correspond to the categories which learners construct in the process of language learning. By the same token, Willis and Willis (2007) contend that most grammar translation and audio-lingual programs are based on what Lightbown and Spada (2006) call "get it right from the beginning" approach, and argue against it as being the case in actuality of language acquisition process.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) contrast "get it right from beginning" approach with the "get it right in the end" approach, which is based on the belief that what learners need most of all are exposure to language and opportunities to use language meaningfully. Such a holistic perception of the process of language acquisition is supported by Norris's (2009) argumentation in support of holistic nature of tasks and task-based teaching. He conditions achieving the benefits of task-based practice on acknowledging the perception "that language develops not as accretion of discrete bits of knowledge but through a series of holistic experience" (p.591). For him, "crucial cognitive and emotional mechanisms are triggered through learning by doing things holistically…" (p. 579).

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the outperformance of TBS group could be attributed to the inherent properties of tasks. In this frame of thought, a task is perceived as a device that guides learners to engage in certain types of information-processing that are believed to be important for effective language use and for language acquisition. This perspective assumes that there are properties in a task that will predispose learners to engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are beneficial to acquisition.

On the other hand, the almost unchanged listening ability of SBS group in the pre-test and post-test could be associated with the nature and content of syllabus they happened to be instructed through within the semester. Robinson (2009) cites Long (2000) as pointing out that the system of linguistic grading, as required by many synthetic structural syllabus, is prohibiting learners' exposure to language that learners might be ready to learn, in that linguistic grading and sequencing produces a language which is artificial and functionally and linguistically impoverished and un-authentic.

V. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

The findings of this study, though small in scale, suggest that the typology of syllabus could affect the listening comprehension ability of students. *Expanding Tactics for Listening,* representing task- based syllabus, proved to be more effective than *American Kernel Lesson,* representing structure-based syllabus, in augmenting listening comprehension ability of the students. Therefore, this study could be another reconfirmation for Prabhu's (1987) idea that effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in a language task, rather than just learning *about* language.

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