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**A study on indicators of listening instruction in Iranian
English as a foreign language curriculum at guidance and
high school educational levels**

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Master of Arts (MA)
Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language**

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful master Hamed Hojatkhah.

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List of abbreviations

EFL: English as a foreign language

PIRLS: progress of international reading literacy study

Abstract

This research is a study on indicators of listening instruction in Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum at guidance school and high school educational levels. This thesis aims at determining: A) the indicators of listening instruction at guidance school and high school EFL curriculum. B) The indicators of listening instruction in Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum. C) The weak and strong points of Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum according to the indicators of listening instruction. To fulfill the mentioned aims, through a qualitative method (grounded theory) EFL curriculum of Finland (2004), Canada (2001, 2007), Lebanon (1995) and EFL curriculum of Iran's guidance school and high school (actually the related EFL textbooks) have been analyzed and investigated. Finland and Canada's curriculum¹ were selected due to their success in international literacy competitions such as PIRLS (2011). Also, Lebanon was considered as one rather successful country in EFL instruction at schools.

By studying Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum, especially those parts on listening instruction, it can be understood that in this curriculum, EFL listening is taken for granted, because no clear definition has been presented for it and its sub-skills have not been introduced explicitly. The curriculum developers directly deal with EFL listening instructional objectives before determining its conceptual framework in advance. The lack of such conceptual framework leads to considering general and ambiguous EFL listening instructional objectives. The pedagogical implications of the findings would be discussed.

Key words:

EFL listening skill, EFL listening Indicators, EFL Curriculum, Guidance School, High School

¹ Finland became third and Canada became 12th among the 45 countries participated in this international literacy competition (see http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/downloads/P11_IR_Chapter1.pdf).

چکیده فارسی

تحقیق حاضر در مورد شاخص های آموزش مهارت شنیداری در برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی ایران در دوره های راهنمایی و دبیرستان است. این پژوهش در صدد است اهداف ذیل را بررسی نماید : 1) شاخص های آموزش شنیدار زبان انگلیسی در برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی راهنمایی و دبیرستان 2) شاخص های آموزش مهارت شنیدار زبان انگلیسی راهنمایی و دبیرستان در ایران 3) نقاط ضعف و قوت برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی ایران در مقاطع راهنمایی و دبیرستان با توجه به شاخص های مهارت شنیداری انگلیسی.

برای بررسی اهداف مطرح شده به روش کیفی (grounded theory)، برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی در کشورهای فنلاند، کانادا و لبنان و نیز برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی در ایران به روش کیفی مورد تحلیل و بررسی قرار گرفته اند. از آنجا که چارچوبی کلی و مشخص برای برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی در ایران لحاظ نشده است، آموزش مهارت شنیداری نیز امری بدیهی فرض شده و تعریف مشخصی برای این آموزش و خرده مهارت های آن به روشی مطرح نمی گردد. تدوین گران برنامه های یاد شده پیش از پرداختن به چارچوب مفهومی برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی در ایران، مستقیماً به بیان هدف آموزش مهارت زبانی پرداخته اند. عدم تدوین چارچوب مفهومی برای این مهارت زبانی در مقطع راهنمایی باعث شده است تا هدف های آموزشی آن به صورت کلی و مبهم ارائه شود. این در حالیست که برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی دوره ی متوسطه در ایران، هیچگونه هدف مهارتی را برای آموزش شنیداری دنبال نمی کند. از دیگر سو این اهداف آموزشی یاد شده در مقطع راهنمایی نیز نتوانسته اند هیچگونه راهکار عملی و اجرایی را در کلاس درس برای معلمان ترسیم نمایند. به طور کلی آموزش مهارت شنیداری در برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی دوره های مختلف تحصیلی ایران چارچوب و هدف مشخصی را دنبال نمی کند.

کلید واژه ها:

مهارت شنیدار در زبان انگلیسی، شاخص های مهارت شنیدار، برنامه درسی زبان انگلیسی، دوره راهنمایی، دوره

دبیرستان

Chapter 1:

Introduction

1.1 Preliminaries

'Introduction' is the opening chapter of this thesis, which encapsulates the following components: In 1.2, Statement of the Problem, will be stated. Then, in 1.3, Purpose of the study, will be presented. After that, in 1.4, Significance of the study, will be indicated, which will be followed by, Research questions, and 'limitations and delimitations of the study, in 1.5 and 1.6 respectively. The chapter will continue with, Definitions of key terms, in 1.7. Finally, the chapter will be closed with Chapterization in 1.8, where brief information on major components of each of the five chapters will be provided. In what follows a brief explanation on listening would be presented.

Listening is a complex process which is often ignored. Speaking, writing and reading are visible and more easily assessed than listening. There is less willingness for improving listening skill and these results from incomplete understanding of the process. However, understanding the listening process could help to know how to improve this language skill. The process moves through the three steps including; receiving, attending, and understanding (responding and remembering). The International Listening Association (www.listen.org) expresses that listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and nonverbal messages. Listening goes beyond natural hearing process. It means paying attention to the words being spoken with the intention of understanding.

There are generally four types of listener (Hellesvig-Gaskell, 2011):

- Non-listeners who are preoccupied with their personal thoughts, that is, they don't listen to what is being said;
- Passive listeners hear the words but can't fully understand them;
- (Ordinary) listeners who pay attention to the speaker but grasp just some of intended message and;
- Active listeners who are completely focused on the speaker and understand the meaning of the words without distortion.

Also, there are different types of listening including; discriminative listening, comprehension listening, critical listening, biased listening evaluative listening, appreciative listening, sympathetic listening, empathetic listening, therapeutic listening, dialogic listening("Types of listening", n.d).

Discriminative listening is the basic type of listening, by which the difference among different sounds is identified. When you cannot hear differences, you cannot make sense of the meaning that is expressed by such differences. We learn to discriminate among sounds within our own language early, but we are unable to discriminate between the phonemes of other languages. It is one reason why a person from one country finds it difficult to speak another language in a perfect way, as they are unable to distinguish the sounds that are required in that language. Beyond discriminating between different sound and sights, the next step is to make sense of them.

To comprehend the meaning requires having a lexicon of words at our fingertips and also all rules of grammar and syntax whereby we can understand what others are saying.

Critical listening is listening in order to evaluate, judge and forming opinion about what is being said. Judgment includes assessing strengths and weaknesses, agreement and approval.

Biased listening occurs when the person hears only what he/she wants to hear, typically misinterpreting what the other person says based on the stereotypes and other biases that they have. Biased listening is often very evaluative in nature.

In evaluative listening, like critical listening, we judge about what the other person is saying. We seek to estimate the truth of what is being said and we also judge what they say in contrast to our values, assessing them as good or bad, worthy or unworthy. Particularly evaluative listening is pertinent when the other person is trying to persuade us and maybe even to change our beliefs. We also distinguish between subtleties of language and comprehend the inner meaning of what is being said. Typically also we weigh up the pros and cons of an argument, while we are determining whether it makes sense logically as well as whether it is helpful to us.

In appreciative listening, we search for certain information which will appreciate, for instance the one which helps meet our needs and goals. We use appreciative listening when we are listening to a good music, poetry or maybe even the stirring words of a great leader.

In sympathetic listening we care about the other person and show this concern in the way we pay close attention and express our sorrow for their ills, happiness or their joys. When we listen empathetically, we go beyond sympathy to search how others are feeling. This needs

excellent discrimination and close attention to the nuances of emotional signals. If we are being truly empathetic, we feel what they are feeling.

In therapeutic listening, the listener's purpose is not only empathizing with the speaker but also to use this deep connection in order to help the speaker understand, change or develop in some way. Not only does this happen when you go to see a therapist but also it happens in many social situations, where friends and family search to both diagnose problems from listening and also to help the speaker cure themselves, maybe by some cathartic process. This can also happen in work situations, where managers, trainers and coaches seek to help employees learn and develop.

The word, dialogue, stems from the Greek words, *dia*, meaning, *through*, and, *logos*, meaning, *words*. So, dialogic listening means learning through conversation and an engaged interchange of ideas and information in which we actively search to learn more about the person and how they think. Dialogic listening is sometimes known as, relational listening. Sometimes it is the most important factor in listening in order to develop or sustain a relationship ("Types of listening", n.d).

Kadagidze (2006) divides listening texts into contents, complexity, authenticity, sphere, theme, quantity, etc. He states that the linguistic and thematic level of listening input and its adequacy to general teaching purposes or concrete goals of each lesson are defined by a sort of criteria. Moreover, the main language and content elements of the particular listening text mostly indicate the style and type of working on it.

As Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002) expressed, listening involves making sense of spoken language, usually accompanied by other sounds and visual input, with the help of our pertinent prior knowledge and the context that we are listening. Hence, rather than thinking of listening as a single process, it is a group of related processes- recognition of sound uttered by the speaker, perception of intonation patterns showing information focus, interpretation of the relevance of what is being said to the current topic. Usually we are unaware of these processes in our own language; achieving comprehension seems relatively effortless unless we encounter unhelpful conditions, such as poor acoustic or an unfamiliar accent. Under more demanding condition, we become more conscious of listening process, and the same thing applies in trying to understand a second or foreign language (L2). Not the least of the problems we face as listeners is the fact that we generally get only chance to process the (linguistic and other) input, and have to do so in real time. In the other words, native people are usually not conscious of how they listen in their first language unless they encounter difficulty. But, second or foreign language learners do it consciously. Therefore, they need to make conscious use of the strategies they use unconsciously in their first language.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Language skills of students are formed in parallel with implementation of the curriculum and with the base class. They employ and form important language skills by reading and thinking about various topics and issues. Language abilities and skills enable students to learn different

issues. By passing of time their flexibility and skills will form in understanding and using language. As students pass their class levels, they should use correct and fluent language in different situations. For the pupils to be able to speak in different situations, they need to listen to audio content. Clearly, listening is a skill that we need for every day conversation whether in formal and informal situation. A better listener will improve productivity, as well as ability to affect, persuade and negotiate and avoid conflict and misunderstandings. Many EFL teachers complain that the importance of listening in curriculum design is often neglected (“importance of listening,” 2010).

It seems that in the present circumstances, textbooks are written according to the authors’ personal experience, and intuition and taste and they don’t have accurate, organized and updated information in the field of listening (see for example, Anani Sarab, 1389). Our concern in this study is setting instructional goals and components of listening skill at Guidance and high school EFL curriculum of Iran which would be very informative and useful for curriculum planners and textbook developers.

The foundation of English as foreign language (EFL) knowledge and skills are developed in students at guidance school and high school and their instruction is continued throughout these school years. However, at earlier grades the students' knowledge and skills are based on what they have learned. In order to listen analytically and critically to oral texts, the sub-skills and components of listening EFL should be instructed to them. However, Iranian school textbooks are developed according to the authors' intuition and taste and they don't have access to up-to-

date and organized information on this language art (skill). This is because of the lack of listening instructional objectives in an organized way for different educational level (see the unapproved document of "a directives for Iranian foreign language curriculum". It means that there are no content standards for English as foreign language arts in an organized and leveled way for different grades of guidance school and high school. Besides, there are not enough research on this and related topic. It means that the researches done on EFL instruction in Iran (that would be mentioned in chapter 5) are not related to this topic directly.

1.3 Purpose of the study

Due to the informational gap in the related literature, the purposes of this study are to determine:

1. The indicators of listening instruction in guidance school and high school EFL curriculum;
2. The indicators of listening instruction in Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum;
3. The weak and strong points of Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum according to the indicators of EFL listening instruction.

1.4 Significance of the study

Based on Bulletin (1952; cited in Saricoban, 1999), listening is the fundamental language skill. It is a medium by which children, young people and adults get a large portion of their education,

their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. He believed that because of the importance of mass communication, it is of vital importance that pupils be taught to listen effectively and critically.

According to de Gruyter (2006) listening is the primary vehicle by which a person acquires an L2. Listening opportunities “provide the linguistic environment” or “set the stage” for acquisition. What must be acquired in L2 acquisition is a range of new knowledge and a multi-faceted set of skills for using this knowledge.

Gruyter (2006) mentioned that the important reason for considering listening in the curriculum is its relationship with speaking. Without ability to listen and understand what has been said, it is not possible to take a meaningful part in most conversations. This is perhaps best mirrored in beginning students who often have severe difficulties answering simple questions correctly because they have failed to comprehend the question aurally (“importance of listening,” 2010).

Therefore, it is important that listening be given a central role in every language curriculum and teachers should concentrate on improving listening skill to a significant level throughout the instruction of the course.

As listening is highly important in communication, students require to be taught how to listen and what to listen for, and they must be given practice with different content, accents and speaking skill. It is clear that listening is often put as the least important of the four basic

language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and is neglected altogether or given minimal class time (“importance of listening,” 2010).

1.5 Research questions

- 1) What are the indicators of EFL listening instruction in guidance school and high school EFL curriculum?
- 2) What are the indicators of EFL listening instruction in Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum?
- 3) What are the weak and strong points of Iran's guidance school and high school EFL curriculum according to the indicators of EFL listening instruction?

This is a qualitative research, so there is no research hypothesis.

1.6 Limitations and delimitations of the study

The present study has several limitations. First, the present study is a qualitative study since the available data are totally (purely) theoretical. Second, levels and grades in listening curriculum of each country are different and not comparable in exact way with grades in Iran. Therefore, it is done by the researcher's presumption.

Also due to shortage of time, the researcher just studied the EFL curriculum of Finland (2004), Lebanon (1995), Canada (2001, 2007). Also, the researcher had to study just one language art, i.e., listening, in order to be able to go in depth and study the strong and weak

points of its instruction according to Iran's EFL curriculum (textbooks) for guidance school and high school level.

1.7 Definition of the key terms

EFL listening skill: in EFL listening skill learners are conscious of how they listen while these learners in their first language are usually not conscious of how they listen. Therefore what second or foreign language learners need to do when listening is to make conscious use of the strategies they use unconsciously in their first language. Moreover, the characteristic patterning of speech in our L1 provides a metrical template that influences the processing way of L2. EFL listening skill is a skill in which the learners should get familiar with recognition of the sounds uttered by the speaker and intonation patterns showing information focused, and interpretation of the relevance of what is being said to the current topic (Schmitt, 2002).

EFL listening Indicators: By indicators of listening instruction in EFL curriculum we mean the number of components considered for EFL listening instruction, and also how the instruction of these components are distributed at different grades of guidance school and high school levels. (“primary English...”, 2011)

EFL Curriculum: EFL curriculum is to equip school students with the literacy skills and learning strategies to better manage their English language learning. The aim of EFL curriculum is to maintain continuity and facilitate a smooth transition from one educational level (e.g., guidance school) to the other one (e.g., high school). The EFL curriculum harnesses the skills

that the students acquire by encouraging them to apply language systems and language learning processes. EFL Curriculum accepts the responsibility and accountability of delivering the teaching materials to the EFL class or classes. However, curriculum is a document containing the approaches, logic, principles, basic learning skills, attitudes, values and statements underlying the instruction of the related academic subject at different educational levels. It should be noted that there is no document as Iran's EFL curriculum for guidance school and high school levels. So, in this thesis, Iran's EFL curriculum is equal to EFL textbooks for guidance school and high school levels.

Guidance School: This cycle includes grades 6 to 8 for children 12 to 14 years old. This cycle provides students with general education. In this stage, the abilities as well as the interests of students are recognized, so they get ready to decide which branch (academic or technical/vocational) they intend to choose in the next cycle. At the end of guidance cycle, students take an examination under the supervision of provincial boards of education. Students who pass the examination are allowed to proceed to the next cycle.

High School: This is a three-year cycle which covers grade 9 to grade 11, from age 15 to 17. It has two main branches namely, academic/general and technical/vocational. The choice of the branches is up to pupils themselves. The academic branch, which is known as the 'theoretical branch' is divided into three mainstreams namely, literature and culture, physics-mathematics, and finally experimental sciences. The technical/vocational branch is designed to train technicians for the labor market.