In The Name of God

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Entitled

The Effects of Two Pre-task Activities on Improvement of Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Dedicated to

My Dear Family

To whom I owe the blessing of a successful life

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Abstract

The present research study attempted to find out the extent to which two pre-task activities of "glossary of unknown vocabulary items" and "content related support" assisted EFL language learners with their performance on listening comprehension questions across two different proficiency levels (low and high). Data for this study were obtained from a total of 120 language learners, female and male. The test materials used in the course of this study were five listening comprehension multiple-choice questions and a cloze test. Before the onset of the study, a TOEFL test was administered to divide participants into low and high proficiency levels. This led to the formation of three groups, 20 participants in each group, totaling to 60 L2 learners in each level. The three classes were assigned into two experimental groups and one control group. A "glossary of unknown vocabulary items" with the pronunciations was offered one session before taking the listening test while content related support (in written form) was offered just 10 minutes before administering the tests. The statistical analysis of the data revealed that in low proficiency level, vocabulary group outperformed both content and control groups while in high proficiency level, content group outperformed the other groups. The study is concluded by suggesting that pre-task activities need to be used taking account of the support type and the learners' proficiency level.

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List of Abbreviations

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESOL: English for Speakers of Other Languages

ETS: Educational Testing Service

HP: High Proficient

LC: Listening Comprehension

LP: Low Proficient

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0. Introduction

The term ‘communication’ implies two conversion processes of creating a meaningful message and recreating that message. To recreate the message from spoken language, it is needed for learner to have some shared linguistic knowledge ability by which the learner takes part in the cycle of communication. As a means of encoding the intended meaning, listening skill has been one of the focal centres of researchers' interest. Listening skill should not be considered as a simple and single process which learners can use successfully to comprehend language. It is more accurate to conceive it as having some procedural stages in reaching some degree of comprehension (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002). Underwood (1989) has defined listening as “the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear” (p. 1). According to Chastain (1988), this skill has been regarded as a primary and pre-required skill which precedes learning other aspects of language especially for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) learners.

1.1. Background of the Study

Changes in the stream of language teaching reflect the direction of moves towards oral proficiency rather than reading comprehension by the time passed. For centuries, by the dominance of the traditional view on language teaching, a great majority of English linguists of 18th and 19th centuries believed that language learning is reading and writing and little or no attention was paid to speaking and listening. As Rost (1990) has stated, “by the advent of oral approaches, listening was viewed as a problem of aural recognition of linguistic structure” (p. 27). Traditionally, this skill was considered as a passive skill with no active processing in it, but now it is conceived as an active skill processing any linguistic input (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002). In the late1960s, scholars, such as James Asher, founder of Total Physical Response, came up with the belief that the foreign language learner should first internalize the target language through listening exercises and speech and other productive skills should be learnt later. He believes that listening is the skill which

has to be preceded speaking (Asher, 1969). In 1979 the first professional assembly called International Listening Association, was established for promotion of listening skill (Feyten, 1991). It gathered researchers from different areas of study such as psychology, education, counselling, business, law, and sociology.

By the late 70s, listening proficiency was not viewed as peripheral and unimportant skill anymore. Celce-Murcia (1991) has stated, "The importance of listening comprehension in language learning and language teaching has moved from a status of incidental and peripheral importance to a status of significance and central importance" (p. 105). Listening was paid due attention and was considered as a critical element in designing language learning syllabuses in the 1980s. In this period CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) emphasized the importance of this skill in language learning. As communication was considered an ultimate goal by itself, listening turned out to be one of the means a learner can use to reach that goal. Today, it has been justified that this skill is an active process which requires the listener to attend to a complicated process actively (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002).

On accounting of the entire challenges EFL learners encounter in classrooms due to the listening complexity, some pre-listening activities or supports in the procedure of teaching listening are proposed by a few authors (Chastain, 1988; Richards, 1990; Rost, 2001; Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984). Researches accomplished in this area have taken these activities as a kind of background knowledge. Some studies aimed at investigating the effect of some pre-task activities as support variable on learners' listening comprehension (Chang, 2007; Chang & Read, 2008; Lin & Chui, 2009).

1.2. Significance of the Study

Despite the difficulties learners face in listening comprehension mentioned above, tradition shows slight attention has been paid to listening in many language classrooms. The reason for lack of attention is that most teachers focus on observable product of learners rather than internal process of comprehending. But it should be

kept in mind that without understanding a language, the leaner cannot produce any product (Chastain, 1988). All these facts lead to the idea that to make students successful listeners, the teacher must support the learners according to their needs, goals, and situation in which they perform. To reach some optimal degree of comprehension, pre-task activities have been demonstrated to be helpful in performing different activities (Richards, 1990; Rost, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to discover the extent to which two pre-task activities of glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support assisted EFL language learners with their performance on listening comprehension questions across two levels of proficiency (low and high). Despite the fact that lack of vocabulary knowledge seems to cause the most worry of EFL learners, there are few studies regarding the effect of vocabulary preparation on listening comprehension (Chang 2006; Chang &Read, 2008; Lin & Chui, 2009). Looking at the other works done in examining the effect of prior information on listening comprehension, we see somewhat different results. To reach a solid conclusion, this study attempted to shed more light on supporting listening skill and as a result help learners reach an optimal degree of listening comprehension. To do so, we provided two types of pre-task activities including a "glossary of unknown vocabulary items" and a "content related support" giving information about the listening task. The present study aspired to find out effects of the pre-task activities across low and high proficiency levels.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions and hypotheses posed in this study are as follows:

Research question 1: Are there any differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of low proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Null hypothesis 1: There are no significant differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of low proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Alternative hypothesis 1: There are significant differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of low proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Research question 2: Are there any differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of high proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Null hypothesis 2: There are no significant differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of high proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Alternative hypothesis 2: There are significant differences in the effects of two pre-task activities, glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, on improvement of high proficient EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Research question 3: What are the similarities and differences between the two pre-task activities across two proficiency levels?

Null hypothesis 3: There are no significant similarities and differences between the two pre-task activities across two proficiency levels.

Alternative hypothesis 3: There are significant similarities and differences between the two pre-task activities across two proficiency levels.

1.4. Definition of Key Terms

- **Listening comprehension:**

  Listening skill is a highly complex process which has been defined as a process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the listener's mind (Lund, 1983). Brown (1980) has maintained, "Listening ability lies at the heart of all growth, from birth through the years of formal education. The better those learning skills are developed, the more productive our learning efforts" (p. 10).

- **Task:**

  Rost (1990) has defined task in a specific pedagogic sense which refers to "a unit of teaching/learning activity which involves relevant instructional variables to be manipulated by the learners using some kind of data" (p. 156).

- **Pre-task activity:**

  The purpose of pre-task activity is to make the listeners activate their relevant background knowledge and get any help needed for completing the task. Pre-listening tasks can be considered as a support before doing listening task (Rost, 1990. Rost (2001) has mentioned that "the pre-listening step may include explicit pre-teaching of vocabulary, grammatical or rhetorical structures, specific pronunciation of phrases, or ideas to be contained in the upcoming input" (p. 20).

- **Content related support:**

  The content related support was in the form of statements giving some information about the content of the forthcoming listening materials. This pre-task activity was aimed to activate the listeners' pre-existing knowledge. This activity aims at activating 'content schema'. Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002) have defined content knowledge as "network of knowledge on different topics" (p. 197).

1.5. Organization of the Study

The present study is organized in five chapters. In this chapter, introduction, background and significance of the study with definition of key terms are presented. A review of literature is presented in chapter two. Methods and the procedure of study are discussed in chapter three. In this chapter restatement of research questions and hypotheses are presented and participants, context of study, materials, design of the study, and the procedure of implementing the study have been discussed in a great length. The statistical analysis and findings of the study are specified in chapter four. In this chapter, each research question regarding low and high proficiency levels are illustrated and described by tables and figures separately. At the end, similarities and differences of learners' performances in accordance with the effects of pre-task activities are discussed. Discussion and conclusions of the study are presented in chapter five. Summary of the findings are outlined and research questions are answered respectively in this chapter. Likewise, implications and limitation of the study along with suggestions for further studies are presented in this chapter.

1.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter started introducing listening skill and its procedural nature in the cycle of communication. Subsequently, the changes of language teaching and its effects on the direction of moves towards oral proficiency were discussed in the section addressing background of the study. The chapter also explained significance of the study referring to some difficulties learners have experienced and reasons for lack of attention to this skill in L2 classrooms. The aim of the study along with its focus on assisting learners was also described. Finally, the chapter defined key terms used throughout the experiment and represented the whole organization of the study.

Chapter Two

Review of the Related Literature