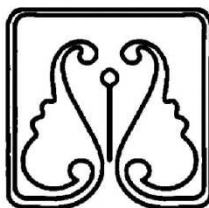


In the name of God



University of Guilan

Faculty of Literature and Humanities

A Thesis Submitted for Master of Arts Degree in Teaching English as a Foreign
Language

**The Effect of Inferencing Skill on Listening
Comprehension of Advanced Learners of
English**

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To

My Dear Wife

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List of abbreviation

long-term memory (LTM) ----- 3

Short-term memory (STM) ----- 3

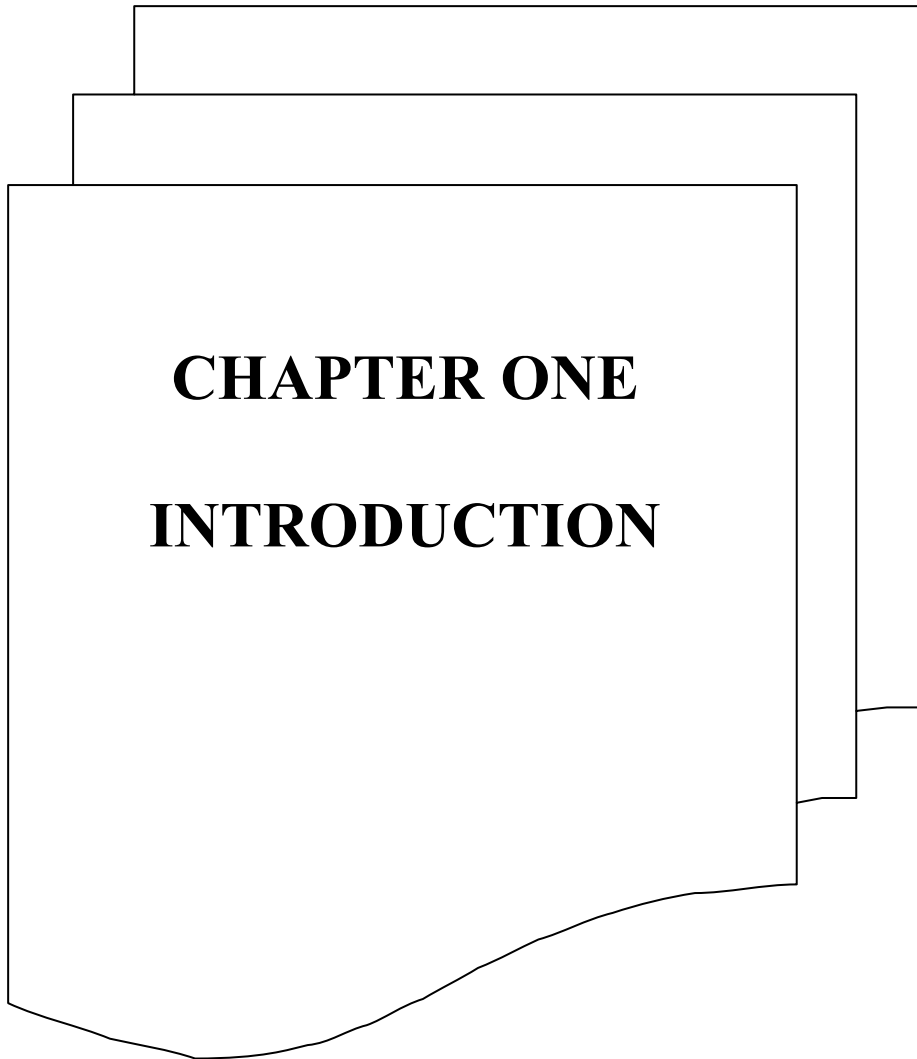
ABSTRACT

The Effect of Inferencing Skill on Listening Comprehension of Advanced Learners of English

The purpose of this study has been to consider the effect of inferencing skills on the listening comprehension of advanced learners of English. The neglected emphasis on strategy-based teaching of listening along with the common difficulties in the process of listening comprehension has necessitated increased attention to involvement of listening strategies in the class room listening practices, in particular in the pre-listening activities. This study was designed for advanced level students in order to see how their ability to use inferencing skill and helps them tackle with common difficulties in listening comprehension occurring due to factors including the context-based problems such as redundancy, assimilation, the authentic materials and its features, and in some cases poor schemata in listeners, and the need for both bottom-up and top-down processing. In order to take a closer look at the strategy use and its potential contribution to listening comprehension in advanced Iranian listeners, this study was carried out on 60 senior students, both male and female, majoring in the English Language Translation at the Azad University of Tonekabon. Following the adopted IBT sample tests given for placement, sixty students were chosen on the basis of their scores on sample IBT listening section, keeping the original IBT scoring standards, stating the testees gaining the score of 22 out of 30 would be considered as advanced level listeners. The collected students were randomly assigned into two groups making the control and the experimental group. The treatment was the explicit teaching of inferencing, including the explicit instruction in inference making, and facilitating the process by suitable pre-listening activities, which was given to the

students in the experimental group. Both groups were given pretests and posttests and their raw scores on the tests were fed into the Covariance analysis through SPSS16 software. Based on the research question of this study (Does explicit teaching of inferencing skills make significant effect on the listening comprehension skills in advanced Iranian learners?) a null hypothesis was made at 0.05 level of significance, comparing the pretest and posttest results in participants during the data analysis, the null hypothesis was finally rejected. The results showed that the explicit teaching of inferencing skills has significant effect on the listening comprehension of the advanced Iranian learners

Key words: Strategy, Inferencing skills, Redundancy , Schemata , Processing



CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Although many teachers might overlook the importance of listening and consider it as a secondary skill compared with speaking, listening has frequently been called a 'Cinderella skill', implying the great emphasis on listening (Nunan in Richards, J.C & Renandya, W.A., 2002; Mendelsohn, 2000,). Some methodologies have even been built along with the notion of great importance given to listening in second language acquisition, such as Asher's Total Physical Response (1969) and Krashen and Terrell's "Natural Approach" (1983) (Mendelsohn,2000). In all of the aforementioned methods, listening plays crucial role as in important receptive skill that mostly precedes other skills in the process of teaching.

Celcia-Murcia (2001) also lays great emphasis on centrality of listening in language teaching and greatly values an appropriate aural program aimed at listening at all levels of instruction, for it is essential as a tool for teaching the elements of grammatical structures and allowing for contextualization of the new vocabulary within a body of communicative discourse. As a result, the importance of listening is a matter of great importance to teaching English as a foreign language which heavily draws on this ever increasing demand for exposure to foreign language communicative discourse.

1.2 Background

Logically, one of major questions in one's mind before taking any important action, particularly in making choices in education, is its benefits. The existence of listening activities in the teaching of English as a foreign or second language is also subject to such a question. Trying to provide us with some good answers, Vandergrift (1999) cites four types of advantages to emphasis on listening comprehension in facilitating language learning. In his consideration, the increased emphasis on listening can lead to **cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective** advantages. The cognitive advantage of an initial emphasis on listening comprehension is its respect for a more natural way to learn a language. Considering the complex nature of language learning, he views neglecting pre-eminence of this fact as "to put the cart before the horse". He further explains that processing and decoding auditory input requires recognition knowledge on the part of the listener, whereas encoding and generating speech output requires retrieval knowledge insisting the fact that learners' efforts to produce what has not yet been assimilated in their long-term memory (LTM) leads them to cognitive overload. That's the reason that when students first begin to learn a language, they have difficulty listening for accurate meaning and learning to produce correct sounds at the same time. Short-term memory (STM) is not capable of retaining all of this information, so when learners are forced to speak before they are ready to do so in class, they have to resort to native language habits. Concentrating on speaking leaves little room for listening, and little room for understanding meaningful messages. The second advantage is the efficiency advantage required to produce all the language material to which they are exposed. In Vandergrift's view, this allows for more meaningful language use earlier in the course, since learners can use all of the limited intentional resources of STM to concentrate on meaning. This has been shown to

enhance the acquisition of other language skills as well. He also emphasizes that preliminary emphasis on listening is also more efficient because students are exposed only to good language models (the teacher and realistic recordings) instead of the imperfect utterances of classmates. This makes more efficient use of everyone's time than the oral class, where one can spend a great deal of time waiting for answers to appear with delay. This leads to the third advantage: the usefulness of the receptive skill, or the utility advantage. He also cites that adults spend 40- 50% of communication time listening, 25-30% speaking, 11-16% reading, and about 9% writing. It follows that language learners will make greater use of comprehension skills. Whereas speakers can use paralinguistic and other communication strategies, at their own pace, to maintain communication, listeners must adjust to the speaker's tempo and active vocabulary. Vandergrift *ibid* considers this issue as probably the most important reason for teaching listening comprehension strategies, and provides the rationale for the continued inclusion of listening activities throughout a language program, even at advanced levels, which is a matter of great importance to this research. In Vandergrift's consideration, the last advantage of an emphasis on listening comprehension is the psychological advantage. According to Vandergrift, without the pressure of early oral production there would be less potential embarrassment about producing sounds that are difficult to master, especially for adults and teenagers. Once this pressure is eliminated, they can relax and focus on developing the listening skill, and on internalizing the rules which will facilitate the emergence of the other skills. He adds that listening comprehension results in "earlier achievement and a sense of success".

So far, the importance of teaching listening has been illustrated, supported by research. However, it is important to understand the main sources of problems that

still exist in the listening comprehension of the learners despite our awareness of such an importance. In the coming paragraphs, these issues will be thoroughly taken into consideration.

1.3 Statement of the problem

This study arises from the need for explicit use of inferencing skills which will be discussed here from three different perspectives. These perspectives will lead us to the question of why to apply it to the advanced level students. Elaborating on these views, this level of proficiency in listening comprehension will be the best to benefit from inferencing skills among all the other levels, although it not limited to the advanced level students.

The first perspective takes us to the need for a strategy-based approach to teaching of listening in general, and explicit teaching of inferencing skills in particular. Unfortunately, the importance of teaching listening comprehension is still being neglected. As Mendelsohn (2000) puts it, there are some reasons for the neglected importance of teaching listening. The first is that, until a few decades ago, it was NOT widely accepted that listening comprehension should be taught explicitly. It was due to **Osmosis Approach**, which states that students are listening to their teacher all day in during their whole class time and will therefore improve their listening comprehension through this automatically. Another reason, in his consideration, is lack of the teacher's confidence, which leads many of teachers to just go through listening in the class, rather than teach how to do it. The inappropriateness of the listening tasks assigned and the materials being used has also been addressed by Mendelsohn. All of these reasons will make it clear that there is room for more consideration of listening and developing listening skills in the ever increasing demands of foreign language learning. This study was designed fore advanced level

participants due to their potential for the confidence and flexibility needed for being assigned with more complicated and strategy-inducing tasks. The advanced level students/listeners who use inferencing skills must show better comprehension performance. This is what this study is aimed at. Furthermore, the need for encompassing inferencing skills to listening comprehension practice in students also follows from some of the features of aural texts which make the comprehension process difficult to learners. Such ability in well-experienced advanced level students will help us address the most frequently cited problems making listening comprehension difficult to learners, i.e. lack of strategy use. This strategy will help us address the most frequently cited problems concerning listening comprehension, which have something to do with closer attention to cognitive processes underlying the listening process.

The second perspective in our consideration of the need for explicit introduction of inferencing skills arises from some of the features of listening comprehension and the aural texts that necessitate the active use of inferencing skills. Mendelsohn (2000) states some features of listening including its *ephemeral, one shot nature, the presence of a rich prosody* (stress, intonation, rhythm, loudness and more). These features are absent from the written language. He *ibid* cites *the presence of the characteristics of a natural fast speech*, such as assimilation, making it markedly different from written language, and *the frequent need to process and respond almost immediately*. All of these features require competent processing abilities, especially those of advanced level listeners, which can be supported by the active use of inferencing skills during the listening comprehension.

"While listening, listeners have no control over what will be "coming at" them, particularly in one-way communication situations, as in a lecture. Listeners have no

control over what is going to be said, and how quickly it (the message) is going to be stated. In a two-way communication, as in a dialog, the listener's responses and reactions do influence the speaker. The situation is quite different from speaking where the speaker can get meaning across with limited proficiency by judicious use of communication strategies. Even with reading, there is not the same time pressure, and readers can both go back over what they have read, and resort to a dictionary if they wish to. In listening, the transient spoken word "comes at" listeners very fast and is gone! "(p.9).

Ur (1996a) also lists some of the characteristics of real life situation which should be taken into consideration, especially while dealing with authentic listening practices. One characteristic that Ur states is *the informal spoken discourse*, typical of listening, involving brevity of short chunks, coming in turns together with *difference between the spelling and pronunciation of words*, *the colloquial vocabulary used*, *noise*, *redundancy*, etc.. She also maintains that listener's expectation and purpose makes him/her know something about what is going to be said, usually relevant. She also talks about looking as well as listening, such as a TV show, which is supplementary to comprehension. The other characteristics she recites include *ongoing, purposeful listener response*, which occurs at intervals, as in a conversation and the speaker attention.

The last perspective of the need for inferencing skills takes us to the heart of devising the listening comprehension activities, hinging upon such a skill. When devising the goals for teaching listening, we must establish those which seem to be attainable by most students within the classroom context, not equal to those by a native speaker (Chastain, 1988). He also believes that unique the features of listening, explained in the previous paragraphs, should be considered by teachers while establishing listening

comprehension goals. The need for inferencing is highlighted by his thorough consideration of the process of planning the listening comprehension activities. He turns our attention to some important points which can imply the need for a closer focus on teaching of inferencing in classroom listening practices. The first point he makes is that the focus of attention should be made on meaning. The next point is that the purpose of the classroom listening activities should resemble those in real-language situations, that is, those familiar to students and their daily lives; this is exactly what teachers aim at when they encourage their students to make inferences. He also rejects having the students recite all details and words appearing in the context they hear (involving adherence merely to bottom-up processing). Listening without activation of background knowledge is harshly rejected as it leaves no room for top-down processing while listening. The other interesting point in his consideration is emphasis on including unfamiliar vocabulary and linguistic forms in the message which will most probably lead students to make inferences for the purpose of getting skeletal meaning as they are taught how to get the gist of meaning and make inferences. He also insists on developing the ambiguity tolerance and control in students as they encounter unknown material. Context is the other point which he emphasizes. He maintains that teachers should teach students to listen by establishing a context within which the speech takes place, which enables the students to expect what is likely to be said and guessed at. Taking a look at what Chastain's provides us suggests that advanced level students are best likely to tolerate the highest level of ambiguity due to their richest vocabulary and background knowledge and better familiarity with the context.

From what was already mentioned on the current problems with teaching listening, due to its characteristics and the research-based emphasis laid on careful planning for

teaching of listening, it seems quite inevitable to take an approach to listening which involves applying interactive processing (involving both the top-down and bottom-up) to listening comprehension in order to have more active listeners who are capable of performing complex advanced level aural contexts.

1.4 Significance of the study

A comprehensible listening course will greatly serve the teaching of listening in language classrooms. In his article Vandergrift (1999) states that the gap between the interests of listening researchers and classroom practitioners in that classroom materials do very little to develop metacognitive knowledge through raising learners' consciousness of listening processes. It is imperative to teach students how to listen. This shifts the emphasis of listening practice from product to process and the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student, thereby helping students become self-regulated learners. Explicit teaching of inferencing can provide students with some useful consequences in their listening comprehension practice. Vandergrift *ibid* states that the pedagogical sequence of pre-listening, listening and post-listening activities is not new (he cites Underwood 1989). However, if used consistently, this sequence of teaching strategies can guide students through the mental processes for successful listening comprehension, and promote the acquisition of metacognitive strategies in three categories: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. He believes that an emphasis on listening comprehension, as well as the application of listening strategies, will help students to capitalize on the language input they receive in their listening practices, and to achieve greater success in their language learning. Learning strategies are useful tools for students because they open up more reliable and less frustrating routines to language learning success, which are matters of complaints by many students in language classes. In particular, as Vandergrift puts it, the use of

listening strategies can make authentic texts more accessible so that the process becomes more relevant and interesting for the learners. If listening activities are just used to test the listening abilities of their students, they will lead to anxiety and apprehension, as it is very common in classroom listening practices. This is not a context favorable to the acquisition of useful listening strategies. Inference making is a strategy which like other strategies is aimed at facilitating learning.

1.5 Research questions and hypotheses

Following the problems stated at the beginning of this chapter concerning the factors which make listening comprehension difficult to listeners, the aforementioned osmosis approach and the role of inference making, and the necessity for more focus on the context, this research aims at understanding how explicit teaching of inferencing skills can lead us to better results in listening comprehension in advanced level students. The focus of this study is on how listening comprehension can be facilitated in students who are capable of inference making, logically advanced level students enjoying the prerequisites of inference making including context related abilities and dependable background knowledge. The main research question is:

1. Does explicit teaching of inferencing skills make significant effect on the listening comprehension skills in advanced Iranian learners?

In accordance with the main research question, a null hypothesis has been devised which is going to be tested in the next chapters. The null hypothesis is:

Explicit teaching of inferencing skills has no significant effect on the listening comprehension in advanced Iranian learners.