The Impact of Listening Strategy Instruction on the Improvement of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Comprehension of News Videotexts

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ABSTRACT

The present study was an attempt to investigate the impact of listening strategy instruction on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' comprehension of news videotexts. After administering modified language proficiency test (Preliminary English Test), 63 homogenous participants were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. The comparison of the groups on the listening pretest confirmed the homogeneity of the subjects before the instruction. During 10 instructional sessions, the experimental group received direct listening strategy instruction incorporating presentation (i.e., explicit teaching and modeling of the selected strategies), practice, and review of the taught strategies using a 3-4-minute pre-recorded CNN news videotext while the control group did not receive any explicit strategy instruction. After the treatment, both groups took part in the listening posttest. The results indicated that direct strategy instruction was effective enough to improve listening comprehension ability of the participants of the experimental group. The findings of the study could be employing in teaching listening to the EFL learners.

Keywords: Contextual knowledge, co-textual knowledge, idea unit, listening comprehension, segment, strategy, strategy instruction, videotext

INTRODUCTION

As a means of communication, listening comprehension plays an important role in people's everyday lives. It is more than just hearing sounds. It is a complex active process of interpretation where listeners match what they hear with what they already know (Rost, 2002). The ability to participate in speech is one of the recent concerns in foreign language education that has generated a stronger focus on listening in the classroom (Ge, 2009). However, listening is the least explicit skill and, consequently, the most difficult one to be taught or learnt (Vandergrift, 2004). Nevertheless, there has been a growing interest in teaching this difficult skill (Goh, 2008).

The focus of listening instruction and the emphasis on teaching listening have changed over the past 40 years. Previously, since listening was believed to be a passive activity, instructional models of the behaviorist approach (e.g., 'listening to repeat' approach of the audio-lingual period) were dominant. Therefore, little instruction and classroom attention were required. However, it is nowadays recognized as an active process which is critical to L2 acquisition and deserves instruction as well as systematic improvement. Thus, the common approach is 'real-life listening in real time', which involves communicative tasks (Morley, 1999). Therefore, it is a fact that listening approach is expanding from a focus on the product of listening (i.e., listening to learn) to a focus on the process (i.e., learning to listen) (Vandergrift, 2004).

Even more recently, the role of explicit strategy instruction in facilitating listening comprehension is being emphasized (Goh, 2008). Furthermore, it is proved that learners can benefit from direct listening strategy training (Vandergrift& Tafaghodtari, 2010).

In addition to the importance of direct listening strategy instruction, the importance of using authentic audio-visual materials (e.g., news videotexts) in listening classes is also being emphasized (Hedge, 2002; Qiang, 2006; Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Moreover, using news videotexts in foreign language learning contexts can be considered as a natural consequence of developments in multimedia technology. However, some familiar vocabularies that are not expected in the given context, insufficient background knowledge, lack of opportunity to negotiate meaning, and unfamiliar cultural norms are numbers of challenges in comprehending news videotexts (Meinhof, 1998). Furthermore, in comprehending news videotexts, learners often perceive visuals as distractions, so disregard them in favor of comprehending every detail of the audio. This is an unrealistic expectation that will end in frustration and demotivation (Cross, 2009). Therefore, without a pedagogical guidance, learners are not able to deal with the complexities of these authentic listening sources. Thus, it is one of the main tasks of teachers to teach listening more effectively through different methods of listening strategy instruction to improve students' listening ability (Ge, 2009). In other words; teachers should help students develop metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies in order to help them learn how to listen.

It is proved that there exists a positive correlation between strategy use and foreign language proficiency (Oxford et al., 2004). A strategy-based approach in teaching listening helps learners improve top-down processing which is essential in extracting meaning from contextual and cotextual clues in order to compensate for comprehension failure (Vandergrift, 2007). Strategy instruction also helps learners comprehend better by raising their awareness of the listening process (Rahimi, 2012). Furthermore, listening strategy instruction helps learners promote their autonomy (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Cross (2009) claimed that strategy instruction helps teachers know how to help EFL learners deal with the difficulties of comprehending authentic videotexts. Thus, there is no doubt that strategy instruction is influential in improving the effective use of strategies (Chamot, 2005).

Accordingly, the present study attempted to discover the impact of listening strategy instruction on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' comprehension of news videotexts. It is worth mentioning that strategies taught explicitly in the experimental group were note-taking, prediction, inferencing, selective attention, and self-monitoring. To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following question was raised:

"Does listening strategy instruction have any impact on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' comprehension of news videotexts?"

In order to investigate the research question empirically, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

"There is no statistically significant difference between the listening comprehension mean scores of Iranian intermediate EFL learners who receive listening strategy instruction and that of those who do not."

METHOD

Participants

In order to conduct this research, at first, 30 students whose language proficiency was similar to that of the participants of the study took part in the piloting stage of the language proficiency test (Preliminary English Test). After that, the modified version of the PET was administered to the participants of the study who were 63 intermediate male and female learners aged between 30 and 45. They were studying English as a foreign language at the University of Power Industry

in Zanjan. It is worth mentioning that the participants were not aware that they were taking part in the research.

Instrumentation

The Preliminary English Test (PET) was first piloted and modified through NRT item analysis and reliability estimation. Then the modified version was used to homogenize the participants of the present study in terms of their general English proficiency. The PET was published by Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL, 2009) and included four sections: reading (35 items), writing (5 objective and 3 subjective items), listening (25 items), and speaking (4 phases). In order to evaluate the participants' listening ability before treatment, a 2-minute pre-recorded segment of CNN news videotext was utilized as the listening pretest for both groups. After 10 instructional sessions, another 2-miute pre-recorded segment of CNN new videotext.

Procedure

At the outset of the study, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was first piloted with a group of 30 intermediate level students. After analyzing the results through NRT item analysis, including item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID), 10 malfunctioning items, out of 65 objective items, were discarded. Then the papers were rescored and the reliability of the objective parts of the test was estimated using the Kuder-Richardson formula (KR-21). Furthermore, the subjective parts of the writing were scored twice by two raters who were familiar with the writing scale of the PET. Then the inter-rater reliability was estimated using the Pearson-Product Moment Correlation formula. At the next stage, the modified version of the PET, including 55 objective items and a two-part subjective writing section, was given to 63 intermediate participants to homogenize them in terms of their general English proficiency. The time allocated was 120 minutes. The writing section of the PET consisted of three sub-parts. The reading section, the first sub-part of the writing section, and the listening section of the PET were scored objectively, and the two sub-parts of the writing section were scored subjectively utilizing the established criteria at hand for the PET (PET exam package, 2009). This scoring procedure was exactly the same as that of the piloting stage. It is worth mentioning that due to time limitations, the speaking section of the PET was not administered to the participants of the present study. The participants then were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group employing simple random sampling (Best & Kohn, 2006).

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, 12 sessions were provided to the participants. Except the first and last sessions which lasted almost 30 minutes for each group and were devoted to the administration of the pre and posttests, each instructional session lasted about 90 minutes for the experimental group and 60 minutes for the control group. The researchers had to give a shorter time to the control group regarding the lack of any explicit strategy instruction in that group. Due to this difference, any generalization should be made with cautious. It is worth mentioning that in the present study, the researchers were inspired by the research conducted by Cross (2009).

To ensure that the two groups were homogenous in terms of their listening ability, a 2-minute prerecorded segment of CNN news videotext was used for both groups as the listening pretest. Prior to the administration of the pretest, the teacher explained to the participants that they were about to listen to a news videotext once without noting down anything, and then they would be allowed to listen again and write down whatever they could understand. At this stage, the teacher paused after every 10 to 15 seconds in order to give enough time to the participants to write down their sentences. It was emphasized that the task was meaning-based and the participants had to write as many sentences as they could based on the meaning they could

perceive from the news videotext (Cross, 2009). This procedure was exactly the same as that completed in instructional sessions. Scoring was done based on the idea units created by the researchers and verified by two experts. Each idea unit was given one mark if it was judged to encompass the same meaning as that of the related idea unit presented in the news videotext. The participants did not lose marks for spelling or grammatical mistakes since the focus was on the meaning of each idea unit. The answer sheets were scored by two raters. The inter-rater reliability was calculated to find out the degree of internal consistency between the judgments of the two sets of scores. The administration and scoring procedures of the posttest stage were exactly the same as those of the pretest. However, in order to avoid the practice effect, a different 2-minute CNN news videotext was administered to the groups.

In the present study, the following steps were taken based on Mendelsohn's model (1994) to provide a framework for promoting EFL learners' listening comprehension of news videotexts:

- 1. Determining meta cognitive, cognitive, or social-affective strategies for instruction and appropriate activities for teaching them;
- 2. Preparing pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening materials;
- 3. Conducting strategy instruction, providing practice and feedback, and consistent reviewing; and
- 4. Encouraging self-evaluation and autonomous use of listening strategies.

At first, based on classifications of cognitive, meta cognitive, and social-affective listening strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and regarding the strategy teaching experience of the teacher, who was one of the researchers in the present study, three cognitive (note-taking, inferencing, predicting) and two meta cognitive (selective attention, self-monitoring) strategies were selected and appropriate activities were developed. The researchers did not select any social-affective strategies, since she aimed at teaching individualistic strategies rather than cooperative ones. Second, pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening materials were prepared. Third, strategy instruction incorporating presentation, practice, and review of the strategies was planned. Finally, the obtained feedbacks on strategy instruction were shared and discussed among the participants of the experimental group in order to encourage the autonomous use of listening strategies. The following pedagogical cycle was utilized with both groups:

- I. Pre-listening stage;
- II. While-listening stage; and
- III. Post-listening stage (Field, 2000; Vandergrift, 2003)

Thus, in each instructional session, the teacher presented a 3-4-minute news videotext prerecorded from the CNN's satellite services, which focused on international topics such as natural disasters or wars, and a transcript drawn from its internet news website. The topic, news videotexts, and scripts were the same for both groups, but varied each session.

Pre-listening Stage: This stage was a 15-minute pre-listening task based on a topic-related content to stimulate and generate background knowledge. According to Devine (1982), at this stage students need assistance to activate what they already know about the topic they are going to listen to, and simply being told the topic is not enough. Thus, in the present study, each session started with a general warm up through (a) topic presentation, (b) activating existing knowledge, and (c) building prior knowledge.

After the topic was presented by the teacher, the learners' existing schemata was activated through encouraging them to ask themselves, "What do I already know about this topic?" to

generate a list of vocabularies. In order to do so, the teacher utilized one of these techniques: (a) She presented the topic and asked the learners, "Have you heard/read anything about this (the topic) recently on newspaper/news?" Then they were supposed to brainstorm as many topic related information and vocabularies as they could; or (b) she played the videotext once without sound, and then she asked the participants some questions like, "What's going on in there?" They could generate lots of vocabularies.

Furthermore, the teacher provided the learners with appropriate background information including data about the topic and vocabularies that were likely to be embedded in the segmented news videotext.

The learners were also told that individual words are not important in the current listening task and their focus should be on the general meaning of the news. Moreover, they were told that the speed of the correspondent and newscaster's speech is very fast. They would not understand everything at first; they would get a bit more each time they listened to the news.

While-Listening Stage: At this stage, the participants of the experimental group were provided with a 60-minute strategy instruction encompassing (a) presentation, (b) practice, and (c) review of the strategies (Ozeki, 2000). The teacher presented the strategy and explained the purpose of using it as well as why, when, and where it could be used. Then she modeled how to use the strategy through one or two examples. Next, the students practiced applying the strategy through some appropriate tasks. They were taught one strategy every other session but the learnt strategies were reviewed each session (Kinoshita, 2003). Before listening, the participants were reminded that since the task was meaning-based, their responses were considered to be acceptable when their meaning matched with the meaning of the segments (Cross, 2009). Subsequently, the segments were presented ranging from 10 to 15 seconds. To utilize both auditory and visual channels, which reflects real-life listening (Wagner, 2007), the participants were asked to just watch and listen as the segment was being played. They were given time to note down information when the segment was posed. This was done twice for each segment. Next, feedback was given to enable learners to evaluate their comprehension (Cross, 2009).

Post-Listening Stage: This stage was based on a 15-minute task incorporating (a) comprehension check by the teacher through asking the participants to summarize or retell the news, and (b) evaluation of understanding by the participants (Cross, 2009) through first reading the transcript as listening to the news, and then comparing the meaning they could get for each segment with the meaning presented in the transcript.

It is worth mentioning that this cycle was exactly the same for the control group with the same news videotext except presentation, practice, and review of the strategies in while-listening stage. In while-listening stage, the participants of the control group completed a 30-minute listening task according to conventional methods of teaching listening based on their personal learning strategies, which differed among individuals; no strategies were taught explicitly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After calculating item facility (IF) and item discrimination (ID) indexes, ten malfunctioning items were identified and discarded from the test. Then the reliability of the objective parts of the PET was estimated utilizing the KR-21 formula.

K	KR-21
55	0.902

Besides, the inter-rater reliability was calculated for the writing section utilizing the Pearson Product Moment formula.

		Rater 1	Rater 2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.738**
1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Ν	30	30
	Pearson Correlation	.738**	1
2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Ν	30	30

Table 2. Inter-rater Reliability of the Writing Section of the PET

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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Group	Ν	Total Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	55	55.10	9.329	- 0.331	0.421	- 0.78
Experimental	32	55	53.44	11.8070	.000	0.414	0

At the next stage, a group of 63 intermediate students took the modified version of the PET. The following table shows the descriptive statistics. In order to check whether the participants in the two groups belonged to the same population in terms of their general language proficiency, a *t*-test was run. However, to legitimize running a *t*-test, the normality of the distributions of the scores for both groups was checked. As demonstrated in Table 3, the significant value for both groups fell within the range of -1.96 and +1.96; therefore, both distributions were normal and running an independent samples *t*-test was legitimized. At the next stage, the researcher ran an independent samples *t*-test to compare mean scores of the two groups were homogenous in terms of their variances [F= 2.713, $\rho = 0.105 > 0.05$, two-tailed]. In addition, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the control and experimental groups at the outset of the study and both groups belonged to the same population in terms of their language proficiency [t= 0.618, $\rho = 0.539 > 0.05$, two-tailed].

Table 4. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Groups on the Language ProficiencyTest

		Fest for <mark>E</mark> Variance	Equality of s	T-test for	Equalit	y of Means
Equal Variances	F Observed	Sig.	T Observed	Sig (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Assumed	2.713	0.105	0.618	0.539	61	1.659

In the next phase, the participants' scores on the listening pretest were analyzed to ascertain that the two groups had no statistically significant difference in terms of their listening ability before the treatment. The descriptive statistics of this test are reported in Table 5.

Group	Ν	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	9.65	2.026	0.006	0.421	0.014
Experimental	32	8.63	2.459	- 0.202	0.414	- 0.487

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of the Listening Pretest in the Control and Experimental Groups

As demonstrated in Table 5, both distributions were normal; therefore, running a *t*-test was legitimized. In order to check the degree of consistency between the judgments, the inter-rater reliability was calculated (Table 6).

		Rater 1	Rater 2
1	Pearson Correlation	1	.924**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Ν	63	63
2	Pearson Correlation	.924**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Ν	63	

 Table 6. Inter-rater Reliability of the Listening Pretest

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As illustrated in Table 7, the variances could be assumed equal [F= 2.986, $\rho = 0.089 > 0.05$, two-tailed]. Moreover, the result of the *t*-test [t= -1.794, $\rho = 0.078 > 0.05$, two-tailed] indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the groups on the listening pretest and they belonged to the same population before the treatment.

Table 7. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Groups on the Listening Pretest

		test for Ed Variances	T-test for	r Equality	of Means	
Equal Variances	F Observed	Sig.	T Observed	Sig (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
Assumed	2.986	0.089	-1.794	0.078	61	-1.020

Following the 10 instructional sessions, another 2-minute segment of CNN news videotext was administered to both groups as the listening posttest. Table 8 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the listening posttest.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics of the Listening Posttest in the Control and Experimental Group

Group	Ν	Mean	SD	Skewness	Standard Error of Skewness	The Significant Value
Control	31	9.97	2.198	-0.198	0.421	-0.47
Experimental	32	11.50	2.676	- 0.318	0.414	0.76

The following table shows the inter-rater reliability of scores on the listening posttest.

		Rater 1	Rater 2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.945**
1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	Ν	63	63
	Pearson Correlation	.945**	
2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	Ν	63	

Table 9. Inter-rater Reliability of the Control and Experimental Groups on the Listening Posttest

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Since both distributions were normal (Table 8), and variances were equal [F= 3.288, $\rho = 0.075 > 0.05$, two-tailed] (Table 10), a *t*-test was run. The results [t= 2.479, $\rho = 0.016 < 0.05$, two-tailed] implied that the treatment had been effective enough to create a significant difference between the means of the experimental and control groups. Consequently, it could be claimed that using direct strategy instruction had improved the students' listening comprehension ability, and the researchers succeeded in rejecting the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance.

Table 10. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Groups on the Listening Posttest

	Levene's test for Equality of Variances				r equality	of means
Equal	F Observed	Sig.	T Observed	Sig (2-tailed)	df	Mean Difference
variances assumed	3.288	0.075	2.479	v	61	1.532

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the statistical analysis of the data presented above, the researchers mainly concluded that teaching listening strategies helped the experimental group to improve their listening comprehension ability. The researchers' finding in this study is in line with Cohen's argument (2005) that directs effective strategy instruction can help less successful language learners to be better learners. The result of the present study is also similar to that of another study conducted by Thompson and Rubin (as cited in Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011) which proved that students receiving strategy instruction represented significant improvement on a video comprehension posttest compared to the students in the control group. Furthermore, the finding of this research confirms the findings of the investigation conducted by Chen (2008) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

As a secondary result, through discussions with the experimental group, it was concluded that strategy instruction helped the learners demonstrate metacognitive awareness using their ability to select the appropriate strategies for comprehending the videotexts.

The results of the present study indicates that instructors can take advantage of direct strategy instruction as a useful tool for improving students' listening comprehension ability, in general and more specifically, their comprehension of news videotexts.

The findings of the present study suggest that teachers should change their perceptions of listening instruction from a test-oriented approach to a strategy-based one. Research has indicated that prescriptive teaching and passive learning is the result of putting much emphasis on testing as the goal of listening instruction. As a result, students will be prevented from developing effective listening strategies and activating their listening processes (Chen, 2008).

Strategy instruction can help teachers to develop students' metacognitive awareness of the use of learning strategies. Strategy instruction can empower learners to control their listening processes better. Gradually, when the strategy training is scaffolded, the responsibilities of learning will shift to learners themselves through self-reflection and self-regulation of their listening processes (Chen, 2008).

Considering the main result of the study, listening strategies can be directly taught to students. Effective listening needs not only linguistic knowledge (knowledge of words, grammar, etc.) but also non-linguistic knowledge (knowledge of world, body language, facial expressions, etc.). To utilize the knowledge of these two aspects, students need some listening strategies. According to Zhang (2007), some listening strategies are acquired automatically but some are not, and it is listening teachers who should teach them directly to students.

Since language learning is a long-term and slow process (Su, 2002), explicit listening strategy instruction should be systematic and integrated into the listening instruction curriculum in order to create positive consequences over a longer term.

Explicit strategy instruction provides learners with a reliable support in their attempts to learn how to listen. Furthermore, students become more confident and autonomous in language learning. Different learning contexts show that L2 learners need strategy instruction in order to develop their awareness of the listening process. This awareness will enhance both their listening ability development and their confidence in language learning (Anderson, 2004). In sum, successful listening strategy instruction is possible only with collaboration among students, teachers, and curriculum authorities.

Although developing listening comprehension through explicit strategy instruction is evident in recent studies, there are a number of concerns in this regard. For example, Ridgway (2000) has argued that learners do not have the cognitive capacity to activate the taught strategies consciously and listen simultaneously. He has further claimed that isolating individual listening strategies for explicit instruction and determining if they are being utilized by listeners is not realistic. In addition, Field (2000) has pointed out that targeting individual listening strategies for instruction may promote the use of those strategies but may not necessarily lead to improved listening performance.

More recently, Cross (2009) conducted a quasi-experimental classroom based study on the impact of listening strategy instruction on Japanese advanced adult EFL learners' comprehension of BBC news videotexts. The experimental group received 12 hours of listening strategy instruction consisting of the presentation, practice, and review of listening strategies while the control group did not receive any explicit strategy instruction. Results indicated a significant improvement for both groups; however, the experimental group did not outperform the control group.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- 1. This study was limited to intermediate EFL learners; it can be carried out with advanced learners or beginners.
- 2. The age range of the participants in the present study was between 30 and 45. Further studies can be run with other age groups.
- 3. Further research can be conducted to provide an objective listening rating scale for a videotext-based assessment.
- 4. Studies on the impact of strategy instruction on the reading comprehension ability of EFL learners can also be conducted.
- 5. This study was conducted in an EFL setting. The same research can be run in an ESL context in which learners are more exposed to English and are more motivated.

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