

Distinct Techniques to Improve Listening Comprehension and Meta-Cognitive Listening Awareness

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Abstract

Listening forms a requisite role whilst communication in every aspect of linguistic studies. As for foreign language learning, listening is of paramount significance since it yields language input. In respect of students' notion, listening comprehension is one of the most demanding courses (Jones, 2007). For second language instructors, fostering the students' listening comprehension skills and preparing them as active listeners is a massive challenge. In this manner, this paper presents findings from a research study exploring the impact of two distinctive pre-listening techniques (giving word bubbles and showing pictures to students) on EFL learners' performance in listening comprehension and on their activation of meta-cognitive listening awareness. Data were elicited from 30 elementary level prep class students at a state university in Turkey. A comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores demonstrated that the participants achieved significantly higher marks after the treatment classes, but had no correlation with the questionnaire results. The findings suggest that topic familiarity through pre-listening is a salutary predictor of improved performance.

Keywords: Topic familiarity, pre-listening, meta-cognitive awareness, listening strategy

Introduction

In second language acquisition, listening skills tends not to receive sufficient attention although forty per cent of daily communication is spent on listening to others. Despite not having a specific course called “Listening Comprehension” at most university preparatory classes in Turkey, most of the speaking courses embrace listening comprehension activities. The reason for this is that speaking sensibly is mostly feasible through receiving input by listening (Jones, 2007). Therefore, the development of listening comprehension should be one of the basics of language learning.

In terms of the adversities which are experienced by learners in a second language learning environment, numerous complexities emerge. One hardship is the content of the listening tasks which are often not familiar to learners. As a result of this, the possibility of learner misunderstandings can be expected.

A further demanding issue is the different accents, idioms and unfamiliar language chunks spoken by English-speaking people. Moreover, what they listen to is eminently too fast for such learners to catch. Since their normal listening comprehension proficiency speed is not the same as that of the speaker’s, they have to keep pace with the thinking process. One example that can be observed in the classroom is when listening comprehension exercises demand no response until the end of fairly long stretches of speech, in this manner when it comes to giving a response, it becomes a test of memory rather than of comprehension.

In this research study, the use of a top-down strategy through an extensive listening project was planned. This listener-based strategy included generating a background knowledge of a given topic, the situation or the context by the aid of two discrete pre-listening techniques: Giving students word bubbles and showing them pictures. Herewith, this background knowledge was expected to activate a set of expectations that help the listener interpret what is heard and give correct responses to multiple choice questions in various listening comprehension tasks.

This study was effectuated due to the difficulties encountered by a group of elementary level prep class of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at a state university in Turkey. Owing to their differences in apprehending listening texts, responding to written questions and utilizing the essential strategies whilst listening; an extensive listening project comprising assorted listening tasks before which the two mentioned pre-listening techniques were implemented was contrived.

This study aims to shed light on the use of the two pre-listening techniques to aid in listening comprehension, which have not been applied together in a single study. In addition, the results of this study could play a vital role in completing the gap in literature where learners’ meta-cognitive listening awareness and their listening comprehension performances have not been associated.

Literature Review

Listening is a stringent process, not only out of the complication of the process itself, but also due to the motives that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message and any visual assistance that consorts the message (Brown and Yule, 1983). Understanding spoken language is a momentous circumstance for language acquisition (Rost, 1990).

According to Vandergrift (2004), listening is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners to evolve which is why it is presumably the least explicit of the four language skills. Additionally, Vandergrift (2004) specifies that listening plays a major role in the learning of a second language since it gives the learner information from which to build the knowledge requisite

for successfully using the language. Listening assures the essential input for learners to acquire the language required for practicing it.

A further point is that listening is a receptive skill which put in the way for productive skills. It was noted that if learners are able to produce something in the target language, the teaching will be more communicative (Sarıçoban, 2014).

Listening Anxiety

The oral aspects of language are by and large seen to be the most closely associated with foreign language anxiety (Salto, Horwitz and Garza, 1999). In disputations of anxiety in classroom language learning, speaking is the most emphasized one. However, listening comprehension can also be considerably stressful for learners. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992), listening anxiety originates when students feel they are exposed to a task that is too difficult or unfamiliar to them. One example for this is a study implemented on Iranian EFL learners in order to detect the role of teachers in reducing/ increasing listening comprehension test anxiety. Slotting sixty intermediate level EFL learners at Islamic Azad University in this Iranian context, the researcher removed learners' fear of evaluation by ensuring them that no negative score would be considered and that they had a second chance to repeat the exam. Additionally in the treatment session, the researcher also pursued a strategy to generate a friendly and anxiety-free atmosphere, with the aim to reinforce self-confidence. As a result of the study, the test-giver was prosperous in making them feel less anxious, and eventually, boost their scores (Izadi,2011).

The Role of Teachers While Listening

A pivotal issue to be perused and commented on is the role of teachers throughout listening sessions. Teaching listening comprehension is- by all means- a challenging task for teachers. The fleeting nature of sound makes it stringent for listeners to concentrate on a particular word or phrases for detailed analysis (Halle, 2002). Herewith, it has been observed that many teachers slip into testing the learners' listening comprehension rather than teaching them how to listen effectively. At this juncture, there are some issues for teachers to consider and some hedges to implement for further success in listening activities. At the outset, instead of anticipating that learners will in the upshot improve their listening skills on their own, teachers should make allowances for the reasons why students experience difficulties with comprehending listening input (Kavaliauskiene, 2011). Furthermore, to carry learners' listening skills forward, teachers should pave the way to the adopting of a positive attitude, being responsive, shutting out distractions, listening for specific purposes, looking for non-verbal clues, evaluating the supporting materials, and looking for the signals of what is to come and looking for summaries of what has gone before (Sarıçoban, 2014). An analogous plea is that teachers should guide learners to comprehend what is being said in conversations to let them disregard, redundancy, hesitation, and ungrammaticality (Sarıçoban, 2014). A research study by Jones (2007) addresses the role of the teacher in terms of learner meta-cognitive. The participants comprise children learning EFL at a primary school context in the UK. The four interlinked approaches that the teacher applied in order to promote effective listening were dialogic teaching, developing meta-cognitive awareness, planning and assessing.

As a result, triumph in active and effective listening was attained by setting up the following: a risk-free learning environment, explaining what assessment is, describing the success criteria, giving shared feedback, setting targets together and reflecting on the learning of listening.

Top-down Processing in Listening

Just as with learning reading skills, there exist two simultaneous ways of processing a text. In top-down processing, learners tap their prior knowledge with the intention of making anticipations concerning the text. On the other hand, in bottom-up processing, learners place their trust on their linguistic knowledge to recognize the meaning. It is common for learners to hear every sound before they apprehend the listening text. In contrast, they often adopt a top-down approach to estimate the probable theme (Lingzhu, 2014).

Pre-listening

In addition to various suggestions to listening difficulties, it is important for teachers to impart listeners with specific knowledge required for the comprehension of the listening text rather than solely pore over on linguistic features (Othman and Vanathas, 2014). In this manner, before listening, students should be “tuned in”, so that they know what to anticipate, both in general and specific tasks (Elkhafifi, 2005). Armed with explanations of how miscomprehension occurs during a listening activity, teachers may be able to design remedial pre-listening exercises aimed at tackling the cause of the problem.

Schema Theory

Schema Theory is a substantial issue with respect to helping learners improve their performance in any domain of language learning. According to McDonald (1993); Schema Theory is associated with the organization of information in memory and how existing knowledge mediates the encoding of incoming information and its retrieval from memory. In terms of listening, Carrell and Eisterhold (1988) assert that listeners lack culture-specific content schema. It is very important that the content schemata must be activated for the learners to access their knowledge in English listening. In the light of this theory, a study by Othman and Vanathas (2004), exploring the impact of schema and topic familiarity on listening comprehension. Thirty four intermediate level students who were majoring in Business Studies at a private tertiary institution in Malaysia participated in the study. A treatment phase of four weeks was generated and comprised listening tasks from merely one listening course book. During the study, learners were given visuals and verbals as a means to create a knowledge base before they listened to the passages. Additionally, by means of semantic webbing, giving ideas and suggestions through discussion; the learners had the opportunity to activate their knowledge on the subject. As a consequence, it was indicated that activating background knowledge had a significant effect on the learners’ listening comprehension

Strategic Listening

Instead of concentrating on the product or result of listening comprehension tasks, teachers should concern their interest with the listening process. With this aim, listening strategy instruction should be given. Strategies are conscious steps or actions by which learners can guide and evaluate their own comprehension and learning (Rost, 2002). Zhang’s (2007) research at a Chinese university is an example for the use of strategies in listening. Insufficient listening comprehension, learners’ frustration and a highly stressful classroom atmosphere were the issues which induced the researcher to begin this research.

Extensive Listening

Extensive listening, which refers to any types of listening activities that allow learners to obtain large amounts of comprehensible and relevant input, is a method to assist second language learners in dealing with their listening difficulties (Renandya and Farrell, 2010). The aim of extensive listening is to provide learners with numerous target language input. In this way, learners are given an opportunity to develop their vocabulary knowledge, accent recognition, and their productive skills, such as pronunciation and speaking (Reinders and Cho, 2010). In a qualitative study implemented by Bidabadi and Yamat (2012) on the strategies exerted by Iranian freshmen in extensive listening, the results indicated that these learners of English could employ their own avail strategies while engaged in extensive listening. Ranking a group of twelve freshmen university students, it was aimed to gain insight on their use of strategies whilst extensive listening. Majoring in the TEFL course, the participants were exposed to a think-aloud training session and were audio-taped after listening to various real-life conversations from Interchange course book during the extensive listening phase. Eventually, it was detected that the learners had entanglement in keeping up with the speaker's rate. However, they seized the opportunity to employ their own cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. Alias, they possessed processes and behaviours supporting their improvement in recalling what they had learnt by aid of the extensive listening (Bidabadi and Yamat, 2012). A further study by Chung and Millett (2013), which was constructed based on Level 1 graded learners, recounts that L2 learners' listening skills acquired by means of extensive listening could be transferred to listening to unfamiliar passages. The study comprised learners of three distinctive groups performing three sorts of treatment, two of which additionally encapsulate reading. The findings of the study propound that learners are able to enhance their listening comprehension and fluency performance by dint of abundant input and consistent practice whilst implementing extensive listening.

The final issue concerning listening comprehension- exclusively strategic listening- is the meta-cognitive strategy use in listening comprehension. Meta-cognitive Approach to listening buttresses training learners to apply penetrative strategies to cope with the demands of listening. Assisting students in managing their learning more influentially, meta-cognitive strategies seem to have a considerable amount of advantages such as generating strategic learners, increasing the speed of learners' cognitive engagement with listening texts, forming a confidence on learners to learn, removing hesitation to obtain help from their environment, actualizing continual learners who can successfully cope with new situations and executing tactics which match the listening task and adjustments (Selamat and Sidhu, 2011). A research was generated by Yang (2013) so as to ascertain whether meta-cognitive strategy use is effective in advancing Chinese graduates' EFL listening. The study, which embraced 150 participants at East China Institute of Technology, propounded that there existed progression on middle and low-level experimental learners' meta-cognitive awareness. Another research implemented on Iranian university students majoring in English aimed to investigate diverse meta-cognitive listening strategies employed by those students and the differences in the frequency of these strategies between high and low-proficient learners. Having Persian as their L1, the participants were implemented International English Language Testing System (IELTS) listening test and MALQ (Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire) with the intention of measuring their own regulation of their learning process through listening. The results revealed that the participants utilized strategies so as to make inferences and to monitor these differences. However, they had high level of listening anxiety and low self-confidence whilst performing in listening comprehension tasks (Ratebi and Amirian, 2013). A further study by Selamat and Sidhu (2011) explored ESL students' perceptions towards a meta-cognitive strategy

instruction program (MetSI) to ameliorate their listening comprehension abilities. 34 first-year students at the faculty of education at a public university in Malaysia who participated in the study were exposed to a 10-week meta-cognitive strategy instruction program as a treatment. Being provided with numerous problem-solving tasks, they were given MALQ. The results revealed that the students perceived the MetSI training as salutary in evolving their listening skills and extracting information from lectures.

Methodology

Research Problem and Questions

In the light of above literature review and specified problems in the field, this study sought to examine the following two specific questions:

1. Which of the two pre-listening techniques provides the best results: giving students word bubbles or showing them pictures related to the listening content?
2. Does the study activate learners' meta-cognitive awareness in listening through the two pre-listening techniques?

In terms of the first research question, it was hypothesised that the participants would achieve higher scores by means of visuals rather than verbals as pre-listening with the assumption based on research showing that learners feel easier to learn content presented in a visual form than in a verbal form (Chan, 2014).

The hypothesis for the second question was that the participants would enhance their meta-cognitive listening awareness more with the aid of visuals (showing pictures technique).

Research Design

A quantitative research design was adopted for the study. Due to the restricted time to implement the research, interviews via audio-recording could not be inserted to the design. A pre-test & post-test design was opted in order to measure the degree of change occurring as a result of the intervention in two discrete ways (giving students word bubbles and showing them pictures).

Context and Participants

The study was performed at a state university in Turkey. The institution is the foreign languages school of this university. Participants comprised 30 EFL learners at elementary level English prep classes from diverse departments. Skills-based instruction of English is provided over a period of 15 weeks in one semester. Classes are held everyday. The language of instruction is solely English.

Participants aged between 18-20 who regularly take part in a variety of listening activities, especially inside the classroom. Sitcom video type series, songs, and audio-taped real-life conversations ancillary to their reading and vocabulary tasks were a major part of their classroom instruction and practice. Periodically, invited native speakers come to class and address these learners in English.

The group of participants did not include any heritage language students (i.e., students whose family situation includes exposure to English language). Although the learners were graduates of many distinct high schools, their academic background is assumed to be excessively similar to one another. They were quite eager to participate in this study together with the teacher researcher.

Data Collection Instruments

Data for the study were obtained from the following instruments:

Pre-test

The pre-tests were two similar listening midterm exams of the 2013 fall semester. The reason for applying two different tests was to implement two similar but different tests in order to measure the effectiveness of two distinct pre-listening techniques. The tests include three distinct sections of multiple choice questions were materialized in conjunction with some procedures such as giving clear instructions, playing the tape twice and stopping playing the tape at frequent intervals with the aim of letting students have time to contemplate their written answers.

In both pre-tests, participants listened to passages and conversations which they were not familiar with without attaining a background information concerning the content.

Post-test

Subsequent to the 7 treatment sessions for each of the two pre-listening techniques in the course of the extensive listening project, the post-tests were administered. All participants were given the pre-tests once again as post-tests. The entailment for the students was to answer the same questions that they had answered earlier in the pre-tests.

Questionnaire

Following each treatment phase and post-test implementation, participants were asked to respond to a MALQ questionnaire on meta-cognitive listening strategies. The application of this questionnaire was carried out in order to conceive whether one of the two pre-listening techniques created any difference on learners' meta-cognitive awareness. The items in this questionnaire by Vandergrift (2006) embraced 5 meta-cognitive factors associated with learners' listening strategies.

The Treatment

Subsequent to the pre-test, the treatment- via an extensive listening project- was carried out over 4 weeks. The materials for these lessons were obtained from New English File course book. The listening texts were mainly the same level or not higher than the learners' tested language level ability.

The intervention- stood by the Schema Theory, Meta-cognitive Approach to listening and Top-down Processing Approach- promoted a background of the listening comprehension text through two distinct pre-listening techniques: Giving learners word bubbles and showing them pictures. In this manner, activities were tailored to assist learners to comprehend the listening concept beforehand. Since the primary objective of the study was to carry forward students' performance in written responses to listening questions; the chief principle during listening was to stop the tape within frequent intervals in order to ensure them with sufficient time to respond to questions and recede from testing their memory through nonstop listening till the end of the test.

Each listening session was generated for 40 minutes a day for four consecutive weeks. In all the treatment lessons, participants completed the required activities individually. They as participants were given multiple choice, gap-filling, chart completion, note-taking, summarizing short stories and written transcription activities throughout the sessions. Even though the participants' pre-existing knowledge was activated by means of exposure to word bubbles and pictures as two pre-listening activities, they were additionally ensured motivational support and encouragement, mentioning the simplicity of listening through strategies in order to obviate their listening anxiety.

Table 1 Data collection process

Week 1	Pretest
Week 2	Training on pre-listening through word bubbles
Week 3	Training on pre-listening through word bubbles
Week 4	Posttest and MALQ
Week 5	Training on pre-listening through speech bubbles
Week 6	Training on pre-listening through speech bubbles
Week 7	Posttest and MALQ

Data Analysis

Analysis of data in this study was made with the aid of statistical analysis through SPSS. Tabulated description (i.e., tables) and statistical commentary (i.e., discussion of the results) were employed to construct simple descriptions about the characteristics of a set of quantitative data and to summarize the findings of the study.

The relevance of the data with its normal distribution was tested via Shapiro-Wilk test. In case of this relevance, statistical parametric procedures were employed. The comparisons between pre-tests and post-tests were achieved by use of a t-test. The correlations between variables were analysed through Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient. Statistical comparisons between pre-test post-test grades were made by obtaining the difference scores in order to behold the effects of the two pre-listening techniques- giving students word bubbles and showing them pictures.

Results

The first research question and hypothesis concerned a comparison between the two pre-listening techniques' pre-test and post-test results. Through the comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores, a statistical significance was obtained in both measures. As can be seen, the estimated mean on the test scores of the second pre-listening technique (showing pictures) suggests that the first hypothesis could be confirmed. Due to this mean score, showing pictures to learners was found more effective than giving them word bubbles.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	P
Pair 1	gwb_pre	58,33	30	13,087	2,389	< 0,001
	gwb_post	68,67	30	13,126	2,397	
Pair 2	sp_pre	60,33	30	12,590	2,299	< 0,001
	sp_post	78,33	30	12,617	2,304	
<p><i>Note: gwb: giving word bubbles (technique 1) sp: showing pictures (technique 2)</i></p>						

Table 2: Paired sample T-test indicating the distribution of the pre-test & post-test scores

As a result of the implementation of the MALQ scale subsequent to both pre-listening applications, the correlation between the two scale results was positively significant ($r=0,83$, $p<0,001$). However, no significance between the pre-test & post-test scores and MALQ results was yielded. In other words, no relationship between participants' progress of listening comprehension and their activation of meta-cognitive listening awareness was obtained.

		malq_g	malq_s	gwb_dif	sp_dif
Spearman's rho	malq_g correlation coefficient	1,000	,833	,165	,095
	Sig (2-tailed)	.	,000	,383	,616
	N	30	29	30	30
	malq_s correlation coefficient	,833	1,000	,003	,120
	Sig (2-tailed)	,000	.	,988	,535
	N	29	29	29	29
	gwb-dif correlation coefficient	,165	,003	,083	,083
	Sig (2-tailed)	,383	,988	,663	
	N	30	29	30	30
	sp-dif correlation coefficient	,95	,120	,083	,083
	Sig (2-tailed)	,616	,535	,663	.
	N	30	29	30	30

Table 3: Correlations (Non-parametric correlations) demonstrating the interaction between participants' pretest and posttest scores and their level of meta-cognitive listening awareness

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of two pre-listening techniques on learners' listening comprehension performance and their meta-cognitive listening awareness. With regard to the first research question, based on the results of this study, it may be concluded that the practice of both giving learners word bubbles and showing them pictures as two pre-listening techniques has proven to be beneficial at university prep classes in Turkey. Data depending on the scores has indicated that teacher's showing pictures to participants as a means of pre-listening could activate their performance in giving correct written responses to listening comprehension questions more than giving word bubbles technique. This finding additionally provides support for the gap in the field since no research comparing two distinct pre-listening techniques had been implemented before.

Owing to the presence of Schema Theory and Top-down Processing principles, which were influential to direct this study, exposing learners of English to schema and background knowledge concerning the listening comprehension was found to be substantially useful. Activating prior knowledge became more of an issue. It has been exposed that the time prior to a listening session is quite crucial, which is why this session should be replenished with a pre-listening activity so as to diminish students' listening anxiety.

A further concern hinging upon the findings of this study is the application of an extensive listening project distinct from the listening classes. Even though much of the listening instruction

literature advocates listening instruction using strategies focused on merely one strategy at a time and within a short period of the instruction, the focus of the present study was to implement two discrete strategies through extensive exposure and with naturalistic texts. Participants seized the opportunity to feel as if they were in a real-life context and had no specific purpose other than comprehending the listening texts.

With regard to the second hypothesis in which the listeners' meta-cognitive awareness would be enhanced in a similar vein as their listening comprehension performance was activated a contingent finding indicated that the learners' meta-cognition in listening could not be activated while their listening comprehension performance progressed emerged. However, having encountered a listening strategy questionnaire (MALQ) for the first time, students took their first step to obtain a meta-cognitive perception of their own listening.

From the aspect of the teacher researcher, teacher's role, not only as a manager of the listening process but also as a facilitator who oriented the listening process into a low-anxiety and meta-cognitively aware atmosphere came into prominence.

The last substantial inference to conclude from the findings of this study is that listening is the most arduous one of the four skills and presents a massive challenge for the learners in their language learning process.

This study makes a number of significant methodological contributions. Relating pre-listening and meta-cognition ensured a brand new implementation in listening. In addition, learners at university prep classes in Turkey had not been analysed before in terms of their listening performance as a result of pre-listening training. Furthermore, the consciousness-raising effect of meta-cognitive listening awareness emerged in all participants' minds and allowed them to benefit from the intervention.

Pedagogical Implications

Learners of a foreign language should possess topic familiarity by means of instructor's support. L2 instructors should focus more on the listening process than the product by means of instruction aimed at reading strategies. The term "meta-cognition" should be introduced to the foreign language learners not only as part of listening but also of the other three skills. Moreover, instructors should generate a low-stress environment which should allow listeners to concentrate thoroughly on listening items.

Implications for Future Research

As a consequence of the present study, it could be proposed that further research needs to be conducted based on the effects of pre-listening techniques on listening performance of learners. Future studies could be implemented within a larger sample and over a longer time. More than two techniques could be compared and some revision may be done on the MALQ. It is even probable to apply a study and examine one more listening issue with pre-listening and meta-cognitive listening awareness.

Limitations

There are two limitations to consider with the results of this study:

1. Testing threat: Three tests (two pre-tests and a post-test) and 14 treatment lessons had been performed prior to the post-test of showing pictures' post-test. This means, participants had made a considerable progress until that time due to their exposure to so many tasks.

2. Maturation effect: Whilst implementing this study, participants had already been along listening instructions throughout their usual listening and speaking course. In addition, they had an extra phase of a four week exposure to listening by means of this extensive listening project. In other words, they developed not only with the aid of the pre-listening techniques, but also through their natural flow of academic instruction.

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