The Impact of Using Different Forms of Pre-listening Activities on Iranian EFL Learners’ Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Pre-listening activities are some introductory activities that familiarize students with the topic and activate their background knowledge on the content. The aim of this paper was to analyze how pre-listening activities (preview of questions & studying unfamiliar vocabularies) could be useful in developing listening comprehension and which one is more effective and helpful as pre-listening. The research was conducted on sixty Iranian EFL learners, in Aryanmehr Educational Association (Iran, Sari), who studied English courses for 3 years. Such students were exposed to listening training designed by researcher for one month. The results indicated that preview of questions as an pre-listening activity can be effective in teaching listening comprehension and studying unfamiliar vocabularies has no significant effect on improving learners’ listening comprehension. Therefore, the present study provides essential information for EFL teachers about the effectiveness of pre-listening and therefore, useful tips for successful teaching listening.

Key Words: Background knowledge, Bottom-up process, Schema, Top down process, Vocabulary pre-teaching.

1. Introduction

To teaching listening as a skill, teachers have long asked students to listen to a recorded text and answer some questions while listening and that was teaching listening comprehension. Listening is a skill in language proficiency which can directly affect other skills and be affected by several other strategies or techniques (Safarali & Hamidi, 2012). Listening is by nature the first acquired skill by human beings (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). Listening comprehension is the basis of successful communication, and a three staged procedure (pre-listening, while-listening, post-listening) advocated by Underwood (1989) for teaching listening supports this claim. The pre-listening is a kind of introductory work which ought to make the content explicit, clarify the purposes and establish roles, procedures and goals for listening (Rost, 1990). In real life it is unusual for people to listen to something without having some idea of what they are going to hear. Underwood (1989) describes pre-listening as follows: before listening, students should be “tuned in” so that they know what to expect, both in general and for a particular task. This kind of introductory work is generally described as pre-listening work or just pre-listening.

Some of the teachers are not sure about the effects of pre-listening and some others are trying to know which activity as
pre-listening will be more effective, and finding out to which two activities will assist EFL learners with their performance on listening comprehension is a matter that helps teachers towards successful teaching. As a result, some learners at Iranian institutes adopt a reluctant attitude that eventually blocks their learning process towards the activities that involve listening. In that sense, it is important to consider that Iranian learners belong to a non-native context in which the exposure to the English language is somehow limited. In fact learners are not equipped with key elements to interact alone with input. Therefore, proficiency and interest on listening comprehension tasks are significantly constrained among some learners who attend courses at Iranian institutes. To help Iranian EFL learners improving listening comprehension skill, we are going to examine the effectiveness of two forms of pre-listening activities, studying a list of unfamiliar vocabularies and previewing of questions as pre-listening activity, to facilitate learning of listening comprehension as an important skill that is undoubtedly necessary for communication.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Theoretical background

Howatt and Dakin (1974) consider EFL listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This involves understanding a speaker’s accent or pronunciation, his grammar and his vocabulary, and his meaning. In addition, there are some strategies involved that an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner must perform such as skimming (get the general idea), scanning (get specific details), predicting (make inferences), in order to cope with meaning during an interaction and be able to follow the thread of any speech event.

The term listening comprehension is defined as the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener’s expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic”. It therefore includes both top down processing and bottom up processing. According to Nunan’s view (1997), the bottom up approach focuses only on the identification of isolated language items as a way to understand the entire text. On the other hand, Nunan (1997) explains the top-down approach as the reconstruction of the original meaning, supported by cues such as the contextualization while being exposed to the text and the incoming sounds. Thus, the listener starts from the general, in a holistic process, in which all the linguistic elements are used as tools to obtain meaning.

Top-down processing is looking from the above to fulfill listening aims. Bottom-up processing is like studying details to fulfill the aims. A Listener uses the top-down and bottom-up processes in order to comprehend spoken language and integration of information that are gathered from the two is a key factor in successful listening and in fact language understanding involved an integration of linguistic comprehension and nonlinguistic interpretation. Top-down processing is going from whole to part, and focused on interpretation of meaning rather than recognition of sounds, words and sentences and listeners use world knowledge, topic understanding, or personal experiences to form hypotheses to interpret the text but in bottom-up processing smaller units are processed first and then built up to larger units. Listener starts with the phonemes, sounds, syllables, words, and go on to sentences, paragraphs, discourse, and finally to the whole text. They decode these elements and constitute the meaning of whole speech based on their syntactic and grammatical knowledge. Bottom-up processing is also used by learners when they rely on specific components of the second language for aural comprehension. Meaning is constructed from morphemes to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings until, eventually, the message is decoded. Bottom-up refers to that part of the aural comprehension process in which the understanding of the heard language is worked out proceeding from sounds to words to grammatical relationships in lexical meanings.
bottom-up processing involves gathering the parts that was heard one by one for a long time to be complete and accurate description of successful listening. Nunan (1998, p. 25) states that “successful listener use both bottom-up and top-down strategies”. For an example of top-down processing, consider the following sentence, When Ali went college, on hearing this part of the sentence, we automatically start to use our bank of knowledge to think about and to predict what the rest of the sentence might be. Bottom-up processing involves building meaning from the sound we hear. We change the sound into words, then into grammatical relationships, and upward until we arrive at the meaning. According to this view, phonemic units are decoded and linked together to form words, words are linked together to form phrases, phrases are linked together to form utterances, and utterances are linked together to form complete meaningful texts. In other words, the process is a linear one, in which meaning itself is derived as the last step in the process.

When we listen, bottom-up and top-down processes interact and this interaction leads to understanding (Peterson, 1991). Although students automatically use these processes in their first language, they often need to be thought to do so in their second language. Many researchers agree that top-down and bottom-up strategies are fundamental in listening comprehension. The latter involves meaning construction by decoding small segments on the phoneme level and then gradually moving focus up to discourse level. The opposing strategy is top-down processing, where listeners’ prior knowledge together with contextual interpretation builds a conceptual framework for the understanding of details on lower levels (Vandergrift, 2011, p.456). The ability to predict what is likely to come next in the stream of speech is a top-down process, since it facilitates lower levels of processing. Consequently, bottom-up and top-down strategies operate simultaneously as listeners create a mental representation of what is heard. Interestingly, listeners tend to vary the use of strategies depending on the purpose of the listening, even though it happens automatically. Naturally, listeners are required to focus on details in some situations, whereas it might be more sufficient in the other context.

According to Vandergrift, listening comprehension consists of three interconnected phases: perceptual processing (perception phase), parsing and utilization. The perception phase consists primarily of bottom-up strategies, whereas the parsing phase involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. During the utilization phase, listeners exclusively use top-down strategies, generally applied by high proficiency learners (Osada, 2004). Studies have shown that first language listeners manage the three phases relatively easily, without spending much effort in actually decoding individual words. Contrastively, second language learners have less linguistic knowledge and therefore have to use more controlled processing in listening comprehension. Low skilled second language learners might even just activate the parsing phase and have therefore no space left for top-down processes at all (Osada2004b, p.63). To improve comprehension, second language learners can learn how to focus on content words, which might make it easier to get a general idea about the topic, even though it requires more time and effort as opposed to automatic processing (Vandergrift, 2010). According to Vandergrift, experienced learners can use their meta-cognitive knowledge to compensate for gaps in comprehension, for example by using cognitive strategies or contextual cues to infer what was not understood (Vandergrift, 2010). In other words, experienced learners are able to activate top-down processes to a further extent compared to less experienced learners, who might have to learn other strategies in order to succeed in listening comprehension.

The term ‘background knowledge’ in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics is defined as “in reading, prior knowledge that readers use of in understanding a text. This can include topic related knowledge, as well as cultural, linguistic and world-knowledge. Background knowledge enables the listener to make greater use of top-down processing”. Background knowledge about a subject or theme is an important aspect to successful listening. It is the knowledge of topic, vocabulary, and text structure that is helpful or necessary to understand a text. Building background
activities provide listener with new background knowledge before they listen. It may come from experience or from listening. It is sometimes called schema. Listeners who activate background knowledge are linking what they already know to what they are currently listening. Instruction in activating background knowledge and building background knowledge usually takes place before listening. Good listeners use their background knowledge to make sense of what they are listening. When they do this, they are more likely to remain engaged, understand the relative importance of information, and understand new information. Less successful listeners can improve their understanding by learning to make use of their prior knowledge. Building background knowledge is helpful or necessary for listeners who do not have sufficient prior knowledge to develop a schema for comprehension. Linking background knowledge to new knowledge is necessary to comprehend completely. In addition to using inferences, analogy could be used to help listener tie unfamiliar materials to familiar information in their memory.

Schema is related to the topic familiarity or on the content background knowledge. Schema theory explains how listeners use prior knowledge and access to information from which to understand the topic. A schema is a knowledge frame stored in the learner's mind, there are stored in the brain, inference and test of listening materials to understand. Listening is a vital component of the English language teaching and learning and provides the base for the growth of reading, writing, and speaking abilities. In view of the current status of the English listening classes, it is necessary to reform the inefficient teaching methods and research and to explore a scientific and efficient mode of English listening instruction. Before, listening was believed to be a passive one-way comprehensive process. However, with the development of language teaching, listening comprehension is found to be an interactive process of two-way communication, during which listeners’ background knowledge play an important role. Schema theory lays theoretical foundation for this explanation. It claims that listening comprehension is an interactive process between listeners’ linguistic knowledge, background knowledge and the incoming information. Whether listeners can understand new information depends to a large degree on how much background knowledge they have activated. Therefore, the schema theory is significant in guiding instruction of English listening, and indicates the impact of background knowledge on listening comprehension.

2.2. Related studies

Teaching some new vocabulary as pre-listening, supports the learners with unfamiliar vocabularies instruction that will be covered in the listening task. Bonk (2000) implies that good listening comprehension is associated with higher text lexis familiarity. Besides as bottom-up processing model, learners interpret the listening discourse from correct interpretation of low level information such as vocabulary. In addition to the effect of background knowledge prior to listening test, Widdowson (1983) has stated that vocabulary provision can balance for the lack of linguistic knowledge.

Lack of vocabulary knowledge can be considered one of the most important difficulties in listening comprehension. Lexicon grammatical knowledge is considered to allow second language learners to derive literal meaning of the message which facilitates listening (Mecartty, 2000). Some authors believe that lack of vocabulary is one of the primary causes which make worse listening difficulties (Goh, 2000; Rost, 1990). Osada (2004) investigated low proficient learners to see whether they preferred using bottom-up procedure or top-down procedure. The result of the study showed that EFL low proficient learners rely on bottom-up processing. Linguistics Threshold Hypothesis implies the importance of second language ability, and among them, vocabulary is one of the factors that is most frequently discussed. Bonk(2000) examine the interaction between learners’ lexical knowledge and their listening comprehension by giving them both first language recall test(as comprehension check) and dictation test(as measurement of vocabulary familiarity). Result showed that complete compre-
hension is significantly correlated with higher vocabulary familiarity.

Another role of vocabulary pre-teaching is that learners be aware of their learning weakness. Unfamiliarity with new vocabulary in the listening process restricts the comprehension. Sun (2002) check the Taiwanese college students’ difficulties in listening. Students mentioned they usually distracted when hearing unfamiliar words and it had negative effects on their listening comprehension. Chung and Huang (1998) examined the effects of three kinds of pre-listening,(1)main characters (2)vocabulary (3) combination of two, on a hundred and sixty EFL low intermediate Taiwanese students' listening comprehension, and results showed that performance of vocabulary group was better than other group.

Farrokhi (2012) indicated that between two activities “content related support” and “glossary of unknown vocabulary items” the second one, unknown vocabulary, enhanced learner’s listening performance. Jafari and Hashim (2012) studied the effects of using two kinds of pre-listening activities “key sentences and key vocabulary” and the results showed that the students who received one of these activities demonstrated significant improvement on the listening comprehension. Although participants’ listening level had a significant effect on listening comprehension; there was no interaction effect between the use of two kinds of activities and the listening proficiency level.

Berne (1995) compared the relative effectiveness of two different kinds of pre-listening activity(1) Preview of Questions, and(2) Studying new Vocabulary, which consisted of studying a list of ten key words from the passage and their equivalents ,the results showed that only subjects of group (1),Preview of Questions received significantly higher scores than a control group. She concluded that new vocabulary did not facilitate listening comprehension. In short some past studies held positive views toward this kind of pre-listening support and some did not agree on the effectiveness of vocabulary pre-instruction listening support on helping learners’ listening comprehension.

2.3. Research questions

This study was an attempt to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. Does preview of Questions as pre-listening activity leads to the improvement of learners’ proficiency in listening comprehension?
2. Does studying unfamiliar vocabularies as pre-listening activity leads to the improvement of learners’ proficiency in listening comprehension?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Sixty EFL students, 30 males and 30 females, participated in this study. They come from four pre-intermediate classes. They are chosen from one hundred students by using an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The participants ranged from 13 to 17 years old in age. They were divided randomly into three groups, two groups received pre-listening activities, (preview of questions, vocabulary pre-instruction) and the other group with no pre-listening activity was control group. They have been learning English for 3 years on average, and the scores of three last terms of participants, also indicated that there was no significant difference among their language proficiency.

3.2 Instruments
The materials and instruments used in this study included listening passages, new vocabulary flashcards, and listening comprehension tests. They are specified as follow:

Listening passages were excerpted from the Tactics for Listening (2005) by Jack C. Richards, much similar to Interchange series, because Interchange series have been used more by Iranian teachers and students, and in Iran they have established the fame as an effective EFL learning material. The passages were selected in a way that bear higher degree of unfamiliarity compared to Iranian culture, and assume that participants had little background knowledge toward their topic. The difficulty level (medium) was acceptable to the level of students’ English proficiency, so for use. For choosing new vocabulary as pre-instruction was tried to select the words that are most unfamiliar with students’ background studies (the text book covered during 3 years of learning English), and students’ culture, and the main goal was to enforce participants’ memorization of new learned words, not to add further difficulty. Also, during this practice stage, the researcher would provide necessary help to participants. The list of new vocabularies was composed of eight words that at least six were unfamiliar for any student, and assumed that participants had a little background knowledge toward them. These target words include verbs, nouns (both concrete and abstract nouns), and adjectives. In total 4 nouns, 2 verbs and 2 adjectives appeared in the listening passages. As to presentation of new words, they were presented with flashcards. The flashcards were made with A6-size thick paper, on one side was the word in second language, and in other side was its' translation in first language. The twelve post-test listening comprehension tests were composed to evaluate students’ understanding of listening passages.

3.3 Procedures

The experiments in this study were conducted in class periods (15 minutes per class) in three consecutive classes. Before the treatment the instructor (the researcher) informed participants of the academic nature and purpose of the study and ensured them that the listening scores would not be included in their regular grade calculation. For the review of questions class, the instructor first presented the list of questions and give 8 minutes to study completely and be familiar with the topics that will be listened afterward, without offering participants any hints or answers to participants’ questions, then they listened to the listening passages twice without interruption or help from the instructor for 5 minutes, then answered and check the questions in 2 minutes. For the studying new vocabularies class, the research procedure was basically the same, except for pre-listening stage. The instructor first gave instruction on words by using flashcards. On one side of flashcard is the word in second language and on the other side is its translation. The participants were asked to guess the meaning and then check it on the other side of flashcard, then the instructor taught participants word pronunciation and asked for their choral repetition first and individual repetition later on. This presentation stage took up 8 minutes (one minute for any word in average), then participants listened to the listening passages twice and did the comprehension test. For control class, same procedure as the above mentioned was repeated, except that participants have pre-listening stage, and just listened to listening comprehension test and answer without any teacher’s instruction.

4. Results and Discussion

Detailed data in Table 4.1 shows that, review of the questions group, achieving the mean score of 9.65 and the standard deviation value of 1.872, had the best performance on the post-listening comprehension tests. Studying the new vocabularies group came the second, having a mean score of 6.85 and a slightly wider standard deviation value of 1.663. Control group with the mean of 6.05 and the widest standard deviation of 1.701 took the last place.
Table 4.1 shows the descriptive statistics about the dispersion of the scores in each group both in pretesting and on post-tests. It shows mean, standard deviation, minimum score, maximum score and skewness values. The skewness values for all the six sets of scores are below 1, which is in itself one index of normality. Furthermore, if we divide each one of the skewness statistics by their standard error value (i.e. .512 for all the six sets), none of them exceeds the value of 2, which is another index of normality (Bachman, 2004). Therefore, we can say that the dispersion in all the six sets of scores is similar to a normal distribution.

The pre-testing mean values for the three experimental groups are very similar (5.85, 6.00, and 5.80). The post-test mean values for each group is larger than the respective pretest. But the Post-test mean for Group 1 (i.e. those who were provided with the listening comprehension questions) is noticeably higher than the other two mean differences. In order to further investigate the significance of mean differences between the three groups, two separate analyses of variances (one-way ANOVA) were conducted: one for the pretests and one for the post-tests. Both the pretest and the post-test scores were tested for homogeneity of variances which is a required test for an ANOVA.

Table 4.2 Tests of homogeneity of variances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene Statistic</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>df2</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>1.108</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-test</td>
<td>.406</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>.668</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the Levene's statistic for both pretest and post-test sets of scores are larger than 95 percent significance level (α<.05), it is concluded that the obtained differences in sample variances are most probably based on random sampling from a population with equal variances. And therefore, the homogeneity of variances condition for ANOVA is met (Table 4.2).

Table 4.3 ANOVA results for the three sets of pretest scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.217</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>.942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>205.750</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3.610</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206.183</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 indicates that the F-value for the analysis of variance between the three sets of pretest scores is not significant at α<.05 significance level. This means that the three sets of pretest scores have no statistically meaningful difference. In other words, this can be taken to mean that the three groups of participants were most probably at an equal level of ability, with regard to their listening comprehension skills, at the start of the experiment.
Table 4.4 presents the results of the ANOVA conducted on the three sets of post-test scores. The very high significance of the F-value is clear evidence that the observed mean difference between the post-test results is statistically significant. However, it has to be noted that the significance of the F ratio in an analysis of variance merely indicates that there is a significant difference among the means of the compared groups as a whole, that is, it indicates that there is at least one significant difference between the means of at least one pair of the groups compared (Brown, 1987). There is clear significant mean difference between the Group 1 post test scores with the other two groups. But the means of Group 2 and Group 3 are not significantly different from one another. This means that the group that received the vocabulary pre-listening instruction (Group 2) did not eventually outperform the group that received no pre-listening instruction at all (Group 3). However, the students who were presented the listening comprehension questions as part of their pre-listening instruction could eventually outperform both the other groups. This means that, for this particular study, the vocabulary instruction as a pre-listening activity did not seem to be effective in listening comprehension scores. Conversely, studying the questions as pre-listening activity seemed to result in significant gains in students’ listening comprehension scores. In fact, studying questions as pre-listening instruction seemed to result in significant gains in students’ listening comprehension scores.

5. Conclusion

Results showed that preview of questions group had significantly better performance than studying new vocabularies and control group on listening comprehension test. Studying the unfamiliar vocabularies group compared to control group did not get so much better scores in listening comprehension, and there was no significant difference between studying new vocabularies group and control group. Whether they preferred using bottom-up procedure or top-down procedure, the results of the study showed that preview of questions helps them to have a better comprehension, and indicated that the preview of questions group get better scores than studying unfamiliar vocabularies, in fact learners tended to rely on top-down processing, it means using the preview of questions as pre-listening activity is more effective than studying unfamiliar vocabularies, and it improves listening comprehension, but some last studies showed that less skilled learners used word-by-word method of translating a text paying little attention to connection of ideas between the text segments, and that learners acted mainly on bottom-up procedure.

Despite the fact that lack of vocabulary knowledge seems to cause the most worry for EFL learners, there are few studies regarding the effect of vocabulary preparation on listening comprehension (Chang & Read, 2008). Looking at the other works done in examining the effects of prior information on listening comprehension, we see somewhat different results. While the findings of the studies highlighted the role of prior information in listening tasks, there are other studies whose findings delimit the effectiveness of such information. Additionally, the findings of this study are sharp contrast with those who concluded that prior knowledge does not support effectively high proficient learners’ listening comprehension.

Farrokhi (2012) indicated that between two activities “content related support” and “glossary of unfamiliar vocabulary terms” just the second one, unfamiliar vocabulary, enhanced learner’s listening comprehension on elementary level and content related support had no effect on listening comprehension, and it contrasts with findings of this study. Also findings
of this study are in contrast with Jafari and Hashim (2012), and supported Berne’s findings (1995). In conclusion, the findings of this study indicated that reviewing the questions as a pre-listening activity that build background knowledge had a significant effect on listening comprehension.

References


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