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The Effect of Awareness-Raising of the Features of Real Speech on Iranian Pre-intermediate EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract – Teaching listening comprehension to EFL students has always been an important concern in language teaching. It is a field about which everyone seems to have an opinion. Some scholars in the field of ELT maintain that listening comprehension should be taught through the real conversation and its features in the classroom. Yet, some other scholars state that listening comprehension should be taught through standard and authentic listening materials. This is while some other L2 teachers and researchers assert that when there is a proper level of proficiency, features of real speech can facilitate the process of learning and comprehending. In other words, they argue that when students are proficient enough, listening comprehension should be taught to them through the channel of real speech features. In order to find out the effect of awareness-raising of real speech features on EFL student's listening comprehension, the researcher conducted an experiment. The purpose of the experiment was to find direct evidence to support one of the above-mentioned perspectives of teaching listening comprehension. In this research, 60 Army officers who took part in English conversation courses at Imam Ali Military University (Foreign Language Center) who were selected from Army Units participated in this study.

***Keywords*:** awareness-raising, real speech features, listening comprehension.

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of listening and its role in a successful communication is not hidden to anyone. Normally, communication is defined as a regular shift of roles in oral discourse between a speaker and a hearer. In other words, the listener has both a receptive and a productive role. In such settings, the listener's inability to grasp the information would lead to communication breakdown. There are also situations in which a radio or television program, a movie, or a lecture is the focus of listener's attention. In this case, the listener enjoys only a receptive role. No matter which situation the listener is in, he should comprehend the spoken message thoroughly.

Furthermore, many researchers have emphasized the role of listening in second/foreign language learning (Field, 1998; Nunan, 1997). Field (1998) believed that by practicing listening in language classes, new grammar is also presented. Lam (1997) punctuated the relationship between listening and speaking, and difficulties many learners encounter in learning. According to Nunan (1997), listening is "the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its older sister – speaking." (p.

238). Richards (2008) considers listening from two different perspectives: Listening as comprehension and listening as acquisition. The first one focused on main function of listening in second language learning in order to facilitate understanding of spoken discourse, but development of second language proficiency is significant for second view.

Olsen and Hucking (1995), for example, stated that most L2 learners with proper comprehension of English at the sentence level had difficulty identifying the main ideas in listening comprehension, mainly as a consequence of their inability to utilize discourse level cues that signaled the organization of the listening comprehension.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Listening

Listening is one of the most important language skills. Feyten (1991) maintains that more than 45% of communication is spent on listening. It is evident that children listen and respond to language before they learn to talk. There are many researchers who emphasize the importance of listening and the ways of teaching listening in the classroom (Bond, Moore & Gable, 1996; Nunan, 1998; Yekta, Jahandar & Khodabandelou, 2013). According to Bond, Moore and Gable (1996), listening has a great importance in a second language. They believe the ways that non-native listeners identified English word are much harder than native listeners. Nunan (1998) stated that listening is the basic skill in language learning. He also punctuated the relationship between listening and how it affects communication. Yekta, Jahandar, and Khodabandelou (2013) believe that the importance of listening is undervalued in language learning. There appears to be no universally accepted definition of the construct of native language listening. The problem of definition limits communication research in listening and lessens the chance of finding effective methods of training individuals to be effective listeners of their native language (Glenn, 1999). Wolvin (1998) also identifies another problem in theory building and research on NL listening comprehension: most research on listening is not based on theory; and the extant research is often contradictory.

B. Consciousness-Raising (Awareness-Raising)

Awareness is the capability to perceive, to feel, or to be conscious of events, objects or sensory patterns. At this level of consciousness, sense data can be proved by an observer, without essentially implying understanding. Broadly speaking, it is the state or quality of being aware of something. The term “language awareness” (LA) is used in discussions of second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language teaching (FLT). This term is very significant in language education. LA is a broader and more sociocultural concept which originally initiated with the British Language Awareness Movement in the 1980’s. In the U.K., it was found that students who had problems with learning English also had problems with learning a foreign language, and they found that teachers of English as a mother tongue and foreign language teachers should share their problems with each other and try to find common solutions. In 1982, the National Council for Language in Education

(NCLE) defined LA as "a person's sensitivity and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life," and set three parameters: a cognitive parameter, an affective parameter, and a social parameter to develop such sensitivity and awareness.

Real speech features. According to Fraser (1993), the following are the real speech features that are used by native speakers in authentic listening material:

1. Clarifying
2. Conceding
3. Explaining
4. Gap-filling
5. Repeating
6. Sequencing
7. Summarizing

Listening and real speech features. It may be beneficial if lecturers could make consistent use of real speech features in their lectures. It is however important that real speech features which commonly occur in conversational-style lectures are featured in EAP listening texts and not those more often associated with written texts, as listening problems can affect L2 students when they are habitually exposed to a model of speech that differs from authentic speech (Brown, 2008, as cited in Flowerdew and Tauroza, 1995, p.453). This would allow students to establish the structural framework of the text as well as to follow the coherent flow of the discourse. Real speech features are further considered to have a semantic-pragmatic function and to act as gap-fillers in a stream of discourse. They also provide more processing time to the students and thus greater opportunities for note- taking, allowing them to extract subject information from the lecture more effectively. An awareness of the role of real speech features in structuring academic discourse would equip listeners to become actively involved in listening and recalling information in test and examination situations. Khuwaleih (1999, p.256) has found that "chunking" or real speech features such as "Finally …" and "On the other hand …" was of great importance to students. Her study indicated that when taking notes, the students started another set of notes each time the lecturers used a chunk. "We found that chunks, phrases and body language play a crucial role on students' comprehension of academic lectures" (ibid, p.259).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of the study were 60 officers, 30 in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. The participants who took part in English conversation courses at Imam Ali Military University (Foreign Language Center) were selected from Army Units. They were pre-intermediate EFL learners. The English conversation course lasted six months that

met from Saturday through Wednesday (Holiday excluded) for 6 hours per day in the morning. The students were exempted from military duties during the scheduled hours of instruction. They were selected on the basis of their scores on a proficiency test (KET) being administrated at the beginning of the study to 75 officers and the selected participants were assigned randomly into the experimental and control groups by the language department. Their native language was Persian.

B. Instrumentation

The present study was conducted using some instruments in the language laboratory:

1. A standard proficiency test (KET) to homogenize the participants in terms of their English proficiency and standard listening tests (KET, Listening comprehension test, 25 questions) as a pretest and posttest. The reliability and validity of the tests were assured because the tests were the Standard tests.

2. For treatment sessions, BBC news and NPR news (National Public Radio) were used that they were involved different real situation conversations in dialogue and monologue forms of speech and they are authentic and reliable sources for this study.

C. Procedure

The study was conducted through the following stages: First, a standard proficiency test (KET) to homogenize the participants in terms of their English proficiency was administered. This Key English Test (KET) included two sub-tests: a reading-writing part and a listening part. From among 69 participants who took this test, 60 participants whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the participants of the experiment. Second, the participants were randomly assigned into two groups: one experimental and one control group, each including 30 participants. Next, a listening comprehension pretest was administered. For this purpose, two standard KET tests (listening section, 15 questions) were used. The allotted time for the participants to answer the KET tests was 70 minutes.

The next step of the experiment was the treatment stage that lasted for 8 weeks (2 months).The participants of the study received the treatment in one session a day. Each session took about 90 minutes. In each session, 10 minutes of the class was allotted to asking and answering about the features and expression of the previous listening task.

The participants in the control group were exposed to the same listening tasks during the sessions. They didn't receive discussion, or awareness – raising tasks about the features of spoken language which are the use of time-creating, facilitation, and compensations devices before, during, and after listening to the materials. But the difficult vocabularies or ideas were presented to them as a pre-listening activity. On the other hand, the experimental group received discussion, or awareness – raising tasks about the features of spoken language which are the use of time-creating, facilitation, and compensations devices before, during, and after listening to the materials. Every session, the researcher at the beginning of the class talked

about the different kinds of real conversation features and during the listening task he explained those features. At the end of class, he asked students to distinguish them in the listening task and discuss about those features.

The second proficiency test or the posttest (KET, Listening section, 15 questions) was given to the participants at the end of the course of instruction to compare the two groups' grades and to see the effect of awareness-raising of features of real speech on their listening comprehension.

IV. RESULTS

A. Testing Assumptions

Four assumptions should be met before one decides to run parametric tests (Field, 2009); (1) the data should be measured on an interval scale; (2) the subjects should be independent, that is to say, their performance on the test is not affected by the performance of other students, (3) the data should enjoy normal distribution and (4) the groups should have homogeneous variances (Field, 2009). The present data are measured on an interval scale and the subjects' perform independently on the tests. The assumption of normality is also met. As displayed in Table1, the values of skewness and kurtosis are within the ranges of +/- 2 (Bachman, 2005).

Table.1: Normality Tests

Group		N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Experimental	Pretest	30	.092	.427	-.798	.833
	Posttest	30	-.011	.427	-.151	.833
Control	Pretest	30	.074	.427	-.801	.833
	Posttest	30	.366	.427	-.155	.833

The assumption of homogeneity of variances will be discussed when reporting the results of the independent t-test although in case the group sizes are equal there is no need to test this assumption (Bachman, 2005).

B. Pretest of Listening Comprehension

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on pretest of reading comprehension in order to prove that the two groups enjoyed the same level of listening comprehension ability prior to the main study. As displayed in Table.2 the mean scores for experimental and control groups on pretest of listening comprehension are 30.43 and 29.73 respectively.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Pretest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

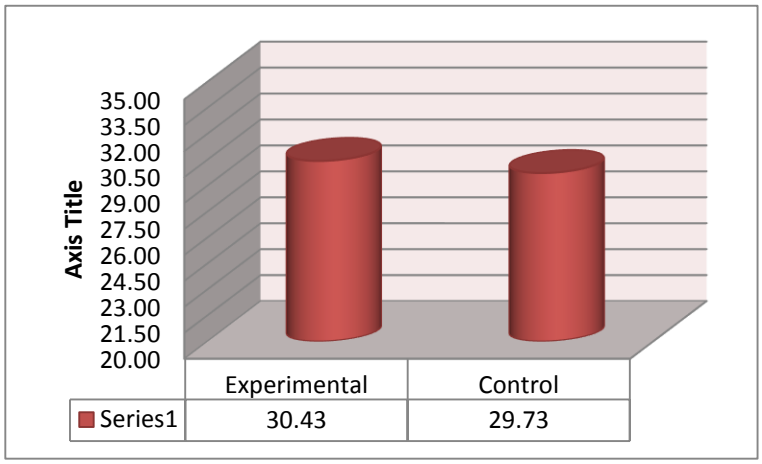
Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	30.433	4.4465	.8118
Control	30	29.733	3.9735	.7255

The results of the independent t-test (t (58) = .64, P = .52 > .05, R = .08 it represents a weak effect size) indicating that there was not any significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the pretest of listening comprehension. Thus it can be concluded that the two groups enjoyed the same level of listening comprehension ability prior to the main study.

Table.3: Independent t-test Pretest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.441	.509	.643	58	.523	.7000	1.0887	-1.4793	2.8793
Equal variances not assumed			.643	57.281	.523	.7000	1.0887	-1.4799	2.8799

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances is met (Levene's F = .441, P = .509 > .05). That is, why the first row of Table 3, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" is reported.



Graph 1: Pretest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

C. Research Question

Does awareness-raising of the features of real speech have any positive effect on the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension?

An independent t-test was run to compare the experimental and control groups' mean scores on posttest of listening comprehension in order to probe the effect of awareness-raising of the features of real speech on the improvement of the Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension ability. As displayed in Table 4 the mean scores for the experimental and control groups on posttest of listening comprehension are 32.70 and 30.30 respectively.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics Posttest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

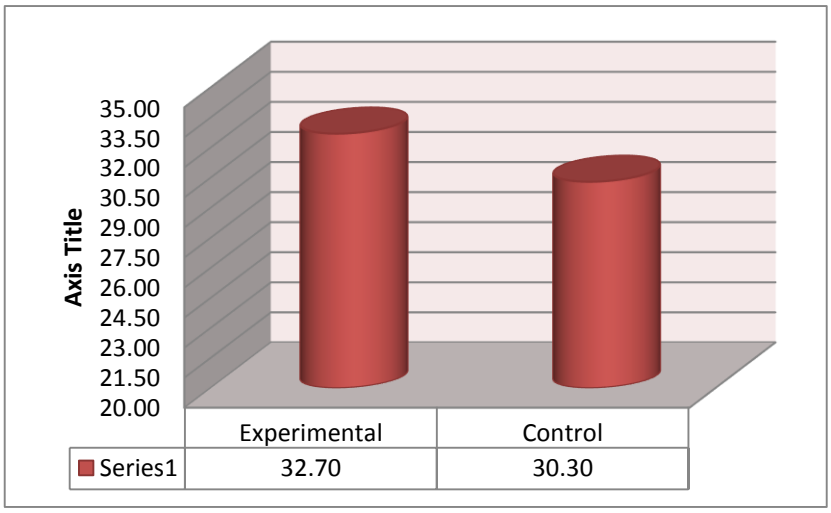
Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	32.700	3.7060	.6766
Control	30	30.300	4.0527	.7399

The results of the independent t-test (t (58) = 2.394, P = .02 < .05, R = .30 it represents a moderate effect size) indicate that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest of listening comprehension. Thus it can be concluded that the null-hypothesis as awareness-raising of the features of real speech does not have any significant effect on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL is rejected. The experimental group – after receiving awareness-raising of the features of real speech – outperformed the control group on the posttest of listening comprehension.

Table 5: Independent t-test Posttest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.293	.591	2.394	58	.020	2.4000	1.0026	.3930	4.4070
Equal variances not assumed			2.394	57.542	.020	2.4000	1.0026	.3927	4.4073

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances is met (Levene's F = .293, P = .591 > .05). That is why the first row of Table 5, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" is reported.



Graph 2: Posttest of Listening Comprehension by Groups

V. DISCUSSION

Teaching listening comprehension to EFL students has always been an important concern in language teaching. It is a field about which everyone seems to have an opinion. As mentioned in the previous chapters, some scholars in the field of ELT maintain that listening comprehension should be taught through the real conversation and its features in the classroom, some other scholars state that it should be taught through standard and authentic listening materials. This is, while some other L2 teachers and researchers assert that when there is a proper level of proficiency, features of real speech can facilitate the process of learning and comprehending. In other words, they argue that when students are proficient enough, listening comprehension should be taught to them through the channel of real speech features.

The current study examined the effect of awareness-raising of the features of real speech on listening comprehension. In this section, the results obtained from data analysis are discussed and presented in a way that addresses the null-hypothesis presented earlier.

With regard to the null-hypothesis, awareness-raising of the features of real speech doesn't have any effect on the L2 learners listening comprehension, it was rejected by the results of the study. In other words, the results confirmed what has been widely acknowledged as the positive effect of the features of real speech on listening comprehension. The difference between the two groups' performances in comprehension suggested a strong possibility that the students who received awareness-raising of the features of real speech before listening were more successful in comprehension rather than students who didn't have any awareness raising activities. Although the awareness-raising of features of real speech can't cause understanding of everything, they can be helpful in comprehension of whole text, which is the primary aim of listening teaching. All the details related to the results of pretest and posttest proved the effectiveness teaching the features of real conversation on listening comprehension since the mean difference of the two groups 2.4, it can be concluded that the

experimental group has made a significant progress compared to the control group, and then the null hypothesis for the research question is rejected.

These results are also in line with the of the study conducted by Eslami and Eslami-Rasekh (2007), who found that awareness-raising of features of real speech plays an important role in comprehending of lectures, in this study the two versions were different according to the quantity and type of real speech feature. Then, listening comprehension tests and their mean scores were compared and the findings clearly indicated that subjects comprehended the lecture better when real speech features were included than when they were omitted.

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