The Effect of Partial Dictation on the Listening Comprehension Ability of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

Amir Marzban¹ and Maryam Abdollahi²

1. Department of English Language, Qaemshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran
2. Department of English Language, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

Corresponding author email: m.abdollahi.1920@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This study investigated the effects of partial dictation on the listening comprehension (LC) ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Two homogeneous groups of intermediate EFL learners at the Abrar Language Institute in Qa'emshahr were chosen. Each group consisted of 30 female intermediate EFL students. One of the groups was chosen as the experimental group (EG), and the other as the control group (CG). They both took a listening test as a pre-test. For one term, consisting of 20 sessions, the students in the control group were given the listening exercises in their textbook. The experimental group, in addition to the listening exercises in the textbook, was given partial dictation 11 times during the term. At the end of the term the LC ability of both groups was post-tested with the same listening test taken from a TOFEL test, which was also used as the listening pre-test. Results of a t-test showed that dictation had a significant effect on the listening comprehension ability of the participants in the experimental group. The mean gain scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than those of the control group.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, Dictation, Partial Dictation, Listening Process, Decoding Problem.

INTRODUCTION

Listening plays a significant role in daily communication and educational process. In spite of its importance, it has long been the neglected skill in L2 acquisition, research, teaching and assessment. Both language teachers and students tend to overlook the importance of listening comprehension because their attention is fixed so completely on their ultimate goal, speaking, that they fail to recognize the need for developing functional listening comprehension skills as a prerequisite to developing speaking skills (Chastain, 1988). However, listening comprehension has received considerable attention in the fields of applied linguistics, psycholinguistics and second language pedagogy during the last two decades (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Flowerdew 1994; Rost, 1990). Results of the large body of research have shown that listening is not a passive process, in which the listener simply receives a spoken message, but rather a complex cognitive process, in which the listener constructs the meaning using both his/her linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. The importance of the listeners' cognitive and social judgments in the process of listening, in addition to the linguistic knowledge, has been especially emphasized (Rost, 1990).

One of the techniques for improving listening comprehension that is recommended in many books about teaching EFL in general and teaching listening comprehension in particular is dictation with a variety of alternative techniques such as partial dictation (Celce-Murcia, 1995; Gilbert, 1996; Ur, 1991).

In this study, partial dictation was used only as a teaching technique for improving the listening comprehension ability of intermediate EFL learners. Conducting such a study seemed necessary because using dictation along with a variety of alternative techniques as listening exercises have been recommended in many books about language teaching, but no research has been done to investigate the effect of PD on the listening comprehension ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.
REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical background
Listening Comprehension Studies

Until recently, listening comprehension attracted little attention in terms of both theory and practice. While the other three language skills (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking) receive direct instructional attention, teachers often expect students to develop their listening skill by osmosis and without help (Mendelsohn, 1994; Oxford, 1993). In the Audiolingual method, it is believed that if students listen to the target language all day, they will improve their listening comprehension skill through the experience. The fact that listening has been neglected or poorly taught may have stemmed from the belief that it is a passive skill and that merely exposing students to the spoken language provides adequate instruction in listening comprehension.

Listening is now considered as an active skill that involves many processes. Byrnes (1984) characterizes listening comprehension as a highly complex problem-solving activity that can be broken down into a set of distinct sub-skills. As Richards (1985) points out, current understanding of the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science. Research into listening over the past three decades has, above all, highlighted the fundamental intricacy of the processes involved (Lynch, 2004). In order to comprehend spoken messages, listeners may need to integrate information from a range of sources: phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. The fact that we achieve all this in real time as the message unfolds makes listening complex, dynamic, and fragile (Celce-Murcia, 1995).

There might be myriads of techniques for improving listening comprehension ability. One of the techniques for enhancing listening comprehension that is recommended by many scholars about teaching EFL in general and teaching listening comprehension in particular is dictation with a variety of alternative techniques such as partial dictation (Gilbert, 1996; Rost, 1991).

Dictation

Dictation is described as a technique used in both language teaching and language testing in which a passage is read aloud to students, with pauses during which they must try to write down what they heard as accurately as possible (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992). Dictation is used as a technique where the learners receive some spoken input, hold this in their memory for a short time, and then write what they heard. This writing is affected by their skill at listening, their command of the language, and their ability to hold what they have heard in their memory. Dictation has been thoroughly examined as a language proficiency test (Oller and Streiff, 1975). As a teaching technique, it helps language learning by making learners focus on phrase- and clause- level constructions. This focusing is accuracy- based.

Partial Dictation

In partial dictation a passage with some deletions is given to the testees, but read in complete form. The testees are required to fill in the deleted parts as they hear the passage. Partial dictation is, in fact, an activity between cloze and dictation tasks. It is similar to dictation in that the passage is read to the testee. However, it is different from dictation in that the testee is provided with an incomplete form of the passage. Furthermore, it is similar to cloze in that the testee should fill in the blanks. It is, however, different from close in that the deleted parts are given to the testees through reading the passage (Farhadi, Jafarpur and Birjandi, 1994). In partial dictation, the portions of the text that are missing in the printed version are the criterion parts where the examinees simultaneously and exactly write what is heard (Oller, 1979).

Previous studies

Rahimi (2008) in his study Using Dictation to Improve Language Proficiency investigated the effect of dictation with 65 EFL learners to see if it helps them improve their language proficiency. To this end, an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) were selected. The results showed improvement for both groups in their performance on the whole proficiency test. However, with respect to the components of the test, the EG showed improvements in grammar, vocabulary, reading, and listening comprehension, while the control group showed improvement just in the vocabulary section of the test.

In another study, Chun (2010) worked on Developing Intensive Listening Skills: A Case Study of the Long-Term Dictation Tasks Using Rapid Speech. This study investigated the effects of dictation of rapid speech on developing listening skills and the impact dictation had on students' listening/speaking ability. Fifty undergraduate TESL program students participated in the research. They were given the opportunity to practice listening through
dictation (listening cloze) for the AP news segments twice a week for a period of twelve weeks. They achieved significant gains in terms of the TOEFL and dictation scores through dictation practice. In addition, three questionnaires completed by the students shed light on how dictation helped them improve listening and speaking skills.

In a study titled "Using Partial Dictation of an English Teaching Radio Program to Enhance EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension" Kuo (2010) reported pervasive decoding/listening problems of word recognition and word segmentation in connected speech at normal speed among Taiwanese university EFL students at the intermediate level. In order to resolve these serious listening problems, an activity which integrates partial dictation with listening to an English teaching radio program appropriate to students’ English proficiency was designed by synthesizing findings, suggestions, and proposals of various FL/EFL researchers. It was then implemented in an intermediate-level Freshman English class with 31 Engineering students. A valid and reliable listening test served as pre- and post-test and two short teacher-made questionnaires were adopted to collect the necessary data.

Statement of the Problem

Current approaches to teaching listening have tended to emphasize listening for gist, top-down processing, and listening strategies. These basically focus on teaching students how to cope with authentic language and real-life situations, as part of the communicative approach. Bottom-up approaches that focus on word recognition, on the other hand, have been comparatively undervalued. Moreover, regardless of the existing research investigating the impact of partial dictation on L2 listening comprehension, there is a glaring omission of empirical work investigating the using of partial dictation on listening comprehension. Therefore, to solve the problems mentioned above on decoding/listening skills, word recognition and word segmentation, partial dictation was used. This study investigated the effectiveness of this activity.

Research Questions

In line with what already has been mentioned, the researcher proposed the following question:
Does partial dictation have any effect on the listening comprehension ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

Research Null Hypotheses

In order to be on the safe side, and also gain logical answer to aforementioned research question, the following null hypothesis was formulated:
Ho. Partial dictation has no effect on the listening comprehension ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

3. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants consisted of sixty intermediate students in an English language institute in Qa'emshahr called "Abrar", girls branch, in which I have been teaching for more than 7 years. They were selected from 100 students who participated in a NELSON General Proficiency Test (Fowler and Coe, 1976). All the participants in my research project were female. I focused on the institute where I was teaching because I had the principal’s support to conduct the research and the number of the students were sufficient to be chosen as participants for my research project. After all the students were informed and a certain day also was assigned, a general proficiency test was administered. Therefore, to obtain the population required for the experiment a large number of students were chosen and a Nelson test 100A (Fowler and Coe, 1976) was administered. Of course, the researcher validated the test beforehand in a class of 10 students. The reliability of the test according to KR-21 turned out to be 0.73, showing that test was reliable. This test was administered with a group of 100. The mean and standard deviation (SD) of this group were 31.50 and 9.53 respectively. Those students located one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean were selected, amounting to 60, and others were discarded. One group, consisting of 30 students, will be assigned randomly to the experimental group and the other, consisting of another 30 students will be assigned to the control group.

Instrumentations

Here in the materials section, I would like to say that my research project consisted of: 1- Giving a general proficiency test to a large group of students and then after analyzing and calculating the standard deviation, the students’ score closer to the mean were chosen. For this part of my research a Nelson test 100A (Fowler and Coe, 1976) has been chosen. 2- Out of the 100 students who participated in the Nelson exam, 60 students were
assigned. As long as my research revolves around listening, so a listening test was necessary to be used as a pretest and after the training sessions, as a post test. For this part, a listening test taken from a TOEFL test was administered. As long as the test is an actual TOEFL test administered in 2004 for Iranian candidates, it wasn’t necessary to standardize the test for Iranian students again. The materials have been chosen from the native-recorded passages and conversations in the course textbook from ‘Interchange’ (Richards et al., 2005) and also “Tune in” series. The same materials were taught in both control and experimental groups. Four- partial texts were provided in order to implement in the experimental group. I adopted and adapted the partial dictation model provided by Farhady, Birjandi, and Jafarpour, (1994). You can observe a copy of partial text in the Appendix.

Procedures

In the first session, all the subjects took the proficiency test. 60 participants were chosen and randomly divided to experimental and control group. 30 participants were chosen for the experimental group and 30 students for the control group. For the pre-test, the students in the control and experimental group were given a listening test taken from a TOEFL test. In both groups listening comprehension was taught. In the control group the conventional method that teachers use in their classes was used. In the experimental group the method of the PD was used.

For one term, consisting of 20 sessions, the conventional method that teachers use in their classes was used in the control group and students were given the listening exercises in their textbook- ‘New Interchange’ and also ‘Tune in’. In addition to the listening exercises in the textbook, the experimental group was given partial dictation 11 times during the term. The materials for giving dictation were the native-recorded passages and conversations in the course textbook-‘New Interchange’ and ‘Tune in’.

The procedure to carry out the treatment, giving partial dictation, is as follows. First, students were made aware of the topic of the passage or conversation to activate their background knowledge; they then listened to the whole passage or conversation without any pauses. Second, The texts were duplicated with blanks for the words or structures that were determined to be important and the students were provided with an incomplete written text, the tape were replayed and the students wrote down in the deleted parts what they heard. In the third stage they listened again to the whole passage or conversation to check what they had written. After the dictation they checked their writing against the tape script. Sometimes after checking their dictation, participants listened to the tape again while looking at their dictation and paying special attention to their mistakes and were given teachers’ explanation and error correction.

There were four steps in creating the partial text. First, the transcript was provided. Second, the instructor identified words or expressions that should be deleted. The deleted parts were mostly nouns or verbs because the most important part of meaning of a text is yield by nouns and verbs. Actually nouns and verbs carry the conceptual meaning of a text. Over 95% of deleted words were known to the majority of students; the chief aim of deleting known words was to provide sufficient practice in recognizing known words and/or strengthening sound-to-word relationships in the long-term memory. Additionally, less than 5% of deleted words were new; these served to teach, demonstrate, and practice transcription of a new word into phonetic symbols and thus to its spelling. This skill is crucial for life-long independent learning, for students can often find spelling and meanings of new words on their own. Third, based on deleted words, questions (primarily Wh-questions) were designed to guide students on what to expect and to focus on. Fourth, phonemic notations of word variations in connected speech (re-syllabification, assimilation, elision, and reduction of function words) were supplied in the handouts to both facilitate in-class explanations and to raise students’ attention on problematic word variations that reportedly impede EFL/ESL listeners’ decoding and/or comprehension.

RESULT AND DISCCOUSION

When the means of pre-tests of CG and EG were compared, it was found that there was not any significant difference between the two groups. On the other hand, when separate the scores and for each group and calculate the means both for pre-test and post-test the story changes. Calculations showed that the mean of pre-test was 29.30 and the mean of post-test was 29.66 and their gain score was 0.33 and also their SD was 6.60 and 6.33 respectively. On the other hand, when the same numerical values for group E is calculated, it can be observed that the mean of pre-test was 27.33 and the mean for post-test is 32.63 and their gain score was 5.3 which shows a great deal of change. Also the SD for pre-test here is 7.47 and for post-test is 6.04. That again shows a big difference between the two groups.
**Inferential Analysis of the Data**

Here, paired sample T-tests were employed to rate differences between mean scores on pre- and post-test of two groups. The results of the tests were subjected to the following statistical procedures. A paired t-test was run to find the differences between the means of the scores on the following tests: the pre- and post-listening tests for the CG as well as for the EG to see if there is any difference between the listening of the subjects on the pre- and post-tests. Table 2, illustrates the results of the T-test for CG on pre-test and post-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t-test</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-0.219352</td>
<td>0.8271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satterthwaite-Welch t-test*</td>
<td>57.8988</td>
<td>-0.219352</td>
<td>0.8271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anova F-test</td>
<td>(1, 58)</td>
<td>0.048115</td>
<td>0.8271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welch F-test*</td>
<td>(1, 57.8988)</td>
<td>0.048115</td>
<td>0.8271</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Test allows for unequal cell variances

**Analysis of Variance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sum of Sq.</th>
<th>Mean Sq.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.016667</td>
<td>2.016667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2430.967</td>
<td>41.91322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2432.983</td>
<td>41.23701</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Category Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Std. Err. of Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRECON</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29.30000</td>
<td>6.607989</td>
<td>1.206448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSCON</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29.66667</td>
<td>6.337264</td>
<td>1.157021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>29.48333</td>
<td>6.421605</td>
<td>0.829026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the calculations, and the level of less than 5 percent of the test statistic, t-test, Satterthwaite-Welch t-test, ANOVA F-test and Welch F-test, the means of the experimental group are not equal before and after the period. The null hypothesis of the impact of partial dictation on student listening comprehension is rejected. In other words, partial dictation had a positive significant effect on the level of the students listening comprehension in the experimental group.

**Results of Hypothesis Testing**

As the results indicate, EG significantly did better than CG in the post-test. In other words, the experimental group who had regular practice with partial dictation made more improvement in their listening comprehension than the control group. Since the two groups of students had almost the same classes during the time interval between the pre-and post-test, one can claim that the difference in their performance on the listening test was due to the fact that the experimental group had practice with partial dictation.

Pappas (1977) argues that dictation has been regarded as a useful means of developing learners' listening comprehension and verbal retention skills. If listening is simply described as making sense of what we hear, it assumes that we have to identify correctly what has been said. Yet speech recognition can be far from straightforward to EFL/ESL listeners, primarily because English presents to them particular difficulties in the form of acoustic blurring of lexical boundaries in connected speech. No wonder Field (2003) argues that the commonest
perceptual cause of breakdown of understanding is lexical segmentation, the identification of words in connected speech.

Increasing evidence exists that L2 listeners' ability to cope at this linguistic end of processing may well be a key to success; bottom-up processing is more important than top-down at limited levels of L2 listening proficiency. This point naturally leads to the significant pedagogic implication that learners should be helped to direct their attention to practice in rapid and accurate linguistic decoding rather than contextual and schematic guessing (Lynch, 2006). Dictation can come into play in this context, as a tool to provide the substantial practice of intensive linguistic listening processing to the L2 learners.

Based on the findings of this study, it could be argued that dictation helps L2 language learning by making learners focus on the language form of phrase and clause level constructions as well as the one at lexis level. Students gained significant benefit from consistent partial dictation. The findings of this study is in line with Hughes' (1989); Buck (2001); Lin (2003); and Nation and Newton (2009), since they claimed that practice with partial dictation helps learners improve their listening comprehension. The value of dictation may be further increased if the learners know what mistakes they made. Providing feedback on the accuracy of their dictation practice, may serve as consciousness raising activities to the learners. The consciousness raising comes from the subsequent feedback about the errors and gaps in their perception (Nation and Newton, 2009).

Table 2. paired t-test for EG on pre- and post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t-test</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-3.019936</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satterthwaite-Welch t-test*</td>
<td>55.55876</td>
<td>-3.019936</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anova F-test</td>
<td>(1, 58)</td>
<td>9.120016</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welch F-test*</td>
<td>(1, 55.5588)</td>
<td>9.120016</td>
<td>0.0038</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Test allows for unequal cell variances

Analysis of Variance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Statistics</th>
<th>Std. Err. of Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREEX</td>
<td>1.364857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POSEX</td>
<td>1.103269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>0.935940</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSIONS and IMPLICATIONS

In this study first of all, the students decoding problem and dictation as a remedial work to overcome this problem were discussed. The research issues that this study is addressing and investigating is: Does PD have any significant effect on listening comprehension ability of Iranian intermediate EFL learners?

Analysis of the data collected through pre-test showed that found that there was not any significant difference between the two groups in terms of listening comprehension. On the other hand, when separate the scores and for each group, calculate the means both for pre-test and post-test the story changes. As you can observe, the mean and standard deviation of group C has exclusively been calculated. As it was shown, the mean of pre-test was 29.30 and the mean of post-test was 29.66 and their gain score is 0.33 and also their SD is 6.60 and 6.33 respectively. On the other hand, when you calculate the same numerical values for group E, you can observe that the mean of pre-test was 27.33 and the mean of post-test was 32.63 and their gain score is 5.3 which shows a great deal of change. Also when you take the SD for group E, you can observe that the SD for pre-test here is 7.47 and for post-test is 6.04. That again shows a big difference between the two groups. In other words, the experimental group who had regular practice with partial dictation made more improvement in their listening comprehension than the control group. So, the null hypothesis of this study is rejected. The findings of this study is
in line with Hughes’ (1989), Buck (2001), Lin (2003), and Nation and Newton (2009), since they claimed that practice with partial dictation helps learners improve their listening comprehension.

Considering the fact that all but most of the language learners, especially in countries that English language is taught as a foreign language, have problem understanding the gist of whatever they listen to, this research can open an avenue to firstly perceive the problem existed and secondly to establish a methodology in language teaching according to properties of partial dictation and use it in language pedagogy. Because this study found that dictation can have a positive effect on the listening comprehension ability of elementary EFL learners, EFL teachers can use this technique in their classes with more confidence.

In some countries such as Iran where students do not have access to native English speakers, EFL teachers can make use of this technique to familiarize their students with the English spoken by native speakers. If EFL students are exposed only to English spoken by Iranian EFL teachers, even after learning considerable grammar and vocabulary they cannot understand native English speakers easily. Dictation makes EFL learners aware of many aspects of the pronunciation of English spoken by native speakers. It may also affect their listening comprehension ability and their pronunciation. Using dictation to make students aware of different aspects of pronunciation and the sound system of English has been recommended both by Kenworthy (1990) and Celce-Murcia (1996).

Dictation can easily be used in various kinds of EFL classes. Dictation can be used not only as a listening exercise, but also as a listening test (Farhady, Jafarpoor, and Birjandy, 1994; Celce-Murcia, 1996). It is recommended as a general English proficiency test (Oller, 1979). It can be used in error analysis studies. Some ELT experts, such as Bowen, Madson, and Hilferty (1985), have recommended it for teaching writing, and some have recommended it for teaching grammar (Kidd, 1992).

References

Lynch T. 2006. Academic listening: Marrying top and bottom. In A. Martínez-Fior & E. Usó-Juan (Eds.), Current trends in the development and teaching of the four language skills (pp. 91-100). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.