The Effects of (Form-Filling, Matching, and Sequencing) Tasks on Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension (A Study in Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of task type instruction on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. To accomplish the purpose of the task the researcher used three different tasks: form-filling, matching, and sequencing. Participants in this study were consisted of 60students studying English as a foreign language in Sadr Institute at intermediate level in Kangavar, Iran .A quasi-experimental design was utilized for the present study. To assure the criterion of homogeneity, an Oxford Placement test was conducted at the beginning of the study. Sixty students were selected out of 150 learners. Then four groups were randomly selected as the control group and the experimental groups of the study. A test from the Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test Package was administered as the pretest of listening comprehension. After that, the experimental groups received task-based instruction while the control group received traditional way of teaching listening comprehension (question and answer model).Treatment lasted 20 sessions –a semester. Finally task based assessment (direct performance-referenced test) was administered to all groups as the post-test of the study. The results of the pretest and posttest in data analysis through statistical procedure such as One Way ANNOVA confirmed the superiority of the experimental groups to the control group.

I. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension traditionally has drawn the least attention of the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in terms of both the amount of research conducted on the topic and its place in language teaching methodology (Morley, 1990; Rivers, 1981). This neglect may have stemmed from the fact that listening is considered a passive skill, and from the belief that merely exposing the student to the spoken language is sufficient for listening comprehension. When audiolingualism was the prevailing approach in foreign language teaching, it was assumed that students' listening skill would be enhanced automatically as a result of their repetition of dialogues and pattern drills. This approach more or less has also been prevalent in Iran. In fact, little effort has been expended on the part of English teachers to enhance students' listening comprehension ability per se.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Importance of Tasks*

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the central unit of planning and teaching in language teaching. Some of its advocates (e.g., Willis, 1996) present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching since it draws on several principles that formed part of communicative language teaching from 1980s (Richard & Rodgers, 1986, p. 223).

In fact, CLT is not a monolithic and uniform approach (Ellis, 2003, p. 28). Howatt (1984) distinguishes a 'weak' and a 'strong' version'. A weak version of CLT drew on assumption that the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught. In this respect, a weak version of CLT does not involve a basic departure from earlier methods. Thus, instead of teaching learners the structural properties of language, a weak version of CLT proposes they be taught how to realize the notions of language such as 'time' and 'possibility', and functions such as 'inviting' and 'apologizing' (Ellis, 2003, p. 28).

In contrast, a strong version of CLT claims that 'language is acquired via communication' (Howatt, 1984, p. 279). That is, learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication but rather actually discover this system while they participate in communicative activities. The strong version of CLT provides opportunity for learners to experience how to use language in communication. The strong version is apparent in

Krashen and Terrell's (1983) natural approach and also in proposals for teaching centered on the use of tasks (Candlin, 1987).

(1) Definition of Task

Here is some definition of task which the outcome of a task is important in these definitions: Task is an activity in which the target language is used by the learners for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996). In other words, it is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed (Ellis,2003, p. 5).

(2) Dimensions of Tasks

The definitions of tasks address a number of dimensions of tasks, like: *a) Scope: Should* the term 'task' be restricted to activities where the learners' attention is primarily focused on message conveyance or should it include any kind of language activity including those designed to get learners to display their knowledge of what is correct usage? Breen (1989) incorporates any kind of language activity, including 'exercises'. His definition seems synonymous with the term 'activity'. *b) Perspective*: It refers to whether a task is seen from the task designer's or the participants' point of view. Learners change the task to suit their own purposes. The task can be a task as a work plan and a task as a process. *c) Authenticity: It* refers to whether a task needs to correspond to some real world activities or achieve situational authenticity. *d) Language skills*: What linguistic skills are involved in performing a task? Any skill can be focused. *e) Cognitive processes*: Tasks involve cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing, transforming information, deducing new information, and evaluating information. *f) Outcome*: It refers to what learners arrive at when they have completed the task. For instance, whether learners can tell a story based on pictures or not.

B. Criterial features for the task

Lee (2000) refers to a task as (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has; (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants,(b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing the interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavour

that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some work-plans.

Ellis (2003) assumes that there are some criterial features for the task that capture all the definition mentioned above. These are:

1. Task is a work-plan: A task includes a plan for learner activity.

2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.

3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.

4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.

5. A task engages cognitive processes.

6. A task has a clearly defined outcome.

A. Tasks for Listening Comprehension

As a general rule, exercises for listening comprehension are more effective if they are constructed around a task. The students should be "required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate their understanding" (Dunkel, 1986, p. 104; Ur, 1984, p. 25). Examples of listening tasks are answering questions appropriate to the learners' comprehension ability, taking notes, taking dictation, and expressing agreement or disagreement. However, Dunkel (1986) and Wing (1986) suggested that listening activities require the students to demonstrate listening skills.

There are different types of tasks that the students can perform without speaking, reading, or writing. One is a transferring exercise that involves "receiving information in one form and transferring the information or parts of it into another form" (Richards, 1983, p. 235), such as drawing a picture or a diagram corresponding to the information given (Dirven & Oakeshott-Taylor, 1985; Dunkel, 1986; Lund, 1990; Paulston & Bruder, 1976; Richards, 1983; Ur, 1984). Another kind of listening task is a matching exercise that involves selecting a response from alternatives, such as pictures and objects, which correspond with what has just been heard (Lund, 1990; Richards, 1983). Samples of this type of exercise are choosing a picture to match a situation and placing pictures in a sequence, which matches a story or set of events (Richards, 1983).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 60 students studying English as a foreign language in Sadr Institute at intermediate level in Kangavar, Iran. All participants were female, and differed in terms of age. They range from 15 to 18 years old. None of them had ever lived in a foreign country or traveled to an English speaking country. The classes were conducted in the afternoon twice a week and 60 minutes a session.

B. Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect the data in the present study: (1) An Oxford Placement Test (Online), (2) A test from Interchange and Passages Placement Test Package as a pre-test, and (3) task based assessment (direct performance-referenced test) as a post-test. Assessment tasks are viewed as devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning focused and direct towards some specific goal (Ellis, 2003, p. 279).It was extracted from different native sources including 'Tactics for listening'(Richards, 2003) and 'Tune in'(Richards, & O'Sullivan, 2007). It included matching, sequencing, and form-filling. Each test includes 20 items. The time allowed was 30 minutes. In order to ensure the reliability of the posttest, the researcher used coefficient Alpha. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was nearly 0.72 which indicated that the tests were reliable enough.

C. Procedures

In summary, the present study was a quantitative research and a quasi-experimental design, because the researcher selected intact classes randomly but he did not choose all the members randomly.

After selecting the whole population, the Oxford Placement Test was administered. Based on the result of this test, participants whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the population mean were selected as target subjects for the study, then the participants were divided into four groups and three groups were randomly assigned to different tasks while one of the groups was selected as a control group. Afterward, all participants were given the pre-test of listening comprehension. The test was extracted from Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test Package. The next phase of the experiment started with some treatment sessions that included three

different tasks to the experimental groups: Matching task to one group, sequencing task to another group, and form-filling task to the third group while the control group received traditional training, i.e., question and answer model (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 71). After the treatment sessions came to an end, a task based assessment(direct performance-referenced) test was given to the students in all the groups in order to see whether there is any significant difference among students' scores on the acquisition of task instruction before and after treatment or not (pretest and posttest). Finally, the results of both the pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

IV. RESULTS

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics encompassed the means, standard deviations, variance, etc. Inferential statistics comprised the application of a one-way ANOVA to test the null hypotheses at the. 05 level of significance.

A. Statement of the problem

The present study tried to answer the questions raised about the effects of task types on listening comprehension.

Q1: Does a 'matching task' have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Q2: Does a 'form-filling task' have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Q3: Does a 'sequencing task' have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

To reveal the purpose of this study, the researcher tried to find the confirmation or rejection of null hypotheses presented here:

HO1: The 'matching task' does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

HO2: The 'form-filling task' does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

HO3: The 'sequencing task' does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Table 1: Mean of language Proficiency Test (Oxford Placement Test)

Mean	N	S.D	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
35.2417	150	8.83	36.00	19.00	55.00	35.2417

All the data including mean, maximum score, minimum score, range, and so on were shown in Table 1. The mean of this test was 35. 24; the standard deviation was 8.83.

Table 2: Descriptive data for all groups in pre-test

Groups	N	M	S.D	Minimum	Maximum
matching	15	54.33	3.71	50.00	60.00
form-filling	15	53.66	5.16	45.00	65.00
sequencing	15	55.00	4.22	50.00	65.00
control	15	54.66	5.49	45.00	65.00
Total	60	54.41	4.61	45.00	65.00

Table 2 provides useful descriptive statistics of the pre-test results for all groups that the researcher compared including the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores.

Table 3: Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: pretest

Tukey HSD

(I) tasks	(J) tasks	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
matching	form-filling	.66667	1.71825	.980	-3.8831	5.2164
	sequencing	-.66667	1.71825	.980	-5.2164	3.8831
	control	-.33333	1.71825	.997	-4.8831	4.2164
form-filling	matching	-.66667	1.71825	.980	-5.2164	3.8831
	sequencing	-1.33333	1.71825	.865	-5.8831	3.2164
	control	-1.00000	1.71825	.937	-5.5497	3.5497
sequencing	matching	.66667	1.71825	.980	-3.8831	5.2164
	form-filling	1.33333	1.71825	.865	-3.2164	5.8831
	control	.33333	1.71825	.997	-4.2164	4.8831
control	matching	.33333	1.71825	.997	-4.2164	4.8831
	form-filling	1.00000	1.71825	.937	-3.5497	5.5497
	sequencing	-.33333	1.71825	.997	-4.8831	4.2164

B. Reporting the output of the one-way ANOVA in pre-test

There were no statistically significant differences among all the groups as determined by one-way ANOVA. A tukey post-hoc test revealed the mean differences among all the groups were not significant.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Post-test For all Tasks

Groups	N	M	S.D	Minimum	Maximum
matching	15	73.00	3.68	70.00	80.00
form-filling	15	74.00	5.07	65.00	85.00
sequencing	15	71.00	4.87	65.00	85.00
control	15	58.00	4.41	55.00	70.00
Total	60	69.33	7.67	55.00	85.00

Table 4 provides descriptive statistics for all groups in post-test that the researcher compared including the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores.

C. Testing the Null Hypothesis

Following the descriptive statistics of this study, discussed thoroughly above, the hypotheses were put to confirm or reject the relationship between the variables. In order to test the null hypotheses, some steps were taken: To see if task-based instruction had significant effects on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners, one way ANOVA was run on the posttest data.

Table 5: Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons

Dependent Variable: task

Tukey HSD

(I) task	(J) task	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
matching	form-filling	-1.00000	1.65951	.931	-5.3942	3.3942
	sequencing	1.33333	1.65951	.853	-3.0609	5.7275
	control	14.33333*	1.65951	.000	9.9391	18.7275
form-filling	matching	1.00000	1.65951	.931	-3.3942	5.3942
	sequencing	2.33333	1.65951	.501	-2.0609	6.7275
	control	15.33333*	1.65951	.000	10.9391	19.7275
sequencing	matching	-1.33333	1.65951	.853	-5.7275	3.0609
	form-filling	-2.33333	1.65951	.501	-6.7275	2.0609
	control	13.00000*	1.65951	.000	8.6058	17.3942
control	matching	-14.33333*	1.65951	.000	-18.7275	-9.9391
	form-filling	-15.33333*	1.65951	.000	-19.7275	-10.9391
	sequencing	-13.00000*	1.65951	.000	-17.3942	-8.6058

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

D. Reporting the output of the one-way ANOVA in post-test

A tukey post-hoc test revealed the mean differences among all the experimental groups comparing to the control group were significant. In other words, there were no significant differences among all the experimental groups. It shows that task based instruction had been effective in augmenting learners listening comprehension.

V. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of three different tasks on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 60 EFL learners studying English at Sadr institute in Kangavar. They were divided into three experimental groups and one control group. The research questions addressed in the present study were whether task-based teaching can lead Iranian EFL learners to a greater increase in L2 listening comprehension or not. To analyze the data obtained from this study the researcher utilized scores on listening comprehension tests and ran one-way ANOVA. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in listening comprehension due to the effect of task-based instruction. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that the participants who were taught based on task generally tended to score higher in listening comprehension**.**

Regarding to the first question i.e., "if the matching task has any effect on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, that the task was very effective for a few reasons:

1. The most important feature of this task was that it involved meaning-focused language use. Learners used all language resources to enable them to work together to match the listening text to the pictures or corresponding sentences and achieve a satisfactory outcome.

2. Another aspect of the task was that the outcome was closed, that is, at the end of the task the researcher encountered single outcome.

3. It doesn't need production on the part of the learners, in other words, this task is exclusively receptive.

Regarding to the second question i.e., "if form-filling task has any effect on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, that the task was as effective as the matching task. One of the aspects of this task is that it was accompanied by a

writing skill task to fill the forms, in other words, one could say that it is a kind of integrative task – both listening and writing task.

Regarding to the third question i.e., "if sequencing task has any effect on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, that the task was as effective as the other two tasks mentioned above. The researcher assumes that sequencing task is similar to matching task except that in this task students put the sentences or pictures in chronological order based on the audio they hear.

To sum up**,** implementing aural task-based materials in the language classroom exposed EFL students to real-language use from the beginning of language study. Generally speaking, according to the obtained results, the listening comprehension skill in EFL students tended to improve through exposure to task-based input. Specifically, the task types applied by the researcher not only affected the listening comprehension of the participants and improved it, but also the researcher assumes that these tasks correspond to all levels of language proficiency and they would be suitable for all participants.

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