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

***The Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching Approach on the
Listening Comprehension of Intermediate Iranian EFL learners***

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*In the Name of God
the Beneficent,
the Merciful*

DEDICATION

This language project is dedicated to my beloved husband Reza for his constant support and encouragement of my academic pursuits.

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Abstract

This study investigated the teaching of listening comprehension within the paradigm of task-based language teaching (TBLT) concentrating on intermediate English learners in Kharazmi English Institute in Birjand. Two homogenous groups of students participated as subjects in 2 groups of 30, a control group and an experimental group. They were female and their age range was 14-18. In order to achieve the homogeneity between the two groups in terms of language proficiency, a Nelson test was administered. A listening comprehension test devised by the researcher was also administered to check the students' listening comprehension abilities. The subjects in the control group were required to listen to recorded speeches and conversations, in accord with the traditional method, which students had to comprehend without any negotiation of meaning and interaction; while the experimental group was taught on the basis of TBLT. At the end of the term, a teacher-made test was given to determine the influence of the treatment on the experimental group. Drawing on the t-test, the researcher came up with the t-observed that was greater than the t-critical value at the .05 level of significance. Therefore, the study suggested that despite the traditional approaches adopted in which students are required to comprehend listening just by drilling and repetition, TBLT is an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting students with problems to be solved and prepares them for accomplishing some tasks in the world outside the classroom.

Key words: Task, Task-Based Language Teaching, Listening Comprehension.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

During last decades, we have gained many insights into the processes of listening comprehension. But we are still far away from getting a comprehensive picture of how listening comprehension is facilitated in exchanges and conversations. Touching on the same point, Osada (2004, p.75) believes that “although listening is now well recognized as a critical dimension, many aspects are not known to us”.

According to Morely(2001): “During the 1980s, special attention to listening was incorporated into new instructional frameworks, that is, functional language and communicative approaches”(p.53).

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides a foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of learning and communication essential to productive participation in life.

Obviously, second language (L2) listening comprehension is a complex process, crucial in the development of second language competence. It goes without saying that listening is an invisible process, making it difficult to describe. That is, listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance.

Referring to the same issue, Krashen’s (1982) ideas about comprehensible input gained prominence. By stressing the role of comprehensible input, second language acquisition research has given a major boost to listening. As Rost (1994) points out, of the four language

skills— speaking, listening, reading and writing, listening is the most critical for language learning at the beginning stages.

On the other hand, the role of task in language pedagogy has gained immense prominence during last decades, paving the way for presentation of interesting and authentic language activities in the context of language classes. The task-based teaching has also dealt with listening comprehension by including appealing listening tasks in the classrooms.

Focusing on the effect of task-based teaching on listening comprehension, this study aims to shed light on the role modern task-based activities play in facilitating listening comprehension of Iranian learners.

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

Recently, a number of advances have been made in research on listening comprehension ability. Among researchers who have specifically focused on listening comprehension in the context of TBLT (Task-based Language Teaching), the essential ones include Willis (1990), Long and Crooks (1993), Ellis (2003), Littlewood (2004) and David Nunan(2004).

Willis (1990) believed that tasks are activities which involve students focusing on the outcomes of the activity rather than on the language itself. On the other hand, TBLT has a richer potential for motivating students than do other approaches (Long & Crooks, 1993). This is because TBLT is learner-centered (Ellis, 2003).

Increasingly, both teachers and researchers acknowledge the need to elicit samples of language use that are representative of how learners perform when they are not attending to accuracy. Such samples, it is believed, provide evidence of learners' abilities to use their L2 knowledge in real-time communication. Thus this research can be considered as a step in this regard.

On the other hand, in the context of Iran language teaching, the audio-lingual method is the dominant one, that is, the emphasis is on structure and grammar of language. As Hosseini (cited in Ghorbani 2008, p.133) has stated:

In Iran, teachers continue to use the grammar translation method through textbooks which lack listening and speaking activities and deploy grammatical exercises disguising as 'writing' activities. They do so because the standardized national exams are still largely structural in orientation.

Thus, more studies need to be done in order to shed light on the extent to which task-based instruction can be effective.

Today, task-based approach to teaching is in vogue and it covers all skills of language proficiency. Many modern language teachers, those who might describe their approach as broadly communicative will, in the spirit of authenticity and language purpose, be eager to see if there is a pedagogical advantage in an approach which favors tasks as a central unit in language instruction and which encourages discovery and autonomy on the part of the learner. This study may help in shedding light on these important issues.

On the other hand, in Iran, few, if any, studies have been conducted on the role task-based teaching plays in listening comprehension. As EFL educators, we need to explore how our Iranian students learn to listen to English tasks and understand more the problems they have encountered in listening so that we can help them acquire better strategies. To get a clearer picture regarding Iranian listeners' perceptions of listening tasks in English and learn more about different levels of proficiency and listeners' use of specific strategies, this study can be of use.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study stems from the importance of listening skills in foreign language learning. Listening plays an important role in second-language instruction for several reasons (Rost, 1994). First, listening provides comprehensible input for the learner which is essential for any learning to occur. Second, listeners need to interact with speakers to achieve understanding. Third, listening exercises help learners draw their attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, interaction patterns) in the language. Thus listening comprehension provides the right conditions for language acquisition and development of other language skills (Krashen, 1995). Listening is considered as one of the important skills in language learning. However, it has not been studied as much as the other skills.

Therefore, research on different methods of teaching listening in Iranian context can be beneficial to both teachers and learners. There are different ways of Task- Based Teaching and in this study some new tasks will be experimented for Iranian learners.

1.4 Research Question and Hypothesis

With regard to the research design of this thesis, the following question is posed:

Does task-based language teaching approach have any significant effect on the listening comprehension of intermediate Iranian EFL learners?

In order to investigate the research question safely, the research hypothesis is stated in the form of a null hypothesis:

Task-based language teaching approach does not have any significant effect on the listening comprehension of intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

Experiments involving the random assignment of participants to conditions may allow us to make causal conclusions if the variables that are manipulated are not confounded with other variables. However, there still may be limitations with respect to the generality of the findings.

As in this study, only intermediate learners participated; they were all female students with an age range of 14-18; and the study was conducted in an English institute in Birjand; so generalization of results to other Iranian English learners and situations may not be appropriate.

1.6 Definitions of the Key Terms

Listening Comprehension

Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes active listening, which goes beyond comprehending literally to an empathetic understanding of the speaker. Pearson and Fielding (1983), among others link listening skills to reading skills. They feel that reading and listening make use of similar language comprehension processes. As does reading, they maintain, listening involves the simultaneous orchestration of skills in phonology, syntax, semantics, and knowledge of text structure--all of which seem to be controlled by the same set of cognitive processes.

Task

A "task" is a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication (Breen cited in Ellis 2003, p.25).

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Related Literature

CHAPTER 2: Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Overview

The nature of LC (listening comprehension) means that the learner should be encouraged to concentrate on an active process of listening for meanings, using not only the linguistic cues but his nonlinguistic knowledge as well.

Research has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of communication time listening (Gilman & Moody 1984), but the importance of listening in language learning has only been recognized relatively recently (Oxford 1993). Since the role of listening comprehension in language learning was taken for granted, it merited little research and pedagogical attention. On the other hand, although listening played an important role in audio-lingual methods, students only listened to repeat and develop a better pronunciation (for speaking). Beginning in the early 70's, work by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and, later, Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning. Listening has emerged as an important component in the process of second language acquisition (Feyten, 1991).

2.2 Listening Comprehension

We always use language as a tool to communicate with each other. And the purpose of language teaching is to cultivate students an ability of using language. As we know, listening, speaking, reading and writing are four basic skills in language teaching and learning. We naturally put listening in the first order and let the other parts follow. Teaching the comprehension of spoken speech is therefore of primary importance if the aim of the communication is to be reached. So listening plays the first and most important role in learning a foreign language.

The following is an elaboration on listening comprehension by Linguist Widdowson (1978, p.60):

When we say that we understand a piece of spoken language we can mean two things: either that we understand it as usage or that we understand it as use. On the one hand, we recognize that the signals received by the ear are related to the phonological and grammatical system of the language concerned, that they constitute sentences, and we understand what the sentences mean.

Vandergrift (1999) considers listening comprehension as a complex activity. Coordinating sounds, vocabulary, grammatical structures, and background knowledge involves a great deal of mental processes on the part of the listener.

Listening is even more difficult for those learners of English whose first language is based on a different rhythm and phoneme (such as Persian speakers). Richards (1990) differentiates between an interactional and a transactional purpose for communication. Interactional use of language is socially oriented, existing largely to satisfy the social needs of the participants; e.g., small talk and casual conversations. Therefore, interactional listening is highly contextualized and two-way, involving interaction with a speaker.

Ellis (2003, p.45) also elaborates on the social aspect of listening comprehension:

Interactive also refers to the social processes of collaboration that listeners enter into to ensure a degree of convergence between their schematic world and that of the speaker. These processes are evident in all communication but become highly visible when listeners need to signal a lack of understanding and where their comprehension problems lie.

A transactional use of language, on the other hand, is more message-oriented and is used primarily to communicate information; e.g., news broadcasts and lectures. In contrast with interactional listening, transactional listening requires accurate comprehension of a message with no opportunity for clarification with a speaker (one-way listening). Knowing the communicative purpose of a text or utterance will help the listener determine what to listen for and, therefore, which processes to activate. As with the advantages of knowing the context, knowing the purpose for listening also greatly reduces the burden of comprehension since listeners know that they need to listen for something very specific, instead of trying to understand every word.

Similarly, Fang (2008) maintains that "Listening comprehension is regarded theoretically as an active process in which individuals concentrate on selected aspects of aural input, form meaning from passages, and associate what they hear with existing knowledge. Cognitive psychology, the most developed model in accounting for comprehension processes, defines comprehension as information processing. Schemata are the guiding structures in the comprehension process. The schema is described by Rumelhart (1980, p. 34) as "a data structure for representing the generic concepts stored in memory. It can be used to represent our knowledge about all concepts: those underlying objects, situations, events, sequences of events, actions and sequences of actions".

Since the activity of listening comprehension is interactive, learner should be encouraged to concentrate on an active process of listening for meanings, using not only the linguistic cues but his nonlinguistic knowledge as well. Put it other way, listeners should be taught not to pay attention to everything; they listen selectively, according to the purpose of the task. This, in turn, determines the type of listening required and the way in which listeners will approach a task.