

The Impact of Explicit Sentence Stress Instruction on Listening Comprehension Ability of Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the effect of teaching sentence stress patterns to Iranian EFL learners' listening ability. This study tried to determine the extent to which awareness raising along with efficient amount of practice of English sentence stress patterns affects the listening ability of Intermediate learners. To answer this question, 40 Intermediate language learners in Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Rasht were randomly selected via administration of a PET exam to 200 language learners. Then, they were divided into two groups of 20 participants each. Participants in the experimental group were instructed on a certain plan to learn and practice the concept of sentence stress. In this study the focus was on standard patterns of sentence stress which means words which are pronounced strongly and also those which are pronounced weakly so that the standard form of their pronunciation changes. The control group received placebo which means no treatment has been done and learners received a normal routine of the semester as they always did. A validated standardized test of listening was administered to both groups, the papers were assessed carefully. The data retrieved from both groups was analyzed through calculating a t-test. The results indicated that the means of the two groups were significantly different. Therefore we can conclude that in classes more focus and energy can be put on teaching sentence stress patterns.

KEYWORDS: EFL learners, PET, Listening Ability, and Sentence stress patterns

1. INTRODUCTION

Considering that human beings have developed a proper writing system, oral language is still the main channel of communication. However, listening seems to be ignored in Iranian EFL contexts. According to Iranian researchers (Jahangard, 2007; Hosseini, 2007; Razmjoo&Riazi, 2006), students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized enough in the Iranian EFL syllabuses. They are not well taught and also tested. Less time and emphasis was devoted to listening tasks, oral drills, pronunciation practices, and speaking abilities comparing to writing, reading, vocabulary, and grammar which have always been the center of focus and attention. Iranian students usually study English language for several years considering their school education and university education; however after all they lack the sufficient proficiency. It can be concluded that something important is missing in the educational system regarding teaching English.

In such classes, the same as most of traditional classes, there is very little interaction between the teacher and the students, if any, and also among students therefore oral skills in particular listening have not been emphasized enough as a significant skill of communication. It often seems as if teachers do not find interaction as a key element to the teaching and learning process (Riazi&Razmjoo, 2006; Ghorbani, 2011). In this way, learners cannot use the opportunity to perform tasks in accordance to the knowledge they have gained in the process of interaction with their peers (Klingner& Vaughn, 2000; Mercer, 2000; Swain, 2001). Well-known Iranian language teaching specialists, such as Farhady, Jafarpoor, & Birjandi (1994), have claimed that even Iranian university students at the university level are not able to use English for communicative purposes as they are supposed to such as other countries' students. According to Hosseini (2007), oral English language teaching in almost every Iranian academic context seems to be insufficient and unattainable as a result of strong examination wash back. In a lot of cases no attention is given to oral language testing in the final exams. Majority of English language teachers in Iran claim that the instruction of oral English in the school system suffers from major impracticalities.

The overemphasized attention given to exams, which hardly pay any attention to enhancement and testing of oral abilities and pronunciation, has led to a failure to educate students who can use the language properly for purposes beyond the exam (Kamyab, 2008).

All in all one can claim that listening comprehension has always been a controversial issue in area of language teaching. There is no need to mention that a lot of students have enough competence in written texts and they easily read, but when it comes to listening, they seem to struggle too hard. One of the main problems of learners is recognizing words in sentences when their phonetic form changes due to the special stress pattern of sentences. Such as change in pronunciation of "have" when used as a present perfect auxiliary verb. Therefore if

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students become aware of changes of this kind, they will be much better listener. Many different approaches since audio lingualism and after wards have been put into practice to enhance this vital issue. In this paper this issue has been put in test.

1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Ostovar-Namaghi (2006), three forces mostly dominant teachers' performance in the Iranian educational contexts. First and the most important reason is that as far as teachers do not have control over the choice of textbooks which are in line with their students' requirements; the input students receive is highly controlled by the predetermined curriculum. Second is the out pout which is controlled by national testing schemes resulting in inability of teachers in developing tests with a positive backwash on teaching and learning. Thirdly, due to the existence of a wrong cultural belief which dictates that high score means high achievement, the whole process of teaching and learning is evaluated and consequently influenced by the grade pressure from students, parents, and school principals. He believes that teachers are nothing more than the implementers of the prescribed methods and schemes influenced by cultural constraints, which limits them from using their own initiatives based on their professional knowledge and experience. Many English institutes and language teaching centers which teach conversational usable English are working out of the formal educational system throughout the country. They exist because of the weakness of spoken English instruction in the formal education system. Even in these institutes, less than enough time and attention is given to the practicing lots of listening. All which is done is practicing listening via using extensive level-appropriate material as the only method to improve students' listening ability.

According to Okita (1999), a lot of English teachers in Japan still use the same pronunciation practices which were dominated during audiolingualism. It seems so old fashioned and useless to perform such practices. Stevick (1982) argues that such activities like mimicry memorization are so unpleasant and completely mechanical which leads to students' monotony. Different scholars have suggested different techniques to assist students improve their listening ability. Wilson (2003) believes in "discovery listening" in which learners with the help of their teachers try to discover their listening problems and their causes. Students learn to find out how their reconstructed text is different with the original text and then they should find the cause of this problem. In this way they can find out the reason why they suffer from listening problems. He argues for a balance between form and meaning in which he claims that top-down processing that is listening for gist should not be used sacrificing the bottom-up processing that is sound and word recognition. Moreover, Dalton (1997) argues that if the English language sounds are not clarified and taught clearly, the learners' mind automatically stimulates them to the closest sounds in their native language.

Although the positive effect of intonation practice as a useful teaching strategy on students' improvement in listening ability has been reported by some researchers, little research has been conducted in this regard in the Iranian context. However, in a study conducted in Korea in order to provide an effective way to improve high school students' listening ability, Chung (2005) found out English pronunciation teaching had a positive effect on participants listening enhancement.

In another attempt by Shimamune & Smith (1995) a study was conducted on Japanese participants. This study was based on the relationship between pronunciation and listening discrimination. In the aforementioned study students were taught to articulate and differentiate English words which contain unfamiliar phonemic contrasts (e.g., red and led). The results of the research indicated that there exists an interaction between pronunciation and listening discrimination. Teaching pronunciation was found to be less effort-taking than teaching listening discrimination.

Elsewhere in a research by Kiany and shiramiry (2002) the effect of frequent dictation on the listening comprehension ability was tested. It was shown that there is a significant difference between listing ability of learners who have been given dictation frequently and those who have not. The researchers believed that the possible reasons could be the effort of participants in listening to native speakers more attentively in order to decode the foreign speech. In the study done by Ghorbani (2011) he claimed that phonetic instruction can facilitate the process of listening.

For many years the instruction of pronunciation has been ignored in language teaching in Iran consequently little research has been conducted in this regard. The reason seems to be unawareness of administrators and syllabus designers of the significance of this skill and the impacts it could have on having a fruitful communication. According to Brown (2007) and Nunan (2004), task-based language teaching has received a large amount of attention and popularity. To be in accordance with this recent trend, the researcher are trying to develop a more appropriate model in teaching pronunciation in which the learners come to an awareness of the super segmental features of the English language, a case which has been researched in this study.

1.2 Research questions and Hypothesis

One specific research questions is going to be addressed in this study:

RQ: Does explicit sentence stress instruction affect Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension ability?

The null hypothesis of the study can be as follow:

H0: Explicit sentence stress instruction does not have any effect on listening comprehension ability

2. METHOD

2.1 The Design of the Study?

The current study was an experimental study in which subjects of the study were homogenously selected and then randomly assigned into a quasi-experimental study two groups of control and experimental in order to investigate research question of the study. Apparently only experimental group received treatment whereas contro group received placebo treatment.

What is meant by sentence stress instruction is giving clear awareness and efficient amount of practice on English sentences' stress patterns. For instance participants were given awareness about stressed words in sentences (content words) and more importantly unstressed words which their pronunciation changes due to special stress patterns. Therefore, recognizing them would be so difficult for the learners. In this research it is believed that if learners become familiarized with this concept and receive enough practice regarding this issue, they will be able to understand listening texts much better.

2.2 Participants

The study was conducted with 40 Iranian students who had enrolled an EFL course in Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Rasht, Iran. The course consisted of 20 sessions, and students received 30 hours of general instruction. In order to make sure of homogeneity, participants were selected out of a pool of 200 based on their result in PET test, which is a standard exam of Cambridge University so there was no need for checking the reliability and validity of the test. Having calculated the mean and the SD, participants with the score of 1 SD above and below the mean ($\pm 1SD$ from the mean) were selected to conduct the study. All participants had already passed 10 courses in the same institute, apart from that, none had any other experience of studying English. After selection of the participants the steps below were taken:

1. 40 students in the same level were selected randomly (randomization)
2. The selected participants were randomly divided in two classes of equal number (random assignment).

As stated previously each class included 20 participants.

2.3 Instruments and Materials

The following instruments were used for the present study:

- 1) Preliminary English Test (PET) which is a standardized Cambridge test so reliability of the test is not needed to be tested.
- 2) A listening test used to determine the ability of the learners in listening. The reliability of the test was estimated 0.69 through Chronbach Alpha coefficient. The procedure of the study is described below. Two parallel version of test were used for pre-test and post-test.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

As this course is a general English course, communicative Language Teaching was used in both classes and all methods except for focus on pronunciation practice specifically sentence stress instruction were the same. At the beginning of the study both groups were taken a listening pre-test in order compare their listening scores. The scores were processed through a t-test calculation and the result didn't show any significant difference between two groups. In the control group the learners received a normal routine instruction as they always do, whereas in experimental group in each session for 20 minutes they were treated with focused practice of sentence stress. In order to make sure of the appropriacy of the pronunciations audio recording of native speakers were used. By the end of the study which as was previously mentioned took almost 2 months that is 30 hours of input, the students listening ability was tested again through running a post test (a parallel version of pre-test). The results of posttest were analyzed for further discussion via another independent sample t-test.

3. RESULTS

As the data gathered from the current study were interval data (scores) and also normally distributed they were analyzed through running an independent sample T-test between the score of experimental and control Group. The results are discussed as follow:

Table 1. The summary of descriptive analysis for the data related to the posttest of the experimental and the control group of the study

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Listeningscore	Control	20	11.6500	1.92696	.43088
	experimental	20	15.1000	1.74416	.39001

As table (1) indicates, the mean of the experimental group is significantly higher than that of the control group. Therefore it can be inferred that the treatment was effective for more detailed information the table below is presented.

Table 2. The summary of t-test between the posttest scores of experimental and the control group of the study

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
listeningscore	Equal variances assumed	.000	.987	-5.936	38	.000	-3.45000	.58117	4.62653	-2.27347
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.936	37.629	.000	-3.45000	.58117	4.62691	-2.27309

According to table (2), the result of t-test ($t_{obs} = 5.9$, $p < .05$) yielded significant difference between the experimental and control groups. The obtained t-observed is higher than the critical value of t in the t-student table with the degree of freedom of 38 ($df = 38$) and the level of significance of 0.05 ($Sig. = 0.05$) for the two-tailed (null) hypothesis as to be 2.01. Such a result ($t_{obs} > t_{crit}$) rejects the null hypothesis of the current study. In another words the sig obtained from the study is 0.000 which is smaller than 0.05 so we can make sure that the difference between the groups is significant.

4. CONCLUSION

As the above mentioned findings indicated instruction of sentence stress patterns and giving awareness and practice on changing pronunciation of words in sentences has a significant effect on EFL learners listening ability. Normally learners can hear the words they know much easier than those they do not. Therefore when due to the special sentence stress patterns when the pronunciation of words changes in the sentences learners seem to have problem recognizing the words they already know. In this study when they were given proper awareness and practice on this issue, their ability in comprehending listening has changed significantly.

It is suggested to include a pronunciation section at the end of each grammar section in text books and teaching materials in order to give students awareness in the right situation along with the grammar they are studying. Some textbook designers seem to consider this issue in their work, however; they do not put enough emphasis on sentence stress and they mostly focus on pronunciation. It is needed to put more time and effort on teaching specifically and explicitly the stress patterns of sentences and most importantly within sentence stress clarifying the changing pronunciation of words due to their stress patterns in order to help learners to be more competent in the area of listening.

Further research can be done in this regard as to check the effect of pronunciation practice and sentence stress instruction on other skills such as speaking as well. It is hoped that this article could have shed some light on this scope ELT and brighten a new path in leading teachers and syllabus designer into preparing more compressible material and learning environment and consequently having better students.

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