Learning to Listen Effectively in EFL Classes

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Abstract: This paper reports on a study exploring the relationship between the manner in which listening content is presented and the results of listening tasks in EFL classes. The study involved university level first-year students in an English foundations program at the intermediate level. The participants were Arabic-speaking students learning English language in a core English class. The students completed four listening tasks presented through a recording and live in the class, which required them to listen to authentic conversations, reports, and lectures and to complete a number of comprehension exercises of various types.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching listening skills in the foreign language classroom, specifically in the English classroom, is one of the most difficult tasks for any EFL teacher. It is a frustrating task that has no rule to follow, in contrast with grammar instruction, for example. This frustration extends to both teachers and students alike. Teachers are apprehensive about teaching skills which have no clear guidelines, while students are anxious about not being able to understand clearly and missing the message.

In real life, listening is not a separate experience; it is part of the general communication process. Individuals listen to different sources, topics and for various purposes all day long without giving it much thought. Their skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. When it comes to the language classroom, the same should apply. Therefore, undertaking listening as an isolated skill is not part of either effective teaching or learning.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between the manner in which listening content is presented and the results of the students in a foundations program intermediate class. The justification for investigating this issue is that listening is one of the hardest skills for the students in an EFL class. Many students cannot keep up with the flow of speech in many listening situations and they misunderstand the message the majority of the time. Therefore, it is important to look closely at listening, as

it is a crucial skill when learning a foreign language. More specifically, the research questions of interest were:

1. What factors can affect listening performance in the classroom?
2. Does the manner in which the listening materials are presented affect the performance results? i.e. teacher reading vs. pre-recorded scripts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

John Gilbert Way (1973) says that "Listening, or the ability to listen discriminately, is one of the most important communicative skills which an individual can possess" (p. 472). This ability to listen evolves from hearing the same way seeing develops from looking. An individual needs to be helped to be able to structure her/his seeing and hearing in order to obtain the necessary message and not be distracted by all the unwanted and undesired stimuli around him/her. Unfortunately, many teachers take the ability to listen for granted and do not give it the needed attention (Way, 1973). He lists 4 types of listening, taken from Pronovost (1959) and Dawson and Zollinger (1957):

1. Casual listening – this is sociable listening. It is polite, conversational listening.
2. Creative listening – this involves the listener to imagine the visions and feelings of what s/he is hearing.

3. Exploratory listening – this listening has intent to listen but involves wandering to find new topics of interest.
4. Intent listening – this is concentrated listening. It focuses intently on what is being said.

Another view on listening is found in Jim Scrivener's work (2005). He says that it is important to tell students that they don't need to understand every single word in order to understand the message they need. By doing this, teachers remove or reduce the stress factor students have while listening. This way, teachers can help students worry less about trying to understand everything and focus more on grasping the full message. Listening in the English classroom should mirror listening in everyday life. When listening in daily life, individuals usually don't concentrate on every minute detail, but listen to get an overview of the main message and try to catch specific details like names, numbers and so on. Scrivener (2005) questions the usefulness of certain materials used in many listening classes. He asks teachers to reflect on how interesting and relevant their material is to their students in their specific part of the world. He states that in real life, listening is done interactively. People have a chance to respond, ask, and repeat, and so on. While in a classroom-recorded conversation, it is passive listening. He questions how helpful teachers are being when using such pre-recorded materials.

Additionally, Scrivener (2005) brings up a very important point, which is the difficulty of the material being used. Some teachers, he says, overwhelm their students by choosing a very difficult recording and even more difficult tasks. Again, this is not real-life listening, as in reality; we don't usually face such situations. If the recording is difficult, he suggests simplifying the task, which would give the students a sense of achievement for completing it.

Scrivener (2005) indicates that we listen for a variety of reasons, which could be replicated in the classroom. Listening is part of speaking and so it is not an independent skill. He contends that when working on listening, some teachers should start with "small pieces" first. This is called "listening for detail." A very useful technique, "listening for detail" is part of the "bottom-up" strategy, which says that learners build up the whole message from the separate small pieces. However, this is practical only in class. In contrast, real life listening cannot follow this approach, as it does not allow the listener to get the big picture. Real life listening requires top-down theory, which states that people listen to get the whole message first, building on past experience and knowledge, then leading to specific details.

Finally, Scrivener (2005) believes that in the classroom, and in real life, when students listen, they use a combination of the two strategies. He says there is no fixed way to do listening tasks, in the end, it's the teacher who decides according to the needs and abilities of his/her students.

An additional opinion on listening from Harmer (1991) indicates that listening shares many similarities with reading, as a skill. However, they also have many differences, the main one being the text itself. In reading, the text is "static". It is read at the speed of the students and can be repeated over and over. This is not the case in listening. The speaker text has its own speed and is not usually repeated. Of course, in real life, a listener can ask a speaker to repeat what s/he just said, but this is not true when listening to a radio program. In speech, various phenomena come into play, such as hesitation, repetition, and reformulation and so on. These are all part of natural speech. They are spontaneous, like a writer's first draft. However, in speech and listening, the receivers only get the final draft. And so, it is the teacher's job to train the students to be selective when listening in order to be able to concentrate on the main idea and understand the message properly.

To elaborate further on the similarities between reading and listening, Bae and Bachman (1998) explain that both require decoding and comprehension. Therefore, both skills rely on language knowledge sources and world knowledge sources. Students need to be familiar with topics, text structures, and culture and so on in order to maximize their comprehension. Reading and listening also necessitate flexible processes in respect to comprehension. The listener and the reader mentally construct a mental image or representation of what has been comprehended (Danks & End, 1987). Finally, both reading and listening are influenced by factors beyond the texts themselves, such as student motivation, interest and so on (Samuels, 1987).

With that being said, it is worth noting the differences between reading and listening as well. The main difference is that listeners need to comprehend spoken language and thus they must pay attention to additional factors that can complicate the process of listening comprehension further. Listeners must consider the sounds, accents, intonations and tones of the speakers, which can all affect the message greatly. Also, listeners do not get the chance to repeat or review the information presented as listening takes place in real time and unlike reading cannot be broken down into parts (Buck, 2011). Additional differences include the speech rate, hesitations, false starts, pauses, and short idea units that are exhibited in speech but not in reading. Finally, it is important to note that listening is much more context-sensitive than reading (Swaffar & Bacon, 1993). For all these reasons, listening can be considered more cognitively demanding than reading

and therefore more difficult for students in the ESL classroom.

Harmer (1991) argues that the main problem teachers and students face when doing listening work is the way the material is presented in class. He says that using tapes is the most practical way; it has many advantages such as the limitless number of voices and accents students can be exposed to. However, using tape recorders is not natural in real life listening situations; one does not sit in silence with a group of 20 or so other people just listening to a tape. An additional disadvantage is that students feel threatened in such a situation especially if they can't follow the conversation; the tape keeps going on. Finally, Harmer (1991) is not in favor of using videotapes for listening practice even though they offer visual context to conversations. He says that they also offer too many distractions. Students focus on the variety of images they see on the screen and fall behind on the conversation.

Adding to the above, Funk and Funk (1989) assert that teachers generally believe that listening will develop on its own. Therefore, not much attention is given to this skill in the classrooms. This neglect for teaching the listening skill in many classrooms is also partly due to the feelings of inadequacy many teachers have when it comes to listening instruction, which stems from their inappropriate or insufficient training in this skill. Many simply do not know how to go about teaching listening.

Funk and Funk (1989) give some guideline on how teachers can create good listeners. First, they must provide a purpose for listening – teachers should give a clear purpose for the listening experience. Students should be clearly told why and what they are listening to. Second, teachers should set the stage for listening. This involves intentionally and carefully setting up the proper atmosphere for a positive listening experience. Third, teachers must provide follow up experiences to listening activities; they must be well thought out and given directly after the listening activity. These exercises give feedback on the students' comprehension of the new information and allow for further practice. Additionally, teachers ought to use methodology that promotes positive listening habits. Sources of the listening should be varied, not only the teacher, students should be given the opportunity to listen to each other. Finally, the amount of time students are expected to listen should be divided into short intensive listening sessions.

Moreover, Funk and Funk (1989) discuss the timing when teachers should teach listening. They believe that listening should be taught throughout the lesson or school day. Teachers should not create artificial listening situations; this is not learning. Furthermore, teachers should practice being good listeners too in order to set the example for their students. Lastly, they explain that classroom listening should involve exposure to different experiences. Exposure to different types and different purposes for listening creates more interest in the skill. They also define four different types of listening and indicate that these types of listening should be varied to create a total listening experience, as listed below:

- Listening for appreciation – listening to stories, jokes, and poems
- Listening for information – reports, announcements and films
- Listening for critical analysis – separating fact from fiction and listening to infer opinions
- Listening for exposure – creative writing and storytelling (Funk & Funk, 1989).

To sum up, in real life, listening is not a separate experience from any of the other skills. People listen to different sources, topics, and for various purposes all day long. The classroom should reflect and validate this natural setting for listening.

METHOD
Participants:

The participants in this study were intermediate level Arabic-speaking first year university students in the first semester of a foundations program. Their study load was 15 hours of core English per week (about 750 minutes). Their ages ranged from 17 to 19. They came from three classes at the same level. The sample used in this study consisted of 30 students selected at random from the foundations intensive English program. These 30 students make up two full class sections and were divided randomly into three groups of 10 students each: Group A, Group B, and Group C (see Table 1). All the students in this study came from were of Arabic ethnicity with differences in their nationalities. The length of their exposure to English instruction ranged from 2 to 4 years. The sample consisted of 17 females and 13 males.

Table 1. Participant Distribution

Section	# Of Students	Males	Females
A	10	5	5
B	10	6	4
C	10	4	6

Instrument:

The measures of the criterion were four separate listening tasks. The listening tasks were administered over a period of 8 weeks (a half of the full semester) at the interval of one listening task every other week. The participants completed the tasks during regular English classes; completion took about 20 minutes per test on average including the pre and post listening activities and correction. Each listening was repeated once in simulation of authentic listening situations. Listening materials presentation was alternated between pre-recorded materials and teacher reading (see Table 2).

All four listening tasks were chosen from the course book used for this particular level. Tasks were chosen based on the classroom syllabus and course curriculum. No changes were made to the pre-set academic program. The four listening tasks were similar in respect to a number of objectives as well as difficulty level and question types (see Table 3). All tasks measured the students' ability to process samples of realistic spoken language in real time by listening to authentic speech concerning topics related to everyday life. Participants demonstrated their comprehension by completing multiple choice questions, comprehension questions, and true/false questions. All tasks required note taking and inference. All participants completed the same tasks during the same week.

Table 2. Listening Schedule and Group Division

Week	Listening	Method	Group
1	The Changing Business Dress Code	Pre-recorded	A and B
		Teacher reading	C
2	**No Listening**		
3	Growing Up Quickly	Pre-recorded	C
		Teacher reading	A and B
4	**No Listening**		
5	Medical Travel Can Create Problems	Pre-recorded	A and B
		Teacher reading	C
6	**No Listening**		
7	The "Flavr Savr" Tomato	Pre-recorded	C
		Teacher reading	A and B
8	**No Listening**		

Table 3. Listening Tasks Details

Task	Title	Type	# Of question items	Types of questions	Objectives
1	The Changing Business Dress Code	Interview (Fashion Design)	8	Multiple Choice Note Taking Long Answer Comprehension	*Listening for new information to identify detail importance *Note taking *Predicting content *Listening for main ideas *Listening for details
2	Growing Up Quickly	Lecture (Developmental Psychology)	16	Tick the Right Answer True / False	*Anticipating information through titles, previous experience and details *Listening for key words for comprehension *Predicting content *Listening for main ideas

| 3 | Medical Travel Can Create Problems | Report (Public Policy) | 14 | Long Answer Comprehension

True / False | *Listening for reasons
*Listening for numbers to understand circumstances
* Predicting content
*Listening for main ideas
*Listening for details |
| 4 | The "Flavr Savr" Tomato | News Report (Agriculture) | 9 | True / False

Multiple Choice | *Listening to understand a speaker's opinion and bias
*Identifying general statements
*Predicting content
*Listening for main ideas
*Listening for details |

Table 4. Listening 1 Results

Group	Material Presentation	Question Type	Average	%	Frequency (n)
A & B	Recording	Multiple Choice	3.55	88.75%	14
		Comprehension	3.25	81.25%	9
C	Teacher Reading	Multiple Choice	3.7	92.50%	7
		Comprehension	3.4	85%	5

RESULTS

Data Analysis

Data were collected anonymously upon completion of each listening task and analyzed upon achievement of all four tasks. Data analysis was conducted using a quantitative approach for an action research project. To ensure the proper conduction of the quantitative analysis, the five steps of action research outlined by Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) which include:

Step 1: Identify an appropriate problem or question.
Step 2: Identify variables to be included in the project.
Step 3: Identify appropriate research participants.
Step 4: Collect quantifiable data.
Step 5: Analyze and interpret the results (p.73).

To analyze the collected data, a multi-step process was followed. First, all the responses were corrected. Next, the raw score responses were then tabulated in an excel spreadsheet. This was done based on each exercise in each listening. After that, the frequencies, averages, and percentages of the responses were calculated. As a precaution, all data was double checked for accuracy of reporting and coding. Finally, conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made based on the data analysis.

Results

Tables 4 - 7 present the results of the listening analysis. The results were divided into four sections showing Material Presentation, Questions Type, Average, Percentage, and frequency as follows: Listening 1, Listening 2, Listening 3, and Listening 4.

Table 4 highlights the results for the first listening, which was administered in the first week of the quarter term. As can be see, Group C's averages were higher for both kinds of question types; with multiple choice average 3.7 (92.50%, n=7) and comprehension average 3.4 (85%, n=5). Material presentation for Groups A and B was recorded materials; while for Group C, the listening script was read by the teacher in class.

Table 5. Listening 2 Results

Group	Material Presentation	Question Type	Average	%	Frequency (n)
A & B	Teacher Reading	Listing (Tick)	5.85	73.13%	5
		True – False	6.75	84.38%	10
C	Recording	Listing (Tick)	6.3	78.75%	4
		True – False	7.4	92.5%	5

Table 6. Listening 3 Results

Group	Material Presentation	Question Type	Average	%	Frequency (n)
A & B	Recording	True – False	6.8	85.00%	10
		Comprehension	4.3	53.75%	7
C	Teacher Reading	True – False	7.4	92.50%	4
		Comprehension	5.3	66.3%	5

Table 7. Listening 4 Results

Group	Material Presentation	Question Type	Average	%	Frequency (n)
A & B	Teacher Reading	Multiple Choice	4.3	86.00%	11
		True – False	3.6	90.00%	10
C	Recording	Multiple Choice	4	80.00%	4
		True – False	3.4	85%	6

Table 5 presents the results for the second listening task, which was completed during the third week of the term. The results show higher scores for Groups A and B as opposed to C. Interestingly, Groups A and B were exposed to the listening material via the teacher reading the scripts in class; while Group C was presented with recorded materials. The results show that the students scored higher on the True-False question items in all groups: A&B (84.38%, n=10) and C (92.5%, n=5).

The results in Table 6 show the percentages and averages for the third listening, which was conducted during the fifth week of the term. The responses indicated a higher percentage in all groups for the True-False type question as opposed to comprehension long answer questions. Groups A&B were presented with recorded materials and Group C listened to the teacher read. The averages for the True-False items were respectively 6.8 and 7.4 with percentages of 85% and 92.5%.

The final listening was completed during the seventh week of the first academic quarter; i.e. the last teaching week. Once more, the material presentation was switched and the results showed that Groups A&B scored higher on the True-False items (90%, n=10) compared to Group C (85%, n=6). Multiple Choice items also received high percentages from both Groups A&B (86%, n=11) and Group C (80%, n=4).

DISCUSSION

Listening is the first skill a person acquires in L1. Babies listen for months before they are able to produce language. The same applies for students learning a second language. In L2, understanding the spoken language is a pre-requisite for reading, speaking, and writing. Although listening is an essential skill for human communication and connection, it is yet to be fully understood and mastered. Too often, ESL teachers feel uncomfortable with teaching listening skills to their students therefore unintentionally undermining the importance of these skills. As a result, many students are left to their own abilities and motivation to improve their listening skills. What is important to remember is that communication is two-way process; a person must listen and comprehend before he or she can make a response. Understanding must happen before production of the target language.

With that being said, it is necessary to look at listening as part of the other language skills and not as an independent skill. In replying to the first research question presented about what factors can affect listening performance in the classroom, Gianneschi (1976) highlights the significance of listening by discussing five dimensions involved in the success of the skill: complexity dimension, interest dimension, familiarity dimension, abstraction dimension, and distraction dimension. To explain, the complexity dimension involves "the degree of time and effort needed by the listener to hear, decode, and interpret what he hears" (p.25). This means that if what a person hears is too complex or difficult to understand, it will require more time and more effort to understand. As a result, the listener will stop listening in order not to waste time and effort. Second, the interest dimension includes the motivation behind the message. Generally, students who are not interested in the topic do not do well on the listening task. Gianneschi states that students do poorly on listening tasks or examinations because the material presented and the manner of presentation are sometimes dull. In such situations, it is

not the ability of the student that is weak; it is indeed the presentation or topic of the materials that is faulty. The next dimension is familiarity. This dimension is concerned with the students' knowledge of the topic. When students are not familiar with the listening subject, they will do poorly. The fourth dimension has to do with abstraction. It is believed that the level of abstraction of a message determines how the listener receives it. In other words, the more abstract the message is, the harder it is to understand. This applies to students and their ability to decode concrete language vs. abstract language. Finally, there is the distraction dimension which involves all the senses and not only sounds. Sometimes, a listener may not understand what the speaker is saying not because of language ability but because of distractions caused by other senses. Gianneschi (1976) states that "A message that is played back on a tape recorder may bring about one reaction, while a message that is delivered live may bring about still another" (p.26).

In answer to the second research question asking if the manner in which the listening materials are presented affects the performance results, the scores from the collected data show that the students who were presented with the listening materials via their teachers live as opposed to a pre-recorded script scored higher each and every time regardless of the type of questions. However, it is interesting to note that students in all groups scored higher on the multiple choice and True / False than the long answer comprehension questions. Taking into account the five dimensions of Gianneschi (1976), it can be concluded that the presented materials fit into the dimensions listed. The topics and language were interesting and familiar to the students. Also, the levels of abstraction, complexity, and distraction were at a minimum. Therefore, the results show that regardless of the group, materials presented live in class by the teacher generated a higher accuracy level.

Looking in more details at the statistical significance of the findings (p-value), it is worth noting that the four listening tasks have the following values respectively: Listening 1- p-value 0.47, Listening 2 – p-value 0.13, Listening 3 – p-value 0.05, and Listening 4, p-value 0.39. Taking the significance of 0.05, all four p-values lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis H0 which states that the manner in which the materials for listening comprehension are presented has no effect on the results. Thus, the outcomes show that there is a difference in the result scores depending on whether the teacher read the listening script live in class or the material was presented through a pre-recorded tool. Despite the small number of participants, the p-value indicates the validity of the H1 hypothesis which supports the direct correlation between the manner of presentation and task results.

Limitations:

- This study is possibly limited because of possible minor differences in language ability among the participants despite their same-level classes. There are no previous scores or data to validate these differences.

- Also, the sample population is small in size (30 students). The students are all Arabic native speakers in the same level in the same university. The small number of participants can impose limitations on the generalizations of results.

Additionally, there are possible extraneous variables that might have affected the results. These include:

- The quality of the taped material – speed of speech, sound, noises, etc.
- The quality of sound on the CD player or CD itself
- The teacher's speed of reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

Listening has not been the focus of L2 teaching practices until recently. Second language teachers have focused more on reading, writing and speaking as the main skills for language acquisition (Vandergrift, 2003). The importance of listening as a language learning skill was brought into the limelight through the work of Asher, Postovsky, and Winitz in the early 1970s. Their concentration on the role of listening in language acquisition highlighted and validated its role as a key factor in assisting language learning (Vandergrift, 2011). Although listening is now considered an active mental process, it is still difficult to describe and teach. When it comes to classroom listening, teachers need to be aware that the key to helping students improve their listening skills is to teach them effective listening strategies, which will facilitate their language learning. Without effective strategies, the listening comprehension tasks will be problematic and confusing for the learners.

The pedagogical applications of these strategies can be summarized in the following six suggestions based on Chamot's (1995) citation of Mendelsohn and Rubin's (1994, p.20) work:

L2 teachers should:

1. Find out what strategies students are using. Ask and record responses.
2. Select one or two strategies found to be missing and identify them by name. Then explicitly explain to students why and when these strategies could be used during the listening process.
3. Model how to use each strategy by incorporating "think aloud" protocols.
4. Ask students to describe what they heard/observed.

5. Give opportunities for students to practice their listening strategies, and ask them to assess how well they use them by engaging them in discussions.

6. Encourage students to practice their strategies on a variety of tasks on a continuous basis.

In addition to teaching students the necessary strategies to face listening situations competently, teachers should vary their sources of materials. Using authentic listening materials in class is to be used discriminately. Many teachers take the audio recordings provided with the course books for granted and just play the exercises without really taking a close look at their students' needs and abilities. This is possibly due to the teacher's own discomfort with listening.

In practical recommendations to my ESL classroom, this study has further strengthened my belief that the manner in which learning materials are presented has a significant role in the results. With that being said, it would be very helpful and much less stressful for the students in an ESL class if the teacher reads the listening transcript herself or himself without relying on the pre-recorded materials. This course of action can increase motivation and reduce anxiety on the part of the students taking into consideration the affective factors involved.

Another important point is teaching the students that they need to listen to English as often as possible outside the classroom. Encouraging the students to seek more exposure opportunities by attempting to converse with native speakers of English, watching non-subtitled TV shows or movies, or looking on the Internet for audio practice will reinforce the students' listening strategies in authentic real-life situations. Effective listening lessons go beyond the listening task itself with related activities before and after the listening. Second language teachers should focus on helping their students develop listening strategies, which will make them good listeners as well as independent learners.

Finally, the importance of listening lies in its being the most frequently used language skill. Cheung (2010) explains, "Listening comprehension results in increased acquisition of the other language skills and consequently leads to acquisition of the target language" (p.6). After all, it is perfectly logical that a person cannot speak correctly unless s/he understands the input.

This exploratory study provided some understandings of the relationship between listening materials presentation and listening results. However, the generalizability of the results is limited by the nature of the research population, the instrument used, and the content of the listening tasks. A similar study needs to be conducted over a longer period of time with focus on the students' listening abilities in L1 as compared to L2.

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