In the Name of Allah,

the Most Gracious

the Most Merciful.

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Faculty of Languages and literature

Department of English Language

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Title:

The Effect of Still Pictures and Full-motion Videos
on L2 Listening Comprehension

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Dedication

Affectionately Dedicated to

My Family

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Abstract

Despite the widespread use of video in listening instruction, little is known about how learners deal with dual-coded media and, in particular, how different visual elements may influence comprehension processes. In this study, attempt was made to examine the role of visual elements e.g., still images and full-motion videos on foreign language listening comprehension. It further aimed to investigate whether text genre influences L2 listening comprehension.

The data was obtained from 75 intermediate L2 learners majoring in English literature at Yazd University. They were randomly assigned to 3 groups each taking the same test with different modes of presentation. Group 1 received pure audio input, group 2 received audio input accompanied by a series of still images and group 3 received audio input accompanied by full motion video. The results of the study indicated a better performance with the full-motion video cues than with the other two modes. The use of still images, however, did not enjoy a facilitative effect.

To investigate the effect of text genres, the listening passages were categorized into three text types i.e., argumentative, expository and narrative. It was observed that the subjects performed the best on the argumentative passages in comparison with the explanatory and narrative ones, and that their performance on the explanatory passages was, in turn, better than the narratives.

The findings suggest that the use of video enhances the listening comprehension of EFL learners. The results further corroborate the supremacy of content over context visuals. However, the utilization of full-motion videos in such

tests may require a rethinking of the listening construct. On the other hand, employing argumentative text types, making the addressee more involved in the process, leads to better comprehension. The implications of the study can help both teachers and materials developers to think of ways to boost learners' listening comprehension.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1   Introduction

The listening skill plays a very important role in communication and in language learning (Rubin, 1994; Anderson & Lynch, 1988) and is perhaps "the most fundamental language skill" (Oxford, 1993: p. 205). Although there is no agreed definition of the listening skill (Wolvin & Coakley, 1988) nor a complete understanding of all the processes involved in listening (Rubin, 1994; Buck, 1992), the development of the listening skill has always been of primary importance to language teachers. Listening has gained increased importance for "not only is it a key language and communication skill but it also provides a channel through which new language input can be received and may become intake" (Ginther, 2003:12).

Listening comprehension has been neglected in research and practice until quite recently. It has received little attention compared to the other three skills (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking). That is why some researchers call listening "Cinderella skill in second language learning" (Nunan, 1997, p. 47).

Until recently, this skill attracted little attention in terms of both theory and practice. While the other three language skills receive direct instructional attention, teachers often expect students to develop their listening skill without help (Oxford, 1993). This idea has its roots in the Audiolingual method which was based on the premise that if students listen to the target language for a long time, they will improve their listening comprehension skill through the experience. The fact that listening has been neglected or poorly taught may have stemmed from the belief that it is a passive skill and that the mere exposure of the learners to the spoken language

provides adequate instruction in listening comprehension (Call, 1985, cited in Osada, 2004).

Arguments for listening comprehension began to be voiced in the mid-1960s by Rivers, who has been "long an advocate for listening comprehension" (Morley, 2001, p. 70). Rivers (1966, cited in Osada, 2004) asserts that, "Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is being said is comprehended by another person" (p. 196), and that "Teaching the comprehension of spoken speeches is therefore of primary importance if the communication aim is to be reached" (p. 204).

One of the events that brought about this paradigm shift was the Second International Association of Applied linguistics (AILA) conference in 1969 which was held in Cambridge, England. As Morley (2001) states, in retrospect, the four themes that dominated the conference seem to have been prophetic in pointing the way toward the trends in second or foreign language education during the last quarter of the twentieth century. New views on the importance of the following issues were proclaimed at the conference: (a) individual learners and the individuality of learning, (b) listening and reading as non passive and very complex receptive processes, (c) listening comprehension's being recognized as a fundamental skill, and (d) real language used for real communication as a viable classroom model (Morley, 2001).

Consequently, more attention has been given to listening comprehension. In the 1970s, the status of listening began to change from being incidental and peripheral to a status of central importance. Instructional programs focused more on pragmatic

skills to include listening as well as reading, writing, and speaking. During the 1980s, as researchers became increasingly interested in exploring this complex skill, more research, theory building, and curriculum development on listening comprehension were done. Throughout the 1990s, attention to listening in language teaching increased dramatically. Aural comprehension in second or foreign language acquisition became an important area of study.

Listening is now considered as an active skill that involves many processes. As Richards (1985) points out, "current understanding of the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science" (p. 189).

Research into listening over the past three decades has, above all, highlighted the fundamental intricacy of the processes involved (Lynch, 1998). In order to comprehend spoken messages, listeners need to integrate information from a range of different sources: phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. The fact that we achieve all this in real time as the message unfolds makes listening "complex, dynamic, and fragile" (Celce-Murcia, 1995:366).

It might be due to this complexity that Underwood (1990) states many language learners have difficulty with this skill. L2 researchers are beginning to theorize about and investigate some of the barriers that impede L2 listening comprehension. These barriers are divided into three main categories: listener factors, speaker factors and text factors (Zhao, 1997). Listener factors include linguistic ability, ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar terms, ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for gaps in linguistic ability, ability to

infer meaning, ability to take notes, failure to understand the main points and logical argument. Zhao also attributed problems of SL learners in listening comprehension to factors related to the speaker as well. These include speech rate, repetition and paraphrasing. He also identified text factors that are thought to affect processing oral discourse: complexity of lexis and syntax, density of information contained in the speech, excessive load of new terminology, excessive load of new concepts, and digressions.

Part of this complexity, mentioned above, is due to some factors related to nature of authentic materials which is strongly recommended by many scholars. If students are to use the language to communicate effectively in the real world, Rogers and Medley (1988) propose that students have to experience the language as it is used for real communication among native speakers (Ockey, 2007). This can be done through the use of aural authentic materials in the language classroom. Furthermore, Gilman and Moody (1984, cited in Ginther, 2002: 24) recommend that the teacher should use authentic materials in listening comprehension training at advanced level and with students at the beginning and intermediate levels.

Traditionally, classroom or language laboratory-based listening work has used audio cassettes which are meant to develop listening skills by providing authentic listening materials. The advocacy for the use of authentic materials in the classroom (Cummins, 1989) also applies to video, and different theoretical and practical frameworks have been suggested for using authentic video in the classroom (Ciccone, 1995).

Nowadays, recent advances in computer technology allow the delivery of digital video and audio in the same interface as written text (Ciccone, 1995). Such equipment has been adapted to the purposes of listening skills development on EFL CD-ROMs. These facilities provide listening tasks, language input and feedback on task success all via the computer screen. Although such multimedia applications are being developed and used, there has been inadequate empirical research as to whether they are really effective or not.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

In spite of the widespread use of video media in second language programs, little empirical investigation has been carried out to investigate the role of visual elements in the listening comprehension process of second language learners. Different causes may be mentioned for such an inadequacy of empirical investigations. One reason for this neglect could be the fact that there is not one single true construct of listening comprehension. In general listening comprehension has traditionally been defined solely in terms of an ability to decode aural stimuli (Rost, 1990). Such definitions have increasingly been attacked in recent years, for they fail to acknowledge the real complexity of the listening comprehension process (Pillar, 1997). With regard to video-based listening, the prominent listening theorist Rubin (1994) defined the skill as "an active process in which listeners select and interpret information which comes from auditory and visual cues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express" (p. 7). What is

important to note in this definition is that visual elements are assigned no specific role, rather they are considered as complimentary factors that work in conjunction with aural elements to influence the active process of listening comprehension. It is a widely held belief among second language researchers that visual elements simply provide a means of 'support' to listeners as they decode the aural input.

Rubin (1994) suggests that visual elements offer assistance to listeners primarily through the display of action and interaction. According to him, listeners make use of these supports to 1) narrow interpretations when they observe physical settings, 2) validate tentative hypotheses when they make sense of action and 3) judge emotional states when they see interaction. Except for Rubin's observations there is little theoretical justification or empirical evidence that supports the belief that listeners utilize visual elements mainly for 'support' of the aural input. Just a handful of studies to date has been carried out which closely investigate the role of visual elements in the comprehension process of second language listeners.

Given the above points, the curriculum developers need to be made aware of the proper way of including listening skills in their intended textbooks and their associated instructional facilities. The question to be dealt with is which method can be more effective in the comprehension process: full-motion videos or still images.

The same is true about the effect of text genre on L2 listening comprehension. Among factors that affect listening comprehension, text genre has been noted as an important one but the studies done to unfold this issue are really scarce. Many more research have investigated how text genre influences reading comprehension. Recent empirical research in first language reading has shown that texts that have schematic

structures guide readers in achieving both comprehension and recall (Shin, 2002). Since it has been emphasized in the literature that the way a text is structured is related to the way it is understood and remembered, more research is needed to throw some light on the plausibility of this claim. The present study attempts to investigate this issue as well.

1.3   Purpose of the Study

Different construct definitions of listening comprehension have led to different types of assessments of this skill. Excluding the visual information from the definition of listening, early language testers believed that listening should be assessed in the absence of visual stimuli. Lado was the prominent figure advocating the unidimensionality of this skill. However, particularly with the advent of multimedia, other scholars (Schriver, 1997; Buck 1994), questioning the validity of this kind of measurement, argued that in real-life communication, the verbal information is often accompanied by visual information. Thus, including the visual information in the definition of listening construct, they tend to assess listening in a more realistic context in which visual support is considered to be an integral part. Incorporating the visual stimuli can mostly be carried out using still images or full-motion videos.

Supporting the second view, this study has a two-fold objective. In the first place it aims to determine if the presence of visual support affect EFL learners' performance on listening comprehension tests. In so doing it tries to investigate the