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An Investigation into the Effect of Authentic Materials on Iranian EFL Learners' English Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Listening comprehension means the process of understanding speech in a second or foreign language. It is the perception of information and stimuli received through the ears. Iranian EFL learners have serious difficulties in English listening comprehension because Iranian universities pay more attention to grammar and reading. The researcher used a set of authentic materials to improve Iranian learners' listening comprehension. The researcher examined the effect of authentic materials on Iranian learners' listening comprehension, their listening difficulties, and their listening strategies. The participants of this study were students majoring in English Language Translation Department at the Payame Nour University of Rudsar. Data were collected from survey. The results of this study indicated that authentic materials helped Iranian students improve their listening comprehension and listening strategies.

Keywords: listening comprehension, authentic materials, listening strategy, listening difficulty

1. Introduction

Listening has an important role in the process of learning and the development of speaking skills will spontaneously follow as long as enough input is provided, Therefore we should put more emphasis on listening rather than speaking as the main priority in the early stages of language learning (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). The most significant component of language learning is meaningful input, that is, listening to language that conveys a real message to the learners and all of the other elements can develop second language acquisition only when they provide comprehensible input to the learners (Krashen, 1985 as cited in Cook, 2000a).

According to Hamouda (2013) and Pourhosein Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), EFL learners have serious difficulties in listening comprehension because EFL teachers pay more attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary and listening and speaking skills are not considered as the important parts of many text books. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011), Iranian learners are very proficient in English grammar and reading rather than English listening and speaking. Due to the fact that Iranian learners live in an EFL environment, they don't need to communicate with each other in their daily life. Consequently, they do not have sufficient opportunities to acquire language input.

Iranian EFL learners have critical problems in their listening comprehension. Therefore, the researcher used some authentic listening materials to improve learners' listening comprehension. The aims of this paper are to examine the effect of authentic listening materials on Iranian learners' listening comprehension, their listening problems, and their listening strategies.

2. Literature Review

McDonough (1999) stated that listening is not a passive but an active process of making meaning from sounds. Byrnes (1984) expressed that listening comprehension is a complex and problem-solving skill. Purdy (1997) said that listeners do not passively absorb the words but actively try to understand the realities and emotions in what they hear by regarding what the speaker says, how the speaker says, and the context in which the message is uttered.

According to Celce-Murica (2001), language teachers should select suitable materials and tasks for their classes. Teachers should know what to do and what to use in their language classes to make language teaching and learning

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more interesting, motivating, and successful. Authentic materials can help motivate learners by creating a real life situation and interaction in their classes.

Rogers and Medley (1988) defined authentic language as the written or spoken language which is created by a native speaker of the language in which it is produced. According to Richards and Schmit (2002), authentic materials are the audio/video recordings of a conversation that automatically produced by the native speakers of the language.

Berardo (2006) declared that authentic materials enable learners to interact with the real language and content rather than the form. Learners learn a target language as it is used outside the classroom. When teachers choose materials from different sources, they should note that the goal should be comprehending meaning and not form. Paulston and Bruder (1976) said that it is necessary for learners who want to study in an English-speaking country to learn how to listen to lectures and take notes, to understand native speakers in different types of speech situations, and to comprehend radio and television broadcasts.

A lot of EFL learners have critical problems in understanding speech spoken by native speakers at the normal rate. Furthermore, many learners are nervous when they hear the English language on television, radio, or in situations in which speech is so fast. One of the best ways to prepare learners to encounter with real language is to use authentic speech in their classes (Rogers & Medley, 1988; Secules, Herron, & Tomasello, 1992).

According to Field (1998), one of the benefits of presenting authentic materials is to help learners become familiar with the target language. Breen (1985) stated that the use of authentic speech in listening permits learners to have immediate and direct contact with input data which show real communication in the target language.

Underwood (1989) said that authentic materials allows learners to hear a much more real act of communication. It gives them a real representation speech with hesitation, false starts and mistakes which will enable them to cope with the real life speech when they meet it outside the learning situation. If learners have the opportunity to listen to some authentic texts they will hear different sounds with various accents.

Listening strategies help learners improve their listening comprehension. Vandergrift (2003) and Goh (2002) examined the relationship between listening strategy use and listening ability in L2. They emphasized listeners' mental processes during the three specific stages called perception, parsing, and utilization. A proficient listener can concentrate on what is being heard, to plan what to listen for, and to interact with both textual cues and personal previous experience.

According to Goh and Yusnita (2006), strategies have a direct impact on listening performance. Yang (2009) expressed that one of the important qualities that differ successful listeners from unsuccessful ones is the application of meta-cognitive strategies. He continued that the role of meta-cognition in listening helps listeners to approach the listening task more successfully.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 50 learners majoring in English Translation Department at the Payame-Noor University, Rudsar, Iran. They had passed 22 English listening and speaking courses for seven semesters.

3.2 Instruments

The researcher carried out a survey of 50 Iranian EFL learners majoring in English Translation Department. The survey emphasized three subjects: (1) listening difficulties, (2) listening strategies, (3) and improvements in listening. The researcher asked students to choose the best responses. Six questions were designed for the purposes of this study.

4. Findings

The quantitative findings were calculated and put into percentages to indicate the results of this study. The results obtained from the survey are shown in the tables 1-6.

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Table 1. Question 1: Which of the following are difficult for you while listening to English materials?

Items	Number	Percentage
a. Unfamiliar accent	8	16
b. Lack of listening strategies	10	20
c. Speech rate	12	24
d. Pronunciation	6	12
e. New vocabulary and phrases	7	14
f. Lack of background knowledge	3	6
g. Stress and intonation	4	8

According to Table 1, Iranian learners had serious problems in (c) speech rate (24%), (b) lack of listening strategies (20%), (a) unfamiliar accent (16%), and (e) new vocabulary and phrases (14%). The findings of the above table indicate that speech rate, lack of strategies, and unfamiliar accent are the most difficult items for learners. Therefore EFL teachers should help their learners improve their listening strategies. They should also motivate their EFL learners to listen to more authentic materials to get used to the speech rate and be familiar with different kinds of accents.

Table 2. Question 2: What are your listening strategies while listening to English materials?

Items	Number	Percentage
a. Listen to keywords	11	22
b. Use of background knowledge	5	10
c. Repeat listening	4	8
d. Concentrate on listening	6	12
e. Listen to details	3	6
f. Guess the meaning of new words from context	9	18
g. Listen to main ideas	12	24

The findings of Table 2 demonstrate that (g) listen to main ideas (24%), (a) listen to key words (22%), and (f) guess the meaning of new words from context (18%) were their main strategies for Iranian EFL learners while they listened to the authentic materials.

Table 3. Question 3: Do you think that free choice of listening materials will have a positive effect on your listening comprehension skill?

Items	Number	Percentage
a. Yes	40	80
b. No	10	20

Based on the learners' answers to question 3, it was indicated that free choice of listening materials had a positive impact on their listening comprehension. Just twenty percent of learners rejected the significant role of free authentic materials on their listening ability. So teachers have a big responsibility in helping their learners select the most appropriate materials to improve their learners' listening comprehension.

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Table 4. Question 4: Will authentic listening materials help you form the habit of listening to English language regularly?

Items	Number	Percentage
a. Yes	43	86
b. No	7	14

The results of Table 4 show that the majority of Iranian EFL learners expressed that authentic materials help them form the habit of listening to English. Fourteen percent of learners didn't believe in the effect of these materials on forming a good habit of listening to English language.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher investigated the effect of using authentic listening materials on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. According to the obtained findings from this study, authentic listening materials had an important effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension and their habit of listening to English language. The results showed that interesting materials improve Iranian learners' listening comprehension. Iranian learners had critical problems in the fields of speech rate, listening strategies, unfamiliar accent, and vocabulary and phrases. Furthermore, Iranian learners used "listen to main ideas," "listen to key words," and "guess the meaning of new words from context" as the major strategies for their listening. It is concluded that EFL teachers should encourage their learners to listen to a lot of interesting, free, and authentic materials and teach them significant listening strategies which can make listening comprehension skill easier for them.

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