

THE EFFECT OF THE LISTENING TO FORMAL LECTURES ON IRANIAN ADVANCED STUDENTS' LISTENING ABILITY IN TOEFL IBT

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have suggested that listeners who listen to lectures that offered discourse signaling cues were able to recall more main ideas and more supporting details than listeners who did not. This study examines the effect of listening to formal lectures on Iranian students' listening comprehension ability in TOEFL iBT test. Two groups of students were selected for the purpose of this study. In the control group, students were taught the six necessary skills in TOEFL iBT, actually the listening parts of the TOEFL iBT books. However, The students in the treatment group were taught the authentic skills while they were listening to lectures, the students see the listening task as an authentic one not the one to listen to in order that they can answer the listening tasks only. The results showed that both groups improved significantly over time. However, while being almost the same at the pretest, the two groups significantly differed from each other at the end of the instruction. The treatment group outperformed the control group by almost half a band score on TOEFL iBT listening scoring rubric. This improvement shows that listening to and watching formal lectures can help learners improve their academic listening ability in English.

Keywords: Formal Lectures, Listening ability, Iranian Advanced Students, TOEFL iBT

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that listening comprehension is one of the most important aspects of L2 acquisition. However, it is difficult for all language learners to comprehend all parts of the whole chunk of the target language, the types and the extent of difficulty varies from one learner to the other.

The communicative trends helped to shape later developments in testing design, the result of which was TOEFL iBT (internet Based TOEFL). The purpose of the test is to assess English language ability for academic purposes.

The TOEFL iBT tasks consist of the actual activities undertaken by university students in their educational settings. Listening to a second language may involve external factors related to speaker, text of context: novel expressions, rate of speech, accent, unfamiliar content and cultural references, and so on. Furthermore there is the complexity of conducting effective research into listening, given the inaccessibility of listening and the variety of influences on the success or failure to understand spoken language.

Cutrone (2005) found that the tendency of Japanese learners of English to avoid confrontation, by providing regular positive back channeling, caused frustration in their native English conversational partners, who were unable to decide whether or not their message was really being understood.

It is widely accepted that university lectures are much more than a way of neutrally conveying information; they are value laden discourses in which lecturers certainly aim to inform, but also to evaluate and critique the source materials that they are bringing to students' attention (J. Lee, 2009). The different levels potentially present in a lecture impose a heavy load on listeners, who may have to interpret detailed and extended monologues.

Jung (2003) found that listeners to lectures that offered discourse signaling cues were able to recall more main ideas and more supporting details than listeners who did not. She argued that students may, in particular, benefit from such discourse signaling cues in certain conditions: when the overall text structure is not evident; when the text type is familiar to them; when they possess the relevant background knowledge; and – perhaps of most significance in actual courses – when the lecture text is unscripted. In a related study of Korean listeners to English, Jung (2006) showed that the absence of what she terms 'contextualizing cues' can even lead students to misunderstand the main ideas in a lecture. One feeling commonly expressed by second language listeners is an overwhelming impression of speed and a lack of control over the speaker; Rost (2002) and Graham (2006) discuss their students' frustration with the speed of comprehension required in natural second language listening. When the requirement to understand is combined with the need to produce, as it is in university tutorials and discussions, the international students' feelings of inadequacy and frustration are exacerbated (e.g. Leki, 2001; Liu, 2001; Morita, 2004).

The present study reports the effect of Listening to formal lectures on EFL Iranian Students' listening comprehension ability in TOEFL iBT test.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It was from the 1980s to the 1990s that research highlighted the important role of listening in oral communication and in language acquisition (Brown & Yule, 1983; Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki, 1994; Faerch & Kasper, 1986; Long 1985). Numerous studies indicated that efficient listening skills were more important than reading skills as a factor helping to academic success (Coakley & Wolvin, 1997; Truesdale, 1990). According to Mendelson (1994), of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9%.

Listening comprehension has been described as an "interactive, interpretive process in which listeners engage in a dynamic construction of meaning" (Murphy, 1991, p.56). It may involve linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, meaning construction and responding. Listening includes the intake of both verbal and nonverbal information, such as paralinguistic characteristics of speech. "Efficient listening entails the integration of the selected information into the cognitive schemata of the recipient. This implies that a recipient's cognitive system is constantly and gradually being modified in the process of listening" (Hermann, 1994, p.59)

Anderson (1983) has identified three interrelated and recursive cognitive processes in listening: a) Perception, b) Parsing, and c) Utilization. During the perceptual phase, listeners concentrate on the oral text and keep the sounds in echoic memory. In the parsing phase, listeners use words and messages to create meaningful mental images which can be used to create the intended meaning. In the final stage, listeners use their prior knowledge for comprehension and remembering.

According to Anderson and Lynch (1988, p.6), in successful listening, "understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process, by activating various types of knowledge, and by applying what he knows to

what he hears and trying to understand what the speaker means." Underwood (1989, p.1) defines listening as "the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear". Mendelsohn (1994) defines listening comprehension as the ability to understand the spoken language of native speakers.

Mendelsohn (1994) points out that, in listening to spoken language, the ability to decode the speaker's meaning is required of a competent listener, in addition to other abilities such as processing the linguistic forms like speech speed and fillers, coping with listening in an interaction, understanding the whole message contained in the discourse, comprehending the message without understanding every word, and recognizing different genres. Listeners must also know how to process and how to judge what the illocutionary force of an utterance is—that is, what this string of sounds is intended to mean in a particular setting, under a particular set of circumstances – as an act of real communication.

Consequently, listening can be summarized as: Listening is the active process of selecting and integrating relevant information from acoustic input. This process is controlled by personal intentions which are critical to listening. It means that listening behavior is intervened with the current and habitual motivational orientation of a person, with his or her attitudes, interests and the person's pertaining self-monitoring skills and control believes.

Underwood (1989) states, there are seven obstacles to efficient listening comprehension. First, listeners do not have control over its speed. He says, " Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks" (Underwood, 1989, P. 16). Second problem is the impossibility of repeating words or sentences. In the classroom, students do not make decision whether or not to replay a recording or a section of a recording. Teachers decide what and when to repeat listening passages; however, it is hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard (Underwood, 1989, P. 17). Third, listeners sometimes face an unknown word which may cause them to stop and think about the meaning of that word and as a result they will miss the next part of the speech. Fourth, listeners may fail to recognize the signals such as pauses, gestures, increased loudness, a clear change of pitch, or different intonation patterns which show the transition from one point to another, giving an example, or repeating a point. These signals cannot be understood especially by less proficient listeners. Fifth, listeners may lack contextual knowledge. Sharing mutual knowledge and common content makes communication easier. Even if listeners can understand the surface meaning of the text, they may have major problems in getting the whole meaning of the passage unless they are familiar with the context. Sixth, it can be difficult for listeners to concentrate in a foreign language. In listening comprehension, even the slightest distraction can seriously impair comprehension. Seventh, students may have established certain learning habits such as a wish to understand every word, and they feel worried if they fail to understand a particular word or phrase and they will be discouraged by the failure. It is necessary for students to tolerate vagueness and incompleteness of understanding (Underwood, 1989).

In order to overcome these listening comprehension problems, learners need to develop techniques known as 'listening strategies'. These strategies are mental processes that enable learners comprehend the aural text despite their lack of knowledge.

When students are made aware of the factors that affect listening, the levels of listening, and the components of the listening process, they are more likely to recognize their own listening abilities and engage in activities that prepare them to be effective listeners. Moreover, listening lessons must be carefully planned: a) Listening comprehension lessons should be constructed with careful step by step planning, b) LC lesson structure should be demanding

and must involve students, c) LC lesson should provide a communicative urgency for remembering in order to develop concentration, d) Listening comprehension lessons should focus on conscious memory work, and e) Listening comprehension lessons should —teach, not —test.

Academic listening plays a crucial role in a student's academic success. Research in English for Academic Purposes (ESP) has begun to show that ESL/EFL students have problems in understanding academic lectures. Practically all students have a problem comprehending lectures because of the lecturers' accents. And it takes time to overcome the problem and get used to as they call heavy accents.

Lexical Knowledge

By comparison with the amount of research into the relationship between second language lexical knowledge and reading comprehension, the number of studies of the vocabulary/listening association is considerably lower. It may seem reasonable to assume that a listener's vocabulary will play a significant role in lecture comprehension, but until recently that assumption was based primarily on research into reading. Mecarty (2000) was among the first to explore the relationship between second language knowledge and listening performance.

In this research, the effect of formal lectures on the students listening comprehension in TOEFL iBT tests is examined. The researcher believes that listening to formal lectures makes the learners ready to comprehend the lectures as deeply as possible in the TOEFL iBT.

It is assumed that while students listen to lectures they face with different complexities namely, lexicon, grammar, topic, situation, organization, and... . Therefore, working on each of the complexities during an authentic lecture makes them more aware of the process of how to listen to a lecture, take notes, and grasp the idea entirely.

Participants

38 female and 26 male EFL learners of differing majors studying at the University of Damavand, Azad University took part in the present study. The treatment group consisted of 31 students (17 female and 14 male), while the control group consisted of 33 students (21 female and 12 male) students. They took the listening program voluntarily. Their age ranged from 21 to 39, with an age mean of 30.

MATERIALS

The main material used was Ted official lectures available at www.ted.com. The other material was a number of TOEFL iBT listening prompts chosen from the ETS TOEFL Listening Prompts Official Booklet available at ETS website. The Listening samples were rated based on the TOEFL iBT listening scoring rubric (ETS, 2006). Besides, the two groups' pretest and posttest were compared through independent and paired samples t tests. Next, their gain scores were compared using an independent samples t test.

PROCEDURE

For the purpose of this research 93 participants (31 males and 62 females) took part in the proficiency test. The proficiency test was a TOEFL iBT test (ETS, 2006). After the test the students who scored between 55-65 were selected. The reason behind this selection is that usually the accepted score in most of the international universities is 80. Therefore, 64 students were selected and 29 of them exempted from the program. The proficiency test was rated by two experienced university faculty members. The criterion was based on the TOEFL iBT test scoring rubric (ETS, 2006). Afterwards the students were randomly sent to

experimental and control groups. However, some of the students couldn't manage their times and changed their class. Finally, two groups were held. Then, the two classes were randomly assigned to control and treatment groups. In the first session a listening test was given to the students in both groups as the pre test. The pre test was the listening part of the TOEFL iBT. The results showed that the groups were the same. In this research, 12 sessions were actually held, one of which was devoted to the final exam. In the control group, Students were taught the six necessary skills in TOEFL iBT, actually the listening parts of the TOEFL iBT books, Longman and Delta, were covered during the program .However, The students in the treatment group were taught the authentic skills, they were listening to lectures, note taking, discussing after the lecture, writing an outline, paying particular attention to key terms, discussing their own attitudes with others ,and explaining the novel lexicon on the part of the teacher. This way the students see the listening task as an authentic one not the one to listen to in order that they can answer the listening tasks only. The lectures were video in which the students were also provided with the power point presented by the lecturers. Not only was the treatment group learning how to understand the messages in the lectures presented in bundle of words, but also how to lecture. It is interesting to mention that the participants were impressed in the way the lecturers organize ideas, support them, have fun, and interact with the audience. Some of them were even motivated to deliver lectures like the lecturers in TED program about a topic of their major interest in the university. On the contrary, the students in our control group were mainly interested in learning the necessary listening skills in TOEFL iBT. Learners' post test was the listening task of TOEFL iBT. The listening samples were rated based on the TOEFL iBT listening scoring rubric (ETS, 2006).

DATA ANALYSIS

The two groups' pretest and posttest were compared through independent and paired samples t tests.

Examining the Null Hypotheses

The null hypothesis implies that listening to formal lectures makes no significant difference between the treatment group and the control group in case of their listening proficiency. To test this hypothesis, the two groups were first checked for their pretest scores to see if they were comparable at the onset of the study. The independent samples t test showed no significant difference between the two groups ($t(62) = -.47, p = .64$). Both the treatment group and the control group significantly improved from the beginning to the end of the instruction as assessed through the use of two paired samples t tests (Treatment Group $t(30) = -26.42, p = .000$; Control Group $t(32) = -15.70, p = .000$). However, the two groups showed a significant difference in their posttest ($t(62) = 2.64, p = .01$).

Table 1. The descriptive statistics for the two groups in the pretest and post-test

Group		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis		
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Treatment	Pretest	31	1.890	.68	.78	.42	.32	.82
	Post test	31	3.870	.61	.05	.42	-.95	.82
Control	Pretest	33	1.970	.72	.25	.409	-.760	.80
	Post test	33	3.410	.78	-.43	.409	-.145	.80

As it can be seen, our sample is almost normally distributed because the Skewness and Kurtosis statistics obtained do not deviate that much from zero.

Table 2. The paired samples t test statistics for pretest and post test

Group	Paired Differences				t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Error			
treatment	Pretest - Post test	-1.98	.42	.07	-26.42	30	.000
control	Pretest - Post test	-1.44	.53	.09	-15.70	32	.000

RESULTS

The results showed that both groups significantly improved over time, which shows that the instruction has been successful for both groups. However, while being almost the same at the pretest, the two groups significantly differed from each other at the end of the instruction. The treatment group outperformed the control group by almost half a band score on TOEFL iBT listening scoring rubric. This improvement shows that listening to and watching formal lectures can help learners improve their academic listening ability in English.

However, a more precise observation of the students' performance during the treatment showed a much wider range of differences between the two groups. By the end of the semester, those in the treatment group appeared to have a better understanding of different topics, most probably due to learning academic listening skills namely, note taking, brainstorming, logical thinking, guessing,... . In treatment group the students were faced with real world tasks which were more challenging for them. Understanding the listening tasks in the class make them better aware of the listening process so they could better decode the messages in discourses provided for them. Most of them stated that they were not stressful while they had the TOEFL iBT listening part in an exam session for, as they mentioned, they had done something more difficult than that (TOEFL iBT, Listening task). They were also observed writing more complete notes, which seems to be another consequence of brainstorming and careful listening. They also understood the pattern and structure of lectures better .They were seemed to be more competent listeners, for they were listening to the lectures more attentively and accurately. After the treatment they learned how to listen to formal lectures and which parts in a lecture was considered more important. Therefore, they could easily detect the main ideas, supporting details and minor details. While the note takings of the control group were mostly characterized using main idea and details together. Sometimes they couldn't get the message because of their high level of anxiety which was due to lack of understanding the messages. However, the students in treatment group were more organized listeners, more motivated and better aware of the listening process. Besides some of them got to know how to deliver lectures like the ones in TED show; for example, they learned to have sense of humor, organize ideas well, connect them coherently, and talk about ideas in an interesting way in order to attract attention. This could be explained by the formal listening they had been exposed to.

In addition, in treatment group the students could better grasp the ideas while in treatment group the students were just concerned to answer the questions provided after each listening text in TOEFL iBT books, Longman and Delta.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION

It is widely accepted that university lectures are much more than a way of neutrally conveying information; they are value laden discourses in which lecturers certainly aim to inform, but also to evaluate and critique the source materials that they are bringing to students' attention (J. Lee, 2009). The different levels potentially present in a lecture impose a heavy load on listeners, who may have to interpret detailed and extended monologues.

In this research, the effect of formal lectures on the students listening comprehension in TOEFL iBT tests was examined.

It is assumed that while students listen to lectures they face different complexities namely, lexicon, grammar, topic, situation, organization. Therefore, working on each of the complexities during an authentic lecture makes them more aware of the process of how to listen to a lecture, take notes, and grasp the idea entirely. As such, the first implication this study may have is applications for language teachers. The results showed that listening to formal lectures makes the learners ready to comprehend the lectures as deeply as possible in the TOEFL iBT. Therefore, teachers teaching listening can use the findings of this study to improve their learners' listening ability. Teachers can ask students to listen to formal lectures in their classes. This way, students are engaged with the whole formal discourse and can be more successful in academic settings. As such, learners can view listening from a wider perspective.

Syllabus designers can also benefit from the results of this study. Incorporating formal listening texts as part of the instruction can be very helpful to learners participating in any language program. Material developers are the third group who can use the obtained results. Incorporating those findings into the materials they develop can help learners learn much more.

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