In the name of Allah

the compassionate

the merciful

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The Effect of Transcribing on Iranian EFL Learners' Phonemic Perception, Listening, and Dictation

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Dedications

To my parents, for their endless support and encouragement

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To my wife, for her patience and prayers for me

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Abstract

The importance of phonology, listening, and dictation has been recognized in L2 studies. However, each of these areas has suffered from some type of neglect. In phonology, the emphasis has been on production rather than perception while perception provides the foundation for production. Regarding listening, most of the techniques proposed to develop this skill are based on top-down processing. This leads to an underestimation of bottom-up processing. Dictation has been used as a tool for improving different areas of language while it can be considered as an end itself which needs some techniques for its improvement. To address the imbalance in each area, this study introduces transcribing as an aural input enhancement device and examines its effect on beginning Iranian EFL learners' phonemic perception, listening, and dictation. To this end, three types of instruments including minimal pair test, listening test, and partial dictation test were employed to serve as both pretests and posttests. A total of thirty one females, aged 14-16, participated in this study. The participants who were chosen through convenience sampling were randomly assigned to two groups of control (N=15) and experimental (N=16). The treatment took 20 sessions. Each session the control group was assigned to listen to some passages while the experimental group transcribed the same passages. At the end of the treatment, three independent samples *t* tests were conducted to compare the control and experimental groups. The results of the first *t* test indicate that transcribing has a significant positive effect on beginning learners' phonemic perception ($p = .037$). The second *t* test was employed to compare the listening comprehension ability of the two groups. The results show that the participants of the experimental group outperformed those in the control group ($p<.001$). The third *t* test was used to compare the means of the two groups on partial dictation test. Based on the findings, the difference between the two groups was highly significant in terms of their dictation-taking ability ($p<.001$). Considering the positive effect of transcribing on

phonemic perception, listening, and dictation, it is advisable for teachers to include transcribing exercise, which is based on bottom-up primacy, for developing beginning learners' listening ability at both phonemic level and higher levels as well as their dictation-taking ability.

***Keywords**:* transcribing, phonemic perception, listening, dictation, input enhancement, bottom-up processes, top-down processes.

List of Abbreviations

EFL	**English as a Foreign Language**
ELT	**English Language Teaching**
FL	**Foreign Language**
GTM	**Grammar Translation Method**
L1	**First Language**
L2	**Second Language**
LTM	**Long Term Memory**
NL	**Native Language**
SLA	**Second Language Acquisition**
STM	**Short Term Memory**
TEFL	**Teaching of English as a Foreign Language**
TL	**Target Language**
WM	**Working Memory**

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. **Introduction**

Listening as one of the four main language skills is perhaps the most fundamental one (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996). It builds the foundation for and facilitates learning other language skills (Oxford, 1990). However, it used to be overlooked especially in the early period of English Language Teaching (ELT) when the main focus was on grammar and written skills.

After years of neglect, listening has recently started to attract many researchers attention (Flowerdew, 1994; Nunan and Miller, 1996; Rost, 2002). As a result, many books have been written and different conferences have been held claiming to address this complex skill and help learners develop their listening ability. Furthermore, to improve listening, different techniques have been proposed (Kiany & Shiramiri, 2002). For example, Ur (1991) and Rost (1991) have presented more than 30 activities and exercises for teaching listening.

However, in most of these attempts the role of lower level processes, especially attention, in learning has been neglected. There has been extensive research into the role of attention in language learning. There is consensus among researchers that attention is a prerequisite for learning and no learning takes place without attention (Schmidt, 2001; Nissen & Bullemer, 1987; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; Velmans, 1991).

The role of attention and noticing becomes even greater when we consider listening as a facilitator of second language (L2) learning. Schmidt (1990, p. 139) distinguishes between input (what listeners hear) and intake (the part of input which is noticed by the listeners). It is the intake that becomes part of learners' linguistic competence and serves as the basis for language development.

One of the different techniques and exercises capitalizing on the role of attention to improve listening comprehension is dictation (Davis, 1995). It is recommended by many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) researchers in general and listening comprehension researchers in particular (Finocchiaro & Bonomo, 1973; Paulston, 1976; Morley, 1977; Rivers & Temperley, 1978; Byrne, 1978; Rost, 1991; Ur, 1991; Davis, 1995; Celce-Murcia, 1996; Gilbert, 1996).

Dictation can be used as both a useful device in testing and a helpful activity for learning (Morris, 1983; Sawyer and Silver, 1961; Valette, 1964). It can also be employed as a teaching device (Whitaker 1976). Although it was firstly associated with the *grammar translation method* (GTM) and was neglected with the dominance of *audiolingual method* in the 1960s, it regained popularity later because:

- As opposed to teaching and testing language components in isolation, dictation is a useful device for teaching and testing language as a whole (Oller, 1979).
- It highly correlates with measures of overall language proficiency (Stansfield, 1985).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

As noted earlier, the role of attention in learning is unquestionable. However, most discussions regarding its role have dealt with morphology and syntax while a few have focused on lexical learning and pragmatic development (Schmidt, 2001). Peters (as cited in Schmidt, 2001) suggests that attention and noticing play a crucial role in different domains of language learning including phonology.

Phonology has been recognized as an important area in L2 acquisition studies (Lado, 1957; Eckman, 1977; Major, 2001; Eckman and Elreyes, & Iverson, 2003); however, more weight is given to the study of learners' production. This emphasis on phonological production

has led to an underestimation of phonological perception while it is a prerequisite for phonological production (Mayberry, 2006). In response to this problem and in order to fill the existing gap, one of the purposes of the current study is investigating the role that attention plays in phonological perception.

It was also stated earlier that different activities have been suggested for improving listening skill. Nonetheless, almost all of them share the same problems. In these techniques, top-down processing, listening for gist, and listening strategies have been emphasized which result in a downplay of the role played by bottom-up processing. Moreover, these techniques either provide learners with practicing comprehension or test their listening rather than teaching them something which improves their performance in listening (Sheerin, 1987; Field, 2000).

Giving learners more practice by emphasizing repeated encounters has some disadvantages. The first disadvantage is that although an increase in the number of listening experiences may help some learners, there is no guarantee that it helps all of them. Repeated exposure to different listening practices for learners who have not been taught how to deal with them may turn to unnerving experiences for them. Field (2008, p. 29) states that "somebody who is a weak listener at the outset might well become increasingly demoralised by their lack of perceptible progress." He believes that using extensive practice of listening is an opportunity when learners receive some training in the basics of listening. Otherwise, it's a threat which results in fossilization of inefficient techniques.

Another disadvantage is that contribution of background knowledge to comprehension depends on learners' ability to use bottom-up processes. In Mayberry's (2006) words, "…low-level processes, affected by L1 [first language] phonemic interference and unfamiliarity with segmentation rules, prevent learners from being able to use any prior knowledge they have of the

L1 and L2 (cognate recognition, grammatical and lexical contexts, etc.) in listening tasks" (p. 227).

Like the techniques which only provide learners with practice, the techniques which test listening rather than teaching it are not flawless. They test learners' listening before teaching it. It is axiomatic that teaching a linguistic point should precede testing it (Field, 2008).

Based on psycholinguistic research, the aforementioned techniques are in contrast with the best supported model of listening comprehension in which bottom-up processing is emphasized (Lindfield, Wingfield, & Goodglass. 1999; Field, 1999), what Marslen-Wilson (1989) called 'bottom-up primacy'.

Wilson (2003, p. 336) also claims that:

> …an excessive focus on meaning, either through extra vocabulary learning or additional listening practice, will not necessarily solve the listening comprehension problems of many students. So, we still need to find an approach to teaching listening that strikes a balance between attention to form and attention to meaning.

Acknowledging the role of top-down processing, Wislon (2003, p. 336) also states that "…the learners' ultimate aim is to rely less on contextual guesswork, and more on hearing what was actually said. Current EFL teaching has tended to overlook this point."

Although it is of utmost importance, listening is not an easy skill to develop. Researchers generally agree that language learners experience difficulties while listening to the target language (TL). To address these problems, Field (2000, p. 187) believes that, as the first step, we

should determine "which sub-skills are giving rise to problems of understanding, then devise micro-exercises to practice them."

In a study trying to find the sources of difficulties that EFL listeners encountered while listening, Goh (2000) listed 10 problems, out of which five were related to perceptual processing. Tsui and Fullilove (1998), in one of the most extensive studies in the area of bottom-up/ top-down processing, concluded that low level listeners used more of top-down processes. They did so to compensate for perception problems, bottom-up processes. As Randall (2007) believes, to make sense of what they hear, EFL learners must first extract the salient features of the aural input they receive (bottom-up process). Although the features are the same in all languages, the combinations of these features differ from language to language. Therefore, "… the first job of second language learner is to adjust to the new combination of features used in the second language" (Randall, 2007. p. 51). Then this feature recognition system should become automatic in order to free *Working Memory* (WM) capacity for top-down processing.

In another study Koster (1987) found that nonnative subjects' use of context was almost the same as that of native subjects. However, according to Randall (2007), native subjects' use of top-down processes rests on highly proceduralised bottom-up ones which are not automatic in the case of nonnative learners. Consequently, we can conclude that the effectiveness of top-down processes depends on well-established bottom-up ones.

To develop and automatize decoding of aural linguistic input, the initial step that beginners need to take is paying attention to the input. In other words, learners should focus on sound and word recognition. Thus, there is a need for techniques which enhance learners' awareness towards how sounds and words are pronounced. Some researchers have tried to