

LISTENING COMPREHENSION SUCCESS AMONG EFL PRESCHOOL CHILDREN USING INTERNET-BASED MATERIALS

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ABSTRACT

The current study investigated the impact of computer-based stories on the comprehension of oral English by a group of Iranian EFL school children. To achieve the intended purpose, a quasi-experimental research study was carried out in a one of Iranian pre-schools in Shahrekord, Iran. A pre-test and a post-test were then used to ascertain whether internet-based stories could improve listening comprehension in English as a Foreign Language. Results revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the final test administered. The findings broached interesting subjects related to the use of technology in the context of foreign language learning. Studies like this can contribute significantly to the more effective use of technology in order to improve the learning process quality.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, Computer-based stories, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Receptive skills have been looked into, through different studies, from different windows. Consequently, different results and implications have been proposed on them. Listening has long been the neglected skill in second/foreign language acquisition, research, teaching, and assessment. The lack of emphasis on listening skills has led to problems faced by students in comprehending listening texts. Anderson & Lynch (2000) state that one of the reasons why the listener fails to process incoming speech is that the speech contains words or phrases that the listener can hear adequately but is unable to understand because of serious problems with the syntax or semantics of the language. This is a common problem faced by students as the topics that they have to listen to, may often contain new or unfamiliar words.

However in recent years there has been an increased focus on listening ability because of its perceived importance in language learning and acquisition (Hayati, 2009). For years, educators and publishers followed a unimodal approach to listening comprehension and presented aural texts without visual or verbal/textual supportive information. Students were often frustrated by such activities (Vogely, 1998) for any number of reasons including lack of prior knowledge of the topic, the comprehensibility of the speaker, the materials reviewed, the lack of visual information, or even the technological design employed. Certainly, when we utilize technology-based listening comprehension materials, our ultimate goal is to help students develop their language skills. However, if the technological design does not offer helpful comprehension aids (e.g., visual aids), then many students' preferences or needs are ignored, potentially leading to poor comprehension. Thus, when students struggle with the material or the technology used, we find that "the more they fail, the more helpless they feel, and the less effort they come to invest ..." (Salomon, 1979, p. 43).

Websites for children can offer a range of opportunities to improve their listening skill in a foreign language provided they are selected appropriately (Van Scoter, Ellis & Railsback, 2001). Accordingly, stories are appropriate and useful listening materials for children to develop listening comprehension and literacy both in their first and foreign language (Zevenbergenn & Whitehurst, 2003).

Besides, the ability to comprehend is important not only for constant learning, but also for adequate functioning in a community. Despite numerous attempts of researchers, teachers, and policymakers to improve reading and listening for all children, many children fail to attain functional levels of literacy (Paris & Stahl, 2005). Thus, it is a must to understand the quiddity of children's early developing language comprehension skills, how they differ from other language skills, and how one can stimulate the development of these skills so that children will be better prepared to excel in reading comprehension when they are formally learning how to read in school. Listening comprehension plays a main role in foreign language teaching, especially with young learners (Grabiellatos, 1995).

Given the above statements, this study tries to explore the ways Internet based technology, more especially Internet-based stories, may promote listening comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. The present study enjoys significance in that it intends to shed more light on the link between the listening improvements of learners through modern technology. Further, not many studies have been done on the effects of technology on listening ability of learners especially for children learners who are of a sensitive age for acquiring the listening skill like a native.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1- Does the use of technology bear any significant effect on the improvement of children as far as listening skill is concerned?
- 2- Is there any difference between the control and treatment group in terms of their performance on listening tests?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the development of new technologies, there has been a keen interest in using these technologies in education, and in getting knowledge on how they would affect the educational outcome of classrooms and learners. Although most people associate the birth of educational technology with the 1970s and 1980s, the history of educational computing actually goes back to the 1940s (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Of course, in the 1940s, the physical technology related these ideas to microfilm, phonographic recordings, and punch card-style computing machines. In the 1950s and 1960s, the most powerful computers occupied entire rooms, not corners of desktops or small briefcases. However, the development of the microchip and miniaturization of components enabled educational technology to move forward rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s (Celce-Murcia, 2001). The common use of technological devices including software, local area network, and the internet has provided agogo opportunities for learners to increase their communicative abilities, both by individualizing practice and by tapping into a global community of other learners.

In addition, it is believed that technology can be very useful in developing children's listening skills if appropriately selected and organized. Different modern technological materials like stories, tales, novels, plays, etc. are interactive and reiterative in nature. Generally, learners have to listen to and comprehend carefully, in order to proceed with the material. The interactivity of technology-based stories may help learning since children are actively involved in decoding and comprehending the material (Donato, 1994). Students are also allowed to progress at their own pace which also caused a high level of individual control. Besides, the reiterative nature of such stories could also assist children progressively learn the material.

Technology would lead to preparation of richer resources, greater access to resources, greater interactivity, and greater chances for learners to use and reflect language. Moreover, making learners utilize technology also contributes to their general technical literacy, which has apparent advantages in the learning process.

Likewise, Baradaran (1999) has confirmed the positive effect of speech analyses via Computer Adaptive Language Learning (CALL) technology on improving learner's pronunciation ability. Shabani (2001) also investigated the advantage of using CALL on vocabulary learning of Iranian learners, and Hatam (2004) reported the positive influence of internet-based tasks/activities on the development of interactional competence of learner.

However, the utilization of technology in classroom teaching has also some downsides. As an example, for a teacher to use technology, it needs a commitment of time and energy to learn new things. That is, using technology causes teacher to devote some noticeable amount of class time for running and setting of the technology. One solution for minimizing such a wastage of time could be first, the preparation of the material before the class starts; and second, teachers' getting familiarization of the technology (how it works) prior to entering the class. Besides, there may be some cases in which during the class the electrical equipment stops working efficiently and consequently much of valuable instructional time is lost. In these cases and other similar cases, the technology distracts from its intended learning goals and in itself can lead to creation of stress and frustration.

As with listening skill, Boyds and Jones (1977) view listening as an active, complex skill which requires careful study in detail. They accounted for that listening, observing and experiencing can effectively influence individuals' life. They learn a new language to interact with others in community and also to widen their knowledge of the world around them. Due to the important role of the listener in the process of comprehension, Anderson and Lynch (1988) reported the view that comprehension is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process by activating various types of knowledge, applying what he knows to what he hears, and trying to understand what the speaker means.

Accordingly, listening comprehension activity in foreign classrooms is mainly limited to testing listening comprehension. The main reason is that if learners are successfully learning the target language, they should be able to decode the aural version of structures and vocabulary they learn in their textbooks. Therefore, listening comprehension is a significant process for language

learners to pay attention. Furthermore, in the traditional listening class, tiring test-based teaching of listening skill made learners become demotivated in improving their listening skill. In such classes, teachers usually selected a few difficult or new words to explain, and then s/he would give learners the correct answer after s/he plays the recording materials from time to time. Learners then listen to the materials mechanically. Therefore, it can be said that teacher functions like a tape-recorder who just needs to push the play and rewind buttons. With this monotonous teaching, learners gradually lose their interest. Due to lack of interest, motivation, and variation in teaching and learning, students easily get bored and take a passive attitude which is a great obstacle for teaching and students' progress (Zhang & Wang, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

To carry out the study, 50 male and female children, ranged from 7 to 9 in age, took part in this study project. They were all the school children in a school in Shahrekord, Iran. The reason for selecting children of this age was mainly due to the fact that this is the age when most of Iranian children officially start their English courses at schools. They were at two intact classes (grouped by the school authorities). Therefore, in this school two groups were selected: a control group and an experimental one. The groups had two different English language teachers, so a total of two teachers took part in the study. The decision for selecting one group as the control and one as the experimental group was made by the teachers. Besides, the number of students per class was 25.

Materials

Two internet-based stories in the www.uanmyfuture.com website (which is a comprehensive, up-to-date website including a range of materials for English language learning) were used as the materials of the study. Children listened to the story and could move on at their own pace. The narrator, for example, asked the children to click on the bear' to see what happens next. By participating in the narration of the story, children became more familiar with the process of work and consequently more independent in their learning. Thus, children played an active role in the listening comprehension of the story and teachers functioned just as facilitators. In most of the stories, written text supported the oral input. However, in the set of selected stories, there was a clear link between phonics and graphics which created a framework for literacy development. A pre-test was administered to both experimental and control groups before they were exposed to the digital stories and the stories in printed version told by their teachers. After the exposures, which were approximately four-week long, they were given a post-test. A pilot test was done with a group of preschool children similar to the target groups to determine the content validity of the tests. To assess the pre-test and post-test reliability, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated. The value acquired was considered satisfactory for the test internal consistency (= 0.846 and 0.851).

Data Collection Procedure

A quasi-experimental analysis was carried out at a pre-school in Shahrekord, Iran. All participants received four 30-minute English lessons a week, as established by the Ministry of Education of the country. During the four sessions per week, the control group was told the stories chosen by their teacher apart from the normal lesson based on teacher instruction and the exploitation of the workbook. No Internet-based material was given to this group. The

experimental group also received English lessons during the four weekly sessions. In two of the sessions, children received the same kind of instruction as the control group, based on teacher instruction and the exploitation of the workbook. The other two sessions were devoted to work on a selected number of digital stories.

A pre-test was designed to collect initial data on children’s background knowledge and to check that all learners had similar levels of English. The pre-test involved two sections. In the first section, ten items were presented to test children's knowledge about animals and colors. Children were required to listen and circle the right option. In the second section, another ten items were presented to test children's knowledge about numbers and animals. Children were required to listen and color the right option.

The post-test that was designed to test children's progressive comprehension of the language, also consisted of two sections. Each section had ten questions similar to those presented in the pre-test but cognitively more difficult and involved new vocabulary (new animals, new colors, new numbers). Finally, to evaluate the tests the author used 1 for correct responses and 0 for incorrect ones.

Data Analysis Procedure

Having collected the required data, statistical package in general, and two Independent samples t-tests, along with a descriptive statistic tests in particular were run to analyze the gathered data. The purpose of running independent t-tests was to see the effect of technology use on listening comprehension of learners. Besides, a Levene's test was run to get knowledge on the homogeneity and heterogeneity of variances of results.

RESULTS

Having gathered and analyzed the data, the results of the study are presented. In order to make a comparison between the listening comprehension of the two groups, an independent T-test sample was run. First Table 1, revealing the performance of the two groups on pre-test, is brought.

Table 1. Pre-Test Performance of the Two Groups

Pre-test	Groups	N	Mean	SD
Part I	Control	25	1.92	1.077
	Experimental	25	1.96	1.060
Part II	Control	25	1.56	0.870
	Experimental	25	1.48	0.770
Total	Control	25	3.48	1.531
	Experimental	25	3.44	1.387

As it is obvious from the table, both control and experimental groups performed very similarly in the two parts. Besides, the mean score obtained by the experimental group in both

parts of the pre-test (3.44) was lower than the mean of the control group (3.48). Therefore, it can be inferred that the performance of control group was, on the whole, slightly better than the experimental group.

Table 2 also shows the results of independent t-test for the pre-test. The table needs to be checked in order to see if there is any significant difference between the two groups as far as the pre-test is concerned.

Table 2. Independent T-Test of Pre-Test

Pre-test	t	p
Part I	-0.13	0.89
Part II	0.34	0.73
Total	0.62	0.92

The table indicates that there was homogeneity of variances between the control and the experimental groups ($F= 0.241$; $p= 0.626$) in the beginning. Hence, there were no significant differences among the two groups at the beginning of the study.

As with the two groups' performance on the post-test, Table 3 represents the pertaining results.

Table 3. Post-Test Performance of the Two Groups

Pre-test	Groups	N	Mean	SD
Part I	Control	25	2.52	.87
	Experimental	25	3.68	1.21
Part II	Control	25	2.56	0.82
	Experimental	25	2.92	0.81
Total	Control	25	5.08	1.15
	Experimental	25	6.64	1.55

As it is conspicuous from the table, the control group increased the test mean by 1.60 if compared with the one obtained in the pre-test (3.48 vs. 5.08), whereas the experimental one increased the test mean sharply by 3.20 (3.44 vs. 6.64). This tendency is related to both Parts I and II of the test.

Finally, with regard to the independent t-test ran for the post-test performance of learners, Table 4 indicates the pertaining vocabulary findings.

Table 4. Independent T-Test of Pre-Test

Pre-test	t	p
Part I	- 3.87	0.00
Part II	- 1.55	0.12
Total	- 4.03	0.00

The table reveals that the differences between the two participating groups were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) except in Part II.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The preliminary purpose of this study was to probe the existence or lack of existence of any influence of technology on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL language learners. The main finding understood from the study is that learners receiving internet-based materials outperform those not receiving the technology-based materials. One justification for such a conclusion may be the motivation created in children as a result of technology use. In other words, the under-studied learners were school-age children who were usually active, dynamic, energetic, curious, daring, and like to try new things. Therefore, when they are asked to use the technology and listen to the intended material they become motivated to try the new thing and do their best on the task. However, the point which needs to be raised here is that while using technology may motivates children and young learners, for adults it may lead to an absolutely opposite finding. That is, it is usually stated that adults are more sensitive to affective feelings in comparison with children. They are, in contrast to children, more self-conscious, cautious, and inactive. They are more anxious while using a new piece of technology. They may think that if they can not use the technology they may be failed, they may be mocked by peers. Besides, using technology may increase the concentration and attention of learners on what they are listening. The permission of children to play the used technological device for several times caused learners to be exposed to the target language more and more.

Further, the results imply that the differences between the two groups were very significant. There may be several explanations for this. One of them, as referred to it above, might be the abundant exposures to target language. As suggested by Verdugo and Belmonte (2007), a longer time of exposure to the digital materials would enhance the outcome obtained. This research confirmed the suggestions. The outcomes of this study reinforced that participants in the experimental group were able to comprehend basic linguistic structures and vocabulary and outperformed the control group. However, in order to obtain a better result, it is believed that existing materials and resources should be adapted into other participants with other participants. More studies, specifically longitudinal ones, are needed in order to determine the long lasting effects and effectiveness of multimedia and digital content in the acquisition and learning of languages. At the same time, it seems necessary to continue analyzing the existing Internet-based content in order to design a coherent syllabus which may respond to young learners' needs.

Besides, in order to complement the findings of the present study, the topic needs to be further explored in some other studies. The following topics can be suggested for those who are interested in conducting research in the area. First, to see the possible effect of sex as a variable,

another similar study can be done in which both males and females can be included as participants and then the discrimination between them can be studied. Second, to investigate the probable impact of level of proficiency; another research can be undertaken with participation of learners from three different levels of proficiency, i.e., beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

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