



The impact of frequent exposure to authentic audio visual material on enhancement of Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension ability

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ABSTRACT

In recent years with the advent of technology in people's life, the use of audio visual material to assist learners in their language learning experience especially EFL learning contexts has been integrated into the curriculum design in many countries. The use of video as an audio-visual aid in foreign language classrooms with the emphasis on communicative language teaching has attracted the attention of language teachers, SLA researchers as well as learners and it is apparent that the use of such useful learning tool can be a great help for language learning. In this study the effect of frequent exposure to audio-visual material on Iranian EFL learner have been investigated. In order to conduct the study 40 Iranian intermediate students have been selected out of a pool of 200 based on their result in a placement test. The selected participants were randomly assigned into two groups of experimental and control each containing 20 learners. The listening ability of the participants were tested by a pre-test before start of the treatment and no significant difference have been observed. After a period of two month in which the experimental group received treatment of exposure to authentic audio visual material a round of post-test was administrated and the scores obtained from two groups was compared using a t-test. It was observed that the experimental group who have received the treatment achieved significantly better scores. It was concluded that frequent exposure to audio visual material has a positive impact on improvement of learners' listening ability.

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Introduction

Although the importance of listening for second or foreign language (L2) acquisition is recognized (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996), both learners and teachers lack a clear understanding of how to develop this skill (Chambers, 1996; Graham, 2006). Listening has also received less research attention than other skills (Vandergrift, 1997). Therefore, the field requires more exploratory studies which might inform principled decisions about pedagogy and research in relation to listening. The present study will be conducted in order to fill this gap and to offer a clearer perspective on listening comprehension ability which differs significantly from those adopted in most previous researches.

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, from the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994). Although the teaching of listening comprehension has long been somewhat neglected and poorly taught aspect of English in many EFL programs (Mendelsohn, 1994, p. 9), listening is now regarded as much more important in both EFL classrooms and SLA research. Listening involves an active process of comprehending and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the label of passive skill applied to listening is a misnomer. This misunderstanding may stem from the fact that superficially learners seem to only sit in a language lab quietly, listen to some pre-recorded dialogues, and write the answers to some questions related to the oral stimulus. It is evident, then, that listening is not as passive as it has been claimed to be as it demands a number of complicated processes on the part of the learners. In normal listening laboratory classes

students listen to some educational listening adopted for their level. However, the valuable these material are, there seems to be a gap between what learners listen to in the lab and what they really listen in normal everyday conversation of real life. There should be taken some actions in order to bridge this gap.

The current study has analyzed one possible, feasible way of overcoming listening problem of students. One specific research questions has been addressed in this study:

1. Does frequent exposure to authentic audio visual material affect Iranian EFL learners listening ability?

Literature Review

When it comes to authentic materials there are different definitions with a slight difference between them. However, there is one common ground in all these definitions which is 'exposure to real language and its use in its own community' (Kilickaya, 2004). Goals, objectives, learner needs and interest are 'natural' and 'appropriate' 'quality' factors that are taken into consideration in Rogers (1988) definition when dealing with real life and meaningful communication (p. 467). Jordan (1997, p. 113) highlights that authentic texts are not written for the aim of language teaching. According to Peacock (1997) the definition of authentic materials is the materials which have been designed in order to fulfil social purposes in the language communities. Martinez (2002) suggests that "Authentic would be material designed for native speakers of English used in the classroom in a way similar to the one it was designed for" (p.1). Widdowson (1987) defines that "Authenticity...is a term which creates confusion because of abasic ambiguity" (p.30).

Little *et al.* (1988, as cited in Guariento & Morley, 2001) gives a definition for authentic material as "an authentic text...created to fulfill some social purpose in the language

community in which it was produced”(p.347). Bacon & Finnemann (1990) put authentic materials as texts “produced by and for native speakers of the target language” (p.469). According to Schulz (1991), teachers’ use of authentic materials in the FL classrooms is highly supported by Krashen’s ‘affective filter’ hypothesis for SLA as well, he further explains that in EFL settings in which authentic material is used affective and attitudinal factors such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety change learners’ receptivity to the target language. Krashen (1987, cited by Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991) believes that a high affective filter prevents acquisition, whereas a low affective filter promotes it. Regarding this claim, Krashen (1989) identifies materials which tend to lower the affective filter as “comprehensible input on topics of real interest” (p.29), that is, by and large, a hint if not direction, to authentic materials.

Moreover, Mishan (2005) believes that the main highly important pedagogical reason for using authentic materials in FL teaching context originates from what is called ‘the 3 C’s’, that is to say, culture, currency, and challenge. He clarifies that: “Culture, in that authentic texts incorporate and represent the culture/s of speakers of the target language; currency, in that authentic texts offer topics and language in current use, as well as those relevant to the learners; challenge, in that authentic texts are intrinsically more challenging yet can be used at all proficiency levels” (p.44).

In recent years there has been a growth in interest on conducting different researches on the role authentic materials in FL teaching context. Researchers and teachers have increasingly acknowledged the need for as well as the usefulness of authentic materials in the field of language teaching. Empirical studies have proved right the positive impact of authentic material taken by learners who have chances to interact with them. Studies, such as Miller (2005) and Thanajaro (2000), revealed that using authentic materials in classes lead to a significant aural language development. Furthermore, Otte (2006 cited in Al-Musallam, 2009) investigated the effect of aural authentic texts on listening comprehension abilities of four adult ESL students at an American university. He claimed that exposure to authentic materials would lead to improvement of students’ listening comprehension abilities as well as motivation.

In addition, a research done on intermediate-level students, Herron & Seay (1991) claimed that those students who listened to authentic radio program recording as a substitute for regular classroom activities demonstrated a significantly better listening comprehension ability than those for whom this type of task was not included in the semester's curriculum. Their research also confirmed that, the more exposure to authentic recording the more improve observed in learners’ listening-comprehension skill. Doing a comparative study on the impact of authentic versus textbook materials on developing learners’ communicative competence, by Gilmore (2007) at a Japanese university. He observed that those learners who received the authentic input, made statistically significant improvements over those who received textbook input on six out of eight tests designed to measure different types of competence. He further claimed that, “This result was attributed to the fact that the authentic input allowed learners to focus on a wider range of features than is normally possible ... and that this noticing had beneficial effects on learners’ development of communicative competence” (p.111).

In the same strand of thought, Weyers (1999) examined the impact of exposure to authentic video material on the language acquisition process of Spanish university students. The results retrieved from the study indicated that those learners who were exposed to authentic videos showed a significant improvement in

their listening comprehension skills and also some component parts of the communicative competence.

Hadley (2001) concludes that the, “use of real or simulated travel documents, hotel registration forms, biographical data sheets, train and plane schedules, authentic restaurant menus, labels, signs, newspapers, and magazines will acquaint students more directly with real language than will any set of contrived classroom materials used alone” (p.97). Therefore, it seems completely wise to base students’ reading practice on a variety of authentic texts as well. Moreover, Morton (1999) suggests that developing strategies in comprehending authentic texts can lead students to improve writing proficiency in the target language. He explicates, “Students ... need to learn the register that is appropriate for their own essays. For this, there is no substitute for authentic academic texts ... which can develop students’ ability to master basic rhetorical devices” (p. 182). In this regard, Carter and Nunan (2001) also claim that the use of authentic materials leads to learners’ awareness raising of both grammatical and lexical and also stylistic features. Furthermore, professionals who favor authentic materials strongly suggest that exposure to authentic materials can be introduced to the learners in the earliest stages of language learning (Bacon, 1989; McNeil, 1994; Miller, 2005), they assert that an early exposure to such material can help learners to develop essential strategies for dealing with more complex tasks in later phases of their language development. Herron & Seay (1991) state that, using authentic materials facilitates language for learners. Authentic materials can also be beneficial from another point of view; empirical studies have shown that less proficient learners can benefit from such materials.

In a study conducted on a group of high school students studying German as a FL, Bernhardt and Berkemeyer (1988) found that all students of all levels have the capacity to use authentic texts. Maxim (2002) concluded, “The students’ limited linguistic competence did not short-circuit their ability to read authentic texts in class with the support of their classmates and instructor” (p.29). The findings of the aforementioned studies have indicated that authentic materials can be useful in many different ways. Such materials shows learners how language is used in the real world and indirectly improve their general language proficiency as well as reading and listening comprehension abilities, communicative competence, and lexical and stylistic knowledge. Although, there are arguments claiming that the use of authentic materials at early stages of language learning hinders the language learning process. Nevertheless, using authentic materials in teaching a FL brings with itself more than just linguistic advantages. In this regard, scholars argue for the motivating power of authentic materials (Gilmore, 2007; Sherman, 2003), which obviously, is a crucial factor in successful language learning (Keiko Komiya, 1992; Krashen, 1981; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). As Gilmore (2007) point out, “Claims that authentic materials are a motivating force for learners are widespread through the literature” (p. 106).

McNeil (1994) & Kilickaya (2004) claim that since authentic texts creates in the learners the feeling that they are learning the real language – the language as it is used by communities that speak it their daily life is regarded as one way for enhancing students’ motivation for learning. Rivers (1987) claims that learners who work with authentic materials have a practical objective in mind and dynamic interest in the language. Kim (2000) asserts that authentic materials provide a means for learners to deal with certain cultural barriers in language learning. Sherman (2003) states, “One reason why [authentic material] is so important for language learning is that it is a window into culture” (p.12)

Despite these ideas discussed there are some scholars who rarely see any worth for incorporating authentic materials. For instance, Clark (1983), argues that there is no effect learning through media under any conditions; therefore, the question of authentic versus non-authentic has no value to discuss (as cited in Miller, 2005). Kienbaum et al. (1986) also pointed out that there is no significant differences in the language performance of learners using authentic materials compared with those in a more traditional classroom context.

Authentic materials, however, according to Martinez (2002), may be too culturally biased and therefore, difficult to understand outside the language community. Nostrand (1989) argues that "Authentic texts from one culture may give a false impression to a student from another unless they are presented in an authentic context which makes it clear precisely what they exemplify" (p.49). However cultural understanding is an inseparable part of communicative competence.

In conclusion, the idea of authenticity in language teaching has been debated overtly in the past three decades. However, the benefits that authentic materials bring to the FL classroom can be claimed to greatly outweigh the obstacles they may give rise to. In other words it is worth taking the risk. Moreover, a creative task design can help language teachers to overcome such challenges. In Field (1998, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002) "instead of simplifying the language of the text, simplify the task that is demanded of the student. ...With the text above the language level of the class, one demands only shallow comprehension" (p.244). Guarienti and Morley (2001) believe that such problems can be solved by designing tasks in which learners are required only to have partial comprehension. In conclusion, it is evident from the abovementioned review that using authentic materials in the language classrooms is worthwhile.

Methodology

Design

This study follows a quasi experimental design. There are two main variables under investigation. The independent variable of the study is exposure to authentic audio visual material whose effect is investigated on the dependant variable, Listening ability of Iranian EFL learners. In the following, the participants of the study, the materials and the data collection and analysis procedure will be explained.

Participants

The study was conducted with 40 Iranian students who have enrolled an EFL course in Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Rasht, Iran. In order to make sure of homogeneity, participants were selected out of a pool of 200, based on their result in a PET exam, which is a standard exam of Cambridge University. Having calculated the mean and the SD, participants with the score of 1 SD above and below the mean ($1SD \pm \text{mean}$) have been selected to conduct the study. All participants have already passed 10 courses in the same institute, apart from that, none has any other experience of studying English. After selection of the participants, they were randomly divided in two classes of equal number each class 20 participants.

Instruments

Proficiency test: in order to make sure of the homogeneity of the participants they were selected based on their results in a PET exam. As PET is a standardized test, standardization process wasn't necessary to be done.

Pre-test: an intermediate level listening test arranged by the researcher and adopted from the books *Tactics for listening*, and *Tune in* by Jack C. Richards have been used. In order to make sure of the validity of the scores obtained from test three

professional tests designer checked and gave marks to the test. On the other hand the reliability of the test was estimated 0.78 through Chronbach Alpha coefficient. After finalizing the test, it was used as pre test.

Post-test: in order to make sure of the equivalence of this test with pre test. The pre-test was re- designed so that the level of difficulty was kept equal but the vocabulary items which were used have been changed with other words. Similarly to what have been done in pre-test, for post test as well, three professional tests designers evaluated the post test.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants in both groups were given a listening pre-test and their listening ability was scored in order to make sure that their listening ability at the beginning of the study was at the same level. As this course is a general English course, communicative Language Teaching has been used in both control and experimental groups and all methods were the same. In the control group the learners received a normal routine instruction as they always do, whereas in experimental group in each session for an extra one hour participants watched an American soap opera. A soap opera was selected to conduct the study for many different reasons. The first one was the popularity of this show among participants and their own interest. Another even more important reason was that in soap operas usually the same characters play in many episodes. So, learners had the chance to find connections with the characters and it makes it easier and less stressful for them to watch the material. The final reason to mention here is the researcher belief on using an up to date material so that the content of material wouldn't be old-fashioned and not usable in modern English. In order to make sure of the appropriacy of the material used, three raters rated the movie to confirm that the dialogues in the selected soap is of standard English and also the content of the material is culturally appropriate for Iranian adult learners.

In Kish Institute of Science and Technology, in which the study was conducted, Classes are held 3 days a week. The course consists of 20 sessions, and students receive 30 hours of general instruction. In this study, however, Students were asked to watch the already mentioned series for an hour in each session, which was an episode each session. They were told that they were watching this series for pleasure and no task was given to them regarding the material they were watching. The reason for not giving any tasks was the aim of this task which is for participants to have exposure to material not to do comprehension tasks. By the end of the term which as previously mentioned took almost 2 months participants have received 20 hours of treatment, the students' listening comprehension ability were tested again and the results were analyzed for further discussion.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the current study was analyzed via an independent T-test between the scores of Control and experimental Group. As we had two independent groups and the elicited data from them is interval data, and also normally distributed, it seems that all pre-requisites of using a T-test are met. The results are discussed as follow:

Results

The summary of descriptive analysis for the data related to the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study is presented as follow in table 1.

Table. 1 Comparison of mean scores of experimental and control groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
score	Control	20	12.6500	1.72520
	Experimental	20	14.8500	1.81442

As table 1 indicates the mean score of experimental group is significantly higher than the mean of control. However, as stated earlier at the beginning of the study the score of listening pre-test of the groups hadn't shown a significant difference. It means both groups had had similar listening comprehension ability at the beginning of the study. So, one can assume that the treatment has been effective. In order to have a better insight and a better understanding of the results of the study the table below is presented in which the t- score is discussed with much more details.

Table 2. The summary of t-test between the posttest scores of experimental and the control group of the study

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Score	Equal variances assumed	.048	.828	3.930	38	.000	-2.20000	.55984	-3.33334	-1.06666
	Equal variances not assumed			3.930	37.904	.000	-2.20000	.55984	-3.33343	-1.06657

According to table (2), the result of t-test ($t_{obs} = 3.93$, $p < .05$) yielded significant difference between the control and experimental groups. the retrieved sig from the study (0.000) is smaller than the pre-determined value (0.05) so we can infer that the difference between the groups is significant.

Conclusion and pedagogical implication

There are many reasons why teaching of ESL/EFL listening is currently less than optimally effective, and certainly it is wrong to pin the blame on anyone group, whether teachers, listening specialists, or academics. Language Listening is a topic of great theoretical interest and practical relevance which unfortunately hasn't been researched on effectively.

ESL/EFL teachers should focus on the students' needs along with their level of proficiency and also their ability, and then incorporate listening activities into their aural skills. In the current study the results of the independent samples t-test analysis from the posttest administration indicated that the experimental group who received enough amount of exposure to authentic material had a better performance in their listening test than the control group who did not. Thus, the findings suggest that frequent exposure to authentic audio visual material will benefit learners in learning to comprehend English language aural texts more accurately. It can be argued that having English learners exposed to authentic material can significantly affect their listening ability. The result of this study can be implicated in language classes and EFL settings. Teachers can motivate and encourage their learners to watch English programs frequently. English institutes can prepare opportunities for their learners to watch things together in the institute and enjoy the benefits of it as well.

This study shows how exposure to authentic material can improve learners' listening comprehension ability. This study is tended for classroom teachers who are willing to make a change in their classes and help their students improve by use of innovative way, teachers who are not sticking to old methodologies and procedures and are open-minded enough to accept and face changes and those who can bring new version of teaching listening comprehension ability to their classes. They can help their learners to be better listener as well as better

speakers. In fact exposure to sufficient amount of authentic material can help learners improve their listening skill.

This study is significant for English learners in language schools, as it can teach them how to be more competent listeners. Learners by watching some movies in their free time even out of the class environment can improve their English without even trying to do so as formal studying. In fact, they just enjoy their free time activity and at the same time learn subconsciously. Clearly one of the most important reasons that learners cannot comprehend listening material is not their lack of knowledge on the content of material but is their weakness in recognizing what they listen to. So, ear training is an important aspect of being a good listener.

There exist a chance for learners to pick up some new vocabulary and expression. In this case they may learn some new items of vocabulary without formal training and apparently their speaking ability and knowledge of vocabulary will improve as well. This could be another good area of research. There is still a great room for further research on this area. Research can be done on other effects frequent exposure to authentic audio visual material has on other aspects of English language such as vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, speaking ability, etc.

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