Visuals and their Effect in Listening Comprehension

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Abstract: This paper provides an overview of listening comprehension and types of visuals which can be used in listening comprehension. It also talks about the effects of different visuals on the result of ESL (English as a Second Language) students in listening comprehension by reviewing previous studies.

Index Terms: listening comprehension, ESL.
Introduction
Among the four language skills listening comprehension is the most difficult to investigate, therefore the least understood in second language research (Vandergrift 2010). Listening involves not only linguistic but also non-linguistic complex process at different levels. listening comprehension is currently considered the most prominent aspect of language teaching, as it is believed to facilitate the other language skills such as speaking, reading and writing (Vandergrift 2011). Correspondingly, Vandergrift emphasizes that if the learners of English as second language want to improve the productive skills- speaking and writing, they have to understand the language input from receptive skills- reading and listening (2011). Currently the major function of language i.e. To use language in social context is being emphasized. In other words the focus has shifted from content to skill development and from teacher-centred to learner-centred. Therefore listening is no longer a passive skill. However it is considered to be an interactive skill where the interlocutor is equally responsible for the message comprehensibility (Branden 2000, Hoven 1999).

Definition of listening
Listening has always been an area of research and the term listening Comprehension has remained an area of interest for many scholars and researchers in the field of language teaching and learning. Many scholars have tried to define the term ‘listening comprehension’ as per their expertise. Chastain (1971) defined listening comprehension by emphasizing ability to understand and comprehend the speech by native speaker and that even at normal speed in particular situation. On the other hand Saricoban (1999) goes further and includes understanding speaker’s accent or pronunciation their grammar and vocabulary and the meaning conveyed. However, according to Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor (1984) listening is a complex activity which not only looks at simple linguistic elements or knowledge of language but also it takes into account non-linguistic elements and knowledge of language used in real context of communication. Byrnes (1984) supports the view of Dirven and Oakeshott-Taylor (1984) that listening is really a complex skill and people need to use all types of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge to derive the meaning including comprehension of words phrases, clauses, sentences and connected discourses.

As far as the term listening comprehension is concerned there is no ‘The’ definition as all vary to some extent. So it can be said that listeners do not confine themselves to use a particular way of understanding oral text rather they employ almost all knowledge to understand the oral text.

Significance of listening
Listening is the first language skill and comes before speaking, reading and writing. Rankin (1926) investigated how frequently the listening skill is used by ordinary adults in their routine verbal communication and he found out that 42.10% of time they spend in listening; 31.09% in speaking; 15% in reading and 11% in writing. Bird (1953) found that female college students spent 42% time of their total verbal communication in listening while 25% in speaking; 15% in reading and 18% in writing. A study conducted by Barker, Edwards, Gaines, Gladney, and Holley (1980) supported Bird’s view and showed that college students spent 52.5% of their time in listening, 17.3% in reading, 16.3 in speaking and 13.9 in writing. On the other hand, according to Gilbert (1988), students from Kindergarten were expected to listen 65-90% of their time.

A historical overview of listening comprehension
Listening is one of the most important skills to acquire any language in the world. The importance of listening cannot be ignored but till 1960s, in the field of language teaching the concept of listening was not focused on. Before the Second World War it was a tradition to focus only on reading skill and not on listening, if wanted to acquire
second language. And hence listening became the least understood aspect in foreign language learning (Winitz, 1981). And even the emergence of Audio Lingual method created a wall in a way of development of listening skill. But, since the development of communicative competence in language teaching and learning has been given importance, the significance of role of listening in the second language acquisition has been understood (Joiner, 1984; Ellis, Tanaka & Yamazaki, 1994).

Technological advances in global communication have made listening a key skill when there is a growing awareness of importance of listening in the world. A variety of comprehension-based methodologies have been proposed and wide range of books, articles and materials are available to assist teachers to develop listening skills of learners (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Underwood, 1989). As the number of studies indicating the listening skill can be taught, increased remarkable changes have taken place in listening instruction over the last five decades. There has been significant change from non-teaching in the Audio-Lingual period to haphazard use of text followed by comprehension questions and to a strategy based approach (Mendelsohn, 1998). After a long period considering listening and reading alike, listening is considered as an individual skill with its approaches in its own rights (Brown, 1990). So with changes in the listening skills it is now considered as a complex and active skill involving several processes (Richards, 1983). So it can be said that listening skill has taken a long journey and a struggling journey as an ignored skill to an essential skill for language learning.

So in foreign language instruction, teaching listening has become an essential part that cannot be ignored (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Morley, 1991). In one of his researches Feyten (1991) showed that 70 percent of average adult’s working day is spent on verbal communication, with 45 percent of that spent on listening acts. In addition to that he says listening skill was a good predictor of language achievement and most frequently used mode of human communication. Dunkel (1993) emphasizes on the importance of listening skill, development of communicative competence and oral fluency.

Many other scholars (Dunkel, 1991; Rost, 1990; Vogely, 1999) insist that acquisition of listening skill should be given an assistance of rich input as a part of language material. One of the most considerable reasons why listening should me emphasized in the classroom and in the process of language acquisition is its frequent use as basic medium of communication as compared to other language skills. It was considered that listening is not only important for learning second language but also it is remarkably important to facilitate the acquisition of other language skills (Vandergrift, 1999). That is why almost all of the scholars advocate the importance of listening in language acquisition and its practice in classroom for teaching and learning.

As the previous researches and studies show the importance of listening in language learning and teaching, the importance of the listening cannot be underestimated (Morley, 1991). Listening is such an important skill that leads teachers to practice and introduce it in the classroom innovatively to help learner in learning second language (Thompson, 1996).

Different views on listening comprehension
Among the four language skills listening is the key language skill that is significant for the language acquisition process. As far as the listening is concern, sound is not only means of communication in spoken interaction but it is accompanied by visual factors as well. Therefore, as stated by Buck (2001, p.253 as cited in Ruslan, 2008), “the common practice of playing a disembodied recording from an audio-player does not create a very realistic listening situation”. The existing definitions of listening comprehensions vary from each other to some extent. Lado (1961, p.206) defines listening comprehensions in earlier definitions as, “recognition control of the signaling elements of the language in commu-
nication situations”. Whereas later definitions deal with the types of stimuli or information exchanged between the speaker and listener. For instance, Coakley and Wolvin (1986, p.20) claim listening as “a complex communication behaviours, involving a process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to verbal and/or nonverbal stimuli”, here as Rubin (1995, p.151) states that listening comprehension “consists of processing information which listeners gets from visual and auditory clues in order to define what is going on and what the speakers are trying to express”.

Therefore it can be said that listening is a multitasking process that involves not only auditory aspect but also visual and attention processors. However in listening comprehension the information or data can be divided in two parts: the original message sent to the listener and the message understood by the listener (Chung, 1994).

The message received by listener comprises three types of information namely, first oral covering words and sentences, second paralinguistic aspects covering extra speech sounds and third visuals.

Apart from all these aspects there are many other linguistic elements that affect listening comprehension like pace, schemata, tone, intonation, body language and gestures, accent and pronunciation and they all help in the process of verbal communication. (Gruba, 1997; Ockey, 2007).

Types of visuals and their effects
The previous researches support the idea that visuals help the listener to understand the speech, the message effectively. And visuals are also being used by almost all the language teachers to teach language. On the other hand visuals always do not have positive and desired effect, sometimes they fail somewhere and play distracting role. Bejar et al. (2000) and Ginther (2002) identifies two types of visuals - context visuals and content visuals. Context visuals are those that help to know about the verbal exchanges wherein one can get information about participants, the settings and the text type conveyed. Content visuals are visuals that convey content of the verbal exchange and it may include images, photographs, sketches, graphs, charts etc. For instance, if a teacher is talking about village life in the classroom using the picture of village settings, is an example of content visual.

These visuals may have positive as well as adverse effect if the language learner can interpret and understand the meaning then it can be said that the visual facilitate the learning. But if the visual distracts the learner or the information is overloaded then it plays an adverse role in language learning (Chung, 1994).

Multimedia language learning
Today in the era of technology the teacher cannot confine himself by using only chalk and talk method, it becomes very easy to explain difficult concept with the use of multimedia like, text, pictures, graphs, sounds, videos etc. The term multimedia stands for “the combination of two or more media such as text, image and sound” (Chung, 1994: 1). When the new matter is presented to the students with the use of sound, pictures, videos etc., it is known as multimedia learning (Mayers, 1997).
A model proposed by Salomon (1989), explains textual and visual media that involves five types of variables namely stimulus variable, cognitive variable, personal variable, task variables and accomplish psychological functions. Integration of all these may help in the process of learning listening.

Another theory referring to multimedia language learning was given by Mayer (1997), he tags this theory as generative theory of multimedia learning which was based on two different theories, ‘generative theory’ by Wittrock (1974) and Paivio’s (1986) ‘the dual coding theory’ respectively. The most important aspects of these theories were integration of visual and verbal data to comprehend text. Mayer (1997:4, as cited in Ruslan, 2008) tries to shed light on this theory in the following way:

“In a generative theory of multimedia learning, the learner is viewed as a knowledge constructor who actively selects and connects pieces of visual and verbal knowledge. The basic theme of generative theory of multimedia learning is that the design of multimedia instruction affects the degree to which learners engage in the cognitive process required for meaningful learning within the visual and verbal information processing systems”.

The present figure represents main three processes involved in multimedia learning. It starts from selecting words and images from the input, organizing them into visual and verbal mental representation, and integrating them. To emphasize on that Mayer (1997) says that representation of data with visuals helps to lead the information to the long term memory rather than the short term memory, “the process of selecting, organizing, and integrating are more likely to occur when visual and verbal information is presented contiguously rather than separately” (Mayer, 1997, p.11).

Research on the use of visuals in second language listening comprehension

Many scholars agree that listening comprehension is a product of not only verbal input but also non-verbal aspects, as per the fact that real life listening comprehension involves words with visuals (Baltova, 1994; Progosh, 1996; Wagner, 2007). So they point out that use of visuals with the speech can support listeners to comprehend the meaning in second language listening.

Some of the major points that indicate the advantages of visual input for second language listening are as follows:

- Visuals of situation and people provide the situational and interactional authenticity (Buck, 2001; Wagner, 2007).
- Paralinguistic aspects like gestures, body language, facial expressions support the understanding of the listener (Buck, 2001; Coniam, 2001; Ockey, 2007).
- Visual input provides the better understanding of context and situation (Rubin, 1995).
• Visuals also help to activate listener’s background knowledge (Ockey, 2007).

There are number of factors that can affect result of visuals in listening comprehension like, tasks, types of material and visual, learners, level of learners, difficulty level of tasks, and interaction of these factors (Ginther, 2002).

There are number of researches that have been done to measure the effectiveness of visuals or the role of visuals in listening and found that visual support is related to context, paralinguistic aspects and cultural aspects (Coniam, 2001).

This significant support of visual is very important in communicative approach in language learning. The visuals provide the learning experiences which are similar to the real life experiences (Secules, Herron and Tomasello, 1992). Discussing the benefits of video in listening, Gruba (2006, p. 79 as cited in Suvorov, 2008) asserts that “visual media may foster macrostructure development by illustrating abstract concepts in a concrete way” and “assisting in the construction of mental models”. Rubin (1995, p.151) argues that “appropriately selected video can be... the most facilitative environment for listening, especially at the elementary language learning stages”.

The researches on the use of visuals in L2 listening comprehension have emerged over the past years however the results of these studies show the inconclusive result. Some of the studies reveal that visuals play facilitative role on the less proficient learners especially when they come across difficult texts (Mueller, 1980; Rubin, 1995). On the other hand, some studies reveal that visuals have little, if any, facilitative effect on the listening comprehension (Lynch, 1998).

There are number of studies that have been conducted to investigate the role of visuals on second language learners of French during the last decade (Jones, 2002, 2003; Chung, 1994). Some studies suggest that the use of visuals with audio format is very effective and it is proved effective in developing listening comprehension (Baltova, 1995; Chung, 1994). The use of images also supports the listening comprehension (Baltova, 1995; Chung, 1995) but the use of multiple images could distract the language learners (Chung, 1994).

Brett (1997), emphasizing on the multimedia language learning, found that computer based multimedia environment resulted in more effective in development of listening comprehension skills and improves task taker’s performance in language recall tasks. According to Jones’s (2002) study that investigated the influences of visual and verbal annotations on listening comprehension of second language students of French, students with access to both visual and verbal annotations performed better while the students with no annotations available showed lowest results on understanding the passage and learning vocabulary. Jones’s study (2002) was supported with the interviews with task takers conducted by Jones (2003) and reveal that, “qualitative evidence for a generative theory of multimedia learning that suggests that the availability and the choice of visual and verbal annotations in listening comprehension activities enhance students’ abilities to comprehend the material presented and to acquire vocabulary ” (Jones, 2003 p. 41).

To summarize, some of the studies reveal that visuals play facilitative role whereas some distracting, so result is inconclusive. So most of the L2 listening researchers call for more studies to understand the role of visuals in listening comprehension.

**Research on the use of visuals in Second language listening tests**

There are several studies available on investigating the use of visuals in listening tests (e.g. Coniam; Ginther, 2002; Ockey, 2007) but there are less number of researches comparing the effect of visuals on the task taker’s performance specifically in
two types of tests, audio only and audio with visuals. Therefore considering the situation researchers call for more comparative studies on audio only and audio with visual to find out the effect of visuals on task takers’ performance in listening tests (Buck, 2001). Buck (2001, pp. 253-254 as cited in Suvorov) also identifies the things to be taken care while designing the listening tests:

...when testing language ability, the emphasis needs to be on processing linguistic information, not visual information. Furthermore, it seems sensible to bear in mind that adding visual information is probably only worthwhile if it provides us with better assessment of the listening construct. In some cases the visual information may serve to increase the cognitive load of the test-taker, and that may interfere with the testing process.

Some of the researchers thought that all the listening tests will be computer based tests as they include some sort of visuals aid (Ockey, 2007). One comparative study conducted by Coniam (1999) to find out if there was any major difference between two modes of tests, pen and paper tests and computer based tests, very surprisingly he found that computer based tests found less reliable as task takers respond to them less favorably.

Emphasizing the use of visuals in computer based listening tests Ockey (2007) argues that listening test should have some sort of visual as major target language use in real world have some sort of visuals and it becomes quite difficult for task takers to stare at the screen and answer the questions. Gruba (1997) point outs four reasons for using video in listening tests, first, as we always have visuals with words in real life situation, using visual in listening tests is theory driven and it follows the models of listening comprehension. Second, the use of video in listening assessment is pedagogy related since language instructors always incorporate visual aids in their teaching for a number of pedagogical reasons. Third, the visuals should be used in the listening tests because it contains meaning in the form of settings and situations. Finally, the fourth reason for using video media in the listening assessment is justified by their existing use in distance learning programs.

There can be five modes of listening tests - audio only format, context images, context video, content images and content video. The outcome in the form of responses always depends on the type of input, it depends on the input that how task takers take sound with visual, and therefore result differs from each other’s.

The results of the existing studies on measuring the effectiveness of visuals in listening tests provide inconclusive result; some studies suggest that visual plays facilitative role and it helps task takers to improve the scores (e.g. Ginther). Where as some studies reveal contradictory result that visuals play no facilitative role on the task takers performance (e.g. Coniam, 2001; Ockey, 2007).

One of the research scholars Gruba (1993) conducted his study using the academic lectures on 91 advanced level ESL students and compared students’ responses on two modes of presentation, audio only and audio with visual format. The study did not reveal and statistically significant difference between two types of tasks audio only and audio with visuals. Another significant comparative study on two modes of listening, audio only and audio with visual, covering open ended short questions by Coniam (2001), reveals that task takers with audio only format performed well. There were 104 Hong Kong English language teachers as subjects of the study however the difference was not statistically significant. On the basis of his comparative study Ockey (2007) identifies five visual clues: lip movement, gestures, hand movement, facial gestures and body gestures. He discovered that visual clues facilitate some task takers but distracting to others.

Conclusion
After having referred to the previous studies, no specific result was found on the role of visuals in listening tests. There is a need for further research on the role of visuals on task takers performance.
References


