



Faculty of Humanities

**The effect of vocabulary preparation on EFL learners'
listening comprehension development and their confidence**

By

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Thesis submitted to the Graduate Studies Office

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of MA in TEFL

December, 2009

Learning is finding out what you already know;

Doing is demonstrating that you know it;

*Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as
you;*

You are all Learners, Doers, Teachers

"Illusions: Richard Bach"

Dedication

Not to us

O Lord,

Not to us, but to your name be

The Glory, because of your love and faithfulness

To my beloved parents

for all their kindness, support, and insightful guidance

Acknowledgements

Glory to God in the highest. First and foremost I would like to offer my thanks to God whose endless grace and blessing I could feel every single moment of my life.

I would like to thank several people for their contribution toward the completion of this thesis. I am deeply grateful to my supervisor Dr. Moradan for his encouragement and guidance at each step of this work and my graduate studies. His support and example have made it possible for me to stay focused on my goal of reaching the end of what, at first, seemed to be an insurmountable challenge.

I wish to thank my advisor Dr. Ruyanian for accepting the burden of reading my thesis.

My heartfelt thanks are expressed to all my professors, in particular, Dr. Farjami, and Dr. Sadeghi who have guided me with invaluable advice during my six years career at this university. In your classes, you helped me develop a scholarly curiosity; in personal conversations, you showed me how much you care for your students. I sincerely thank you all.

I am also in debt to my good friends, especially my classmate Ms. Soltanian for her friendly help and recommendations.

I would like to thank Mr. Nooranian for his help and support in English laboratory during my research study.

I wish to acknowledge my special indebtedness and gratitude to my first professor at Semnan University: Mrs. Azarnoosh whose words of advice gave me confidence and hope of advancement in my way.

My deep appreciation and thanks go to Mr. Basir who inspired in me the never- ending love for literature.

I am also deeply grateful for the best role models anyone could have: my parents. You have given so much to me over the course of my life, including wanting this achievement for me. I have always felt your loving guidance in my life. I love and thank you.

The last but not the least, I wish to thank all the students who readily gave their precious time to me for the fulfillment of this study.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title	Page
Title page.....	I
Dedication.....	II
Acknowledgements.....	III
Table of contents.....	V
List of tables.....	X
List of figures.....	XI
Abstract.....	XII
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Overview.....	2
1.2. Role of prior knowledge in listening comprehension.....	5
1.2.1. Schema theory.....	6
1.2.2. Bottom-up and top-down processing.....	7
1.2.2.1. Reading vs. listening.....	8
1.3. The importance of vocabulary.....	10
1.4. Significance of self-belief in language learning.....	11
1.5. Statement of the problem.....	13
1.6. Research questions.....	14
1.7. Research hypothesis.....	14
1.8. Significance of the study.....	15
1.9. Definition of key terms.....	16
1.10. Limitation of the study.....	17
1.11. Delimitation.....	17
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	18

2.1. Introduction.....	19
2.2. What is listening?.....	22
2.3. What is comprehension?.....	23
2.4. Components of listening.....	25
2.4.1. Perceptual processing.....	26
2.4.2. Parsing.....	26
2.4.3. Utilization.....	27
2.5. Theoretical concepts basic to listening comprehension.....	27
2.5.1. Information theory.....	29
2.5.2. Redundancy.....	29
2.5.3. Body language.....	30
2.6. Listening-based methods of language teaching.....	31
2.6.1. James Asher.....	32
2.6.2. Valerian Postovsky.....	33
2.6.3. James Nord.....	34
2.6.4. Krashen and Terrel.....	34
2.7. Two alternative views of listening.....	35
2.7.1. Listener as a tape-recorder.....	35
2.7.2. Listener as an active model builder.....	35
2.8. Role of comprehension in L2 learning.....	37
2.9. Listening problems.....	39
2.10. Listening material.....	50
2.10.1. Designing listening comprehension materials.....	55
2.10.1.1. Motivating students to focus on the learning objective.....	55
2.10.1.2. Maintaining the same topic and objective for consecutive activities.	56
2.10.1.3. Applying appropriate teaching methods and techniques.....	57

2.13.2.1. Setting the context.....	81
2.13.2.2. Generating interest.....	82
2.13.2.3. Activating current knowledge.....	82
2.13.2.4. Acquiring knowledge.....	82
2.13.2.5. Activating vocabulary / language.....	83
2.13.2.6. Predicting content.....	83
2.13.2.7. Pre-teaching of vocabulary.....	84
2.13.2.8. Checking / understanding the listening tasks.....	85
2.13.3. Selection criteria.....	85
2.14. Research on Listening comprehension.....	86
CHAPTER 3: METHOD.....	95
3.1. Overview.....	96
3.2. Participants.....	96
3.3. Instruments.....	97
3.3.1. A listening comprehension pre-test.....	97
3.3.2. A questionnaire on learners' confidence.....	97
3.3.3. An already standardized TEFL test.....	98
3.4. Preparation materials.....	98
3.4.1. Listening text.....	98
3.4.2. Vocabulary list.....	98
3.5. Procedures.....	98
3.6. Data analysis.....	100
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.....	101
4.1. Overview.....	102

4.2. Descriptive statistics.....	102
4.3. Inferential statistics.....	105
4.3.1. Listening comprehension pretest.....	105
4.3.2. Listening comprehension posttest.....	108
4.3.3. Results for questionnaire.....	112
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	117
5.1. Overview.....	118
5.2. Pedagogical and theoretical implications.....	119
5.3. Implications for teachers.....	122
5.4. Implications for material developers.....	125
5.5. Suggestions for further researches.....	126
5.6. Conclusions.....	127
REFERENCES.....	129
APPENDICES.....	139
Appendix A: Listening comprehension pretest.....	139
Appendix B: Questionnaire.....	143
Appendix C: Listening comprehension posttest.....	144
Appendix D: vocabulary lists.....	150

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for LC Pretest.....	102
Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for LC Post-test.....	103
Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Experimental Group.....	103
Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Control Group.....	104
Table 5: Analysis of t- test for Pre- test.....	105
Table 6: Analysis of t- test for Post- test.....	109
Table 7: Demographic data for the participants in the Ex-group.....	112
Table 8: Students' attitudes towards vocabulary preparation.....	113

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: histogram of listening comprehension pretest for experimental group.....	106
Figure 2: histogram of listening comprehension pretest for control group.....	107
Figure 3: histogram of listening comprehension posttest for experimental group.....	111
Figure 4: histogram of listening comprehension posttest for control group.....	112

ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that prelistening activities play an important role in the development of listening comprehension (e.g. Long 1990; Chiang and Dunkel 1992; Schmidt-Rinehart 1994; Jensen and Hansen 1995; Robinson et al., 1995; Buck, 1995; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Teng 1996; Robinson, 2001; Chang and Read 2006). In line with previous studies and to shed light on a new aspect of schemata-building, this study tried to investigate the effect of vocabulary preparation on EFL learners listening comprehension development and their confidence level. The sample consisted of a total of 36 freshman English language and literature majors at Semnan University divided into experimental and control groups. Both groups took listening comprehension pretest and posttest. The participants in the experimental group were given the vocabulary list at each session as a prelistening activity, and after the treatment, they filled in a questionnaire concerning their confidence. Subjects' scores in experimental group were compared to those in control group.

The results of the t-test (observed-t) revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The students' overall responses also indicated a positive view towards vocabulary preparation. It is concluded that the preparation of vocabulary like many other prelistening activities contributes to the development of listening comprehension ability. It also influences the learners' confidence for further cognitive and affective involvement.

Key words: EFL learners, listening comprehension, vocabulary preparation, confidence

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“what I called the ‘auditory imagination’ is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious level of thought and feeling; invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten; returning to the origin and bringing something back; seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meaning and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current and the most civilized mentality.”

T.S.Eliot

1.1. Overview

The traditional division of language into four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, though may not be psychologically real, has been considered as a convention in the history of language teaching. Such a division endows a considerable importance to each skill as an ability to be taught in its own right, separated from others. It also follows that ignoring one skill would lead to the impairment of language ability in that particular area. Recent attempts to focus on listening comprehension, to investigate the factors which influence this skill, and to encompass listening tasks to communicative textbooks (Ur, 1984; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Underwood, 1989; Rost, 1990; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Rubin, 1994) are the consequences that listening comprehension has not received enough attention in second/foreign language teaching programs to date.

In recent years, much attempt has been made for elucidating the psychological reality of listening comprehension skill both at the theoretical and pedagogical levels. Questions have been raised on the validity of viewing listening as a separate skill. Providing the psychological validity of the four skills, listening has been viewed as a channel which provides authentic language for the learners and breeds the helpful input for facilitating the learning process.

Generally speaking, listening has been viewed as a skill which requires an interactive interpretive processing task on the part of listener. This processing task is realized via comprehension of the taught materials or any piece of discourse. Clark and Clark (1977) and Foss and Hakes (1978) suggest that propositions which are the basic units of meaning are involved in comprehension, and the listeners' ultimate goal is to determine the propositions which an utterance or speech event expresses. However, Leech (1977) present an alternative

view for the preceding view of listening, i.e. the semantic view. By this view--the pragmatic view-- he takes the role of speaker and addressee into consideration. This notion is followed by the idea of Schmidt and Richards (1980) that pragmatic meaning is understood by the application of the theories of conversational analysis, discourse analysis, and speech act theory. Moreover, Schank and Abelson (1977) describe the role of prior knowledge in listening. This idea in turn, displays the significance of scripts or schemata in listening comprehension.

These views can support the distinction made by Richards (1983) between conversational and academic listening. The validity of this distinction lies in the semantic and pragmatic views of listening and factors which somehow affect the comprehension process via listening.

For many years, listening skills did not receive priority in language teaching. Teaching methods emphasized productive skills, and the relationship between receptive and productive skills was poorly understood. Until recently, the nature of listening in a second language was ignored by applied linguists, and it was often assumed that listening skills could be acquired through exposure but not really taught. This position has been replaced by active interest in the role of listening comprehension in second language acquisition, by the development of powerful theories of the nature of language comprehension, and by the inclusion of carefully developed listening courses in many ESL programs. Some applied linguists go so far to argue that listening comprehension is at the core of second language acquisition and therefore demands a much greater prominence in language teaching (Richards and Renandya, 2002).

Listening comprehension as a separate and important component of language learning only came into focus after significant debate about its validity. Recent research has demonstrated the critical role of language input in language learning (e.g. Dunkel 1991, Feyten 1991),

providing support for the primacy of listening comprehension in instructional methods. This has led Dunkel to assert that the study of listening comprehension has become the 'polestar' of second language acquisition theory building, research, and pedagogy (cited in Vandergrift, 1999).

Listening is assuming greater and greater importance in foreign language classrooms. There are several reasons for this growth in popularity. By emphasizing the role of comprehensible input, second language acquisition research has given a major boost to listening. Many scholars have emphasized on the importance of listening skill. As Rost (1994) points out, listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning cannot simply begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking.

Listening is the most common communicative activity in daily life: "we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write." (Morley, 1991, p. 82)

Chastain states that listening is one of the only two sources of new linguistic data and general information. It is the more important of the two skills involved in all types of oral exchange. It is a necessary skill for classroom oral communication activities. It is an indispensable skill for oral communication out of class. It is the skill that tends most to impede oral communication between native and nonnative speakers. It is the skill most needed out of class by language students attempting to improve their knowledge and use of the second language.

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)

1.2. Role of prior knowledge in listening comprehension

The teaching of listening has attracted a greater level of interest in recent years than it did in the past. University entrance exams, school leaving and other examinations now often include a listening component, acknowledging that listening skills are a core component of second language proficiency, and also reflecting the assumption that if listening isn't tested, teachers won't teach it. Earlier views of listening saw it as the mastery of discrete skills or microskills, such as recognizing reduced forms of words, recognizing cohesive devices in texts, and identifying key words in a text, and that these skills should form the focus of teaching. Later views of listening drew on the field of cognitive psychology, which introduced the notions of bottom-up and top-down processing and to the role of prior knowledge and schema in comprehension. Listening came to be seen as an interpretive process. At the same time the field of discourse analysis and conversational analysis revealed a great deal about the nature and organization of spoken discourse and led to a realization that written texts read aloud could not provide a suitable basis for developing the abilities needed to process real-time authentic discourse. Current views of listening hence emphasize the role of the listener, who is seen an active participant in listening, employing strategies to facilitate, monitor, and evaluate his or her listening.

The idea of prior knowledge is one part of the cognitive model of language processing. That model says that when people listen or read, we process the information we hear both top-down and bottom-up. *Top-down* means using our prior knowledge and experiences; we know certain things about certain topics and situations and use that information to understand. *Bottom-up* processing means using the information we have about sounds, word meanings, and discourse markers like *first, then* and *after that* to assemble our understanding of what we read or hear one step at a time.

1.2.1. Schema theory

Background knowledge is often essential to an understanding of a text. Our knowledge of the world is said to be stored in the form of schemata. A schema is a set of interrelated features which we associate with an entity or concept (Field, 2006:39). Schema theory deals with the listening process, during which listeners are expected to combine their previous experiences with the text they are hearing. Since each learner has different background knowledge, it is culture specific. It is claimed that any text either spoken or written does not itself carry meaning until a text provides directions for learners as to how they should understand meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge. A listener's comprehension depends on his ability to relate the information that he gets from the text with his pre-existing knowledge. As Field (2006) states, when considering how listeners and readers process language information, it is useful to think in terms of three types of schema:

- a. 'World knowledge': including encyclopedic knowledge and previous knowledge of the speaker or writer. This helps us to construct a **content schema** for a text.

- b. Knowledge built up from the text so far: a current meaning representation.
- c. Previous experience of this type of text (**a text schema**). This can be extended to include: previous experience of the type of task that the listener/reader has to perform (p.40).

Listeners integrate the new information from the text into their pre-existing schemata (background knowledge and global understanding). Schemata influence not only how they recognize information, but also how they store it. Listening process includes bottom-up and top-down processes.

1.2.2. Bottom-up and top-down processing

The terms ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ occur frequently in the literature on second language listening and reading. They are nothing but metaphors to show the complex nature of human information processing. They are often used to mark a distinction between information derived from perceptual sources and information derived from contextual ones. Strictly speaking, however, the terms refer not to particular levels of processing but to directions of processing. In a ‘bottom-up’ process, small (‘lower level’) units are progressively reshaped into larger ones; in a top-down process, larger units exercise an influence over the way in which smaller ones are perceived. Consider, for example, the vocabulary effects which potentially occur in both first and second language listening, where the listener’s interpretation of a string of phonemes is constrained by the knowledge that a particular word exists. They qualify as a top down process, since information from one level (the word) shapes the interpretation of information at a lower level (the phoneme) .The term ‘contextual’ as used in relation to ‘top-down’ processing is also