

LISTENING VS. READING: AN EXPERIMENT TO SEE HOW THEY IMPROVE EACH OTHER

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ÖZET : Yabancı dil öğrencileri dinleme ve okuma başta olmak üzere dil becerilerini geliştirmekte zorluk çekmektedirler. Söz konusu iki becerinin ortak özelliklerden biri tahmin yeteneğinin anlama düzeyini artırmasıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, yapılan bir deney sayesinde dinlemenin mi okuma konusunda tahmin geliştirmede daha etkin olduğunu, yoksa okumanın mı öğrencileri dinleme konusunda daha doğru tahminlere yönelttiğini ortaya koymaktır. Eşit düzey ve sayıda öğrenciden oluşmuş dört grupta yapılan araştırmanın sonucunda okumanın dinlemeye olan etkisinin çok daha belirgin olduğu görülmüştür.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Dil becerileri (okuma, yazma, dinleme, konuşma), tahmin yeteneği

ABSTRACT: Most foreign language students have difficulty improving their language skills, especially listening and reading. One of the common characteristics of the two skills mentioned is that an ability to predict the content of the language substance helps increase their comprehension. The aim of this study is to see whether listening or reading is more influential in improving the other. The experiments carried out with four groups of students, equal in number and the level of proficiency, conveyed that reading as a pre-listening activity was more efficient in improving the listening skill rather than vice versa.

KEY WORDS: Language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), ability to predict.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ever since language learning and therefore language teaching gained importance, applied linguists and language teachers have been seeking solutions for the very many problems learners have in improving their language skills. Even after mastering basic grammar rules and reaching a sufficient level in vocabulary, most learners still have great difficulties in developing their language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Of these four skills, listening and reading have a lot in common, one shared characteristics of which poses an additional difficulty: since it is not always possible to see the

concrete outcome of the listening and reading processes, language teachers may not be aware of the problems their learners are encountering. For instance, while a learner is occupied with either listening to a conversation from a tape recorder or reading a short story, unless s/he complains about not being able to understand it, the teacher is not generally aware of the problems s/he is struggling with. The situation is even worse when learners try to use these skills outside the classroom, because when they listen to a public speech, or when they read an article, for example, they have no chance of testing themselves. They can never be sure about how much of what was really said or written they have understood correctly.

Nevertheless, not all of the shared characteristics of listening and reading add to the difficulty learners have while improving these skills. Quite the contrary, some of these may even help them to have more control over what they listen to or read and thus easily comprehend much more. The ability to 'predict' the content of the spoken or the written language material they will be exposed to, not only comforts the learners psychologically, but also enhances their level of comprehension. Recognizing the importance of the predicting skill has led many scholars to search for ways to improve this ability which can then be employed in order to improve the listening and reading skills. However, not many teachers have thought of either making use of the reading skill in order to help learners come up with predictions about what they will listen to, or of making use of the listening skill to facilitate predicting which can thus make reading a simpler task.

2. AIM

Since the aim of this study is to point out the similarities between listening and reading, the main features of both will be put forth before concentrating on the shared characteristics. Then, an experiment will be carried out to see how effective listening can be in enhancing the learners' ability to predict about what they will read; and how effective reading can be in developing the learners' ability to predict about what they will listen to. Finally, putting forth whether

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listening or reading is more influential in giving learners a chance to generate predictions about the other will be the last aim of the present study.

Listening which can be defined as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying is not a very easily grasped skill for most language learners. When first confronted with a foreign language, the listener hears a barrage of meaningless sounds. The frustration arises from the stream of unfamiliar sounds and the inability to link these sounds with meanings. Learners eventually learn to segment the streams of sounds, group them into meaningful chunks and comprehend the message they convey.

Another thing they learn is to treat listening material differently depending on the function they aim to fulfil. In other words, since learners have various expectations, they need not listen to everything devoting the same effort and energy. They must be able to figure out the type of listening they have to indulge in: Discriminative listening involves merely the identification and interpretation of vocal and visual clues, while comprehensive listening has comprehending the message as its purpose. Therapeutic listening requires listening to a person's problems in order to be able to express opinion or to give advice in return. While critical listening requires the formation of judgements about the already discriminated and comprehended message, appreciative listening is mainly listening for pleasure [1].

An able listener is usually capable of coping with the listening process since s/he bears the following enabling skills listed by Willis:

1. predicting what people are going to talk about
2. guessing at unknown words and phrases without panicking
3. using one's own knowledge of the subject to help one understand
4. identifying relevant points; rejecting irrelevant information
5. retaining relevant points (note taking, summarizing)
6. recognizing discourse markers, e.g. 'well', 'oh', 'another thing is...', 'Now, finally'
7. recognizing cohesive devices, e.g. 'such as', 'which', including link words, pronouns, references, etc.
8. understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress, etc. which give clues to meaning and social settings
9. understanding inferred information; e.g., speakers' attitude or intentions." [2]

Although it takes time and energy to improve the listening skill, it is still a worthwhile effort, since it helps learners develop other skills as well. Joiner states that all other native language skills are dependent either directly or indirectly upon listening, and that listening is therefore crucial in the development of the ability to speak, read, and write. She later goes on, citing studies by Asher and Postovsky, and concludes by saying that proficiency in listening comprehension is readily transferable to other language skills:

"In the experiments upon which this observation was based, students whose training focused on listening comprehension and whose language practice involved no systematic training in either reading or speaking nevertheless developed those skills." [3]

No matter how interesting it may be to learn that reading can be developed even without receiving any systematic training merely due to the training of the listening skill, the purpose of this current study is to prove whether listening or reading is more influential in improving the other. Therefore, after a brief look at the requirements and characteristics of the reading skill, the shared qualities of listening and reading will receive closer attention.

Despite the very many different reasons and therefore ways of reading, the main purpose of the readers is usually the same: to get something out of the reading material. In other words, s/he is interested in what the writer has intended to convey whether it be an idea, a fact, a feeling, or merely enjoyment. In order to achieve her/his objective, the reader needs to involve in an active process of correlating elements of language with meaning which may pose numerous difficulties.

Although an able reader usually disregards unknown vocabulary items and successfully reads past it, in some instances, if the reader cannot understand the meaning of a word or phrase, s/he may miss the whole point of a passage. Furthermore, s/he needs to be able to recognize the patterns of relationships between words—the semantic patterns of lexical items.

"Thus, he must learn to observe, for example, how a series of synonyms can carry a particular concept through a passage (weapons...arms...equipment...), or how a general term is made more precise (The men were issued with their weapons. Each man received a pistol, two clips of ammunition, and a dagger), or how a technical meaning may be assigned to a term so that it may be used as a counter in the development of an exposition." [4].

Another relationship the reader must be aware of is the grammatical relationship between the lexical items which may help to grasp the semantics of a particular grammatical item in a particular context. For instance, a sentence like 'He'll change the programme in Germany' may be interpreted either to mean 'He'll change the programme which has been arranged in/for Germany', or 'He'll change the programme when he gets to Germany'.

A skilled reader makes use of the information and the signals passed to her/him by the lexical and grammatical patterns to discover the logical relationship patterns as well. In doing so, s/he can perceive whether a sentence is an evidence upon which a possible generalisation in the next paragraph may be based, for example.

Two other types of relationships regarding the

reading process are the ones between the text and the writer; and the text and the reader. The ability to recognize the writer's attitude and purpose can make the reader's task a lot simpler since it may supply her/him with information on what to look for or on how seriously the text should be read. Finally, how much influence the text will have on the reader depends on the last type of relationship mentioned above.

The so-far-stated information on listening and reading might now lead to the similarities between both skills, thus carrying us one step further towards why it is assumed that each one of these skills improve the comprehension of the other.

In trying to list the similarities between the listening skill and the reading skill, the very first item should be that they are both related with comprehension. In other words, the aim of the learner will be to have the ability to understand what others have tried to convey either in spoken or in written language. In order to improve their comprehension level in both skills, learners will need to develop the ability of 'to predict' what people are going to talk about or what they have written about. By the help of their predicting ability they can expect to hear or read certain words, phrases and even sentences, thus increase their ability to decode the correct meaning.

For example, if a person at a wedding party naturally has the expectation of hearing the bride's father talk about the happy occasion, nevertheless hears him start talking about psychology and psychoanalysis, may, and probably will, be very surprised. On the other hand, if another person at the same party knows that the bride's father is a psychiatrist and is in the habit of considering everything from the point of psychology, he may have expected this speech and might even predict that the father will somehow link the future happiness of the couple to their being psychologically healthy. In this case, what the second person understands of the father's speech will be much more than that of the first listener who may miss much in trying to recover from the shock and concentrate on what he is actually saying.

Similarly, let us consider that a reader has the expectation of learning about the recent developments in politics when he starts reading his favorite journalist's article. This person will be surprised if he finds that the first few paragraphs are about psychology and reasons of committing suicide. However, if another person who knows that one of the ministers have committed suicide the day before reads the same article he might predict that the journalist will draw a link between the quotations he has gathered from psychology books and the recent developments

in politics which have led the minister to accomplish that dreadful act. In this case too, how much the person understands from the first few paragraphs will be much more than that of the first person who may be rather confused to find his favorite journalist write about psychology instead of politics.

Let us now suppose that there is a third person in both situations. If the third listener at the wedding had been another psychiatrist or if the third reader of the article had been a psychologist, what these people had comprehended of both messages would naturally be much more than that of even the second persons. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that a knowledge on the subject of what is being read or said increases the comprehension.

As has been stated by Rost, numerous learners have difficulties with different aspects of comprehension. While some have trouble with factual or literal comprehension (identifying what was said or what facts were stated), others have trouble with interpretation (such as categorizing new information or seeing cause-effect relationships between facts) [5]. Although recognizing discourse markers, cohesive devices, link words, pronouns, etc., and the ability to deduce relevant meaning rejecting irrelevant points are important factors enhancing comprehension in both skills, the experiment carried out for this study concentrates mainly on the importance of predicting what is going to be said or read.

3. METHOD

In order to see whether reading or listening is more effective in improving the other, two passages giving information about the same subject, a creature called 'the kangaroo rat' were selected. Although these passages were dealing with the same animal, they were not at all the same. One of the passages was a reading passage and the other was a recorded text meant to be used as a listening activity. Five multiple-choice items, more or less of equal difficulty level, were prepared for each passage.

Then 140 preparatory class students who had recently failed the same proficiency test in an English Language Teaching Department were divided into four groups. Each group consisted of 35 students chosen at random. The first group of students were made to read the reading passage once (the time was just enough for one reading) and answer the questions following. The second group was asked to listen to the listening passage first, and were then given the reading text and the questions to be answered. The third group of students had a chance to listen to the listening passage only once and were then given a short time to answer the questions following that passage. Finally, the fourth group of students first

read the reading passage and then listened to the listening passage once, before they had the same amount of time to answer the questions.

The reading passage and its questions which were read and answered by the first two groups of students (the second, after listening to the listening passage first) was as follows:

"Few animals are as well adapted to the dry, hot desert as the kangaroo rat. Because it comes out of hiding only at night, it misses the extreme day time temperatures. In addition, strong back legs move it efficiently across the desert, a foot at a time. Furthermore, a larger than normal middle ear helps it hear possible danger from a distance. The most surprising physical adaptation is an unusually large nose that helps conserve moisture. The large nose actually captures any extra moisture in the rat's own exhaled air. Because of these characteristics, the kangaroo rat never needs to drink water in its lifetime." [6]

1. Which sentence best states the main idea?

- a) The kangaroo rat has only one foot, so it must hop.
- b) The kangaroo rat has powerful legs that propel it.
- c) The ears of the kangaroo rat help to keep it safe.
- d) The kangaroo rat has adapted well to a dry environment.

2. It is understood that the kangaroo rat does not.....

- a) walk around during the day
- b) sleep during the day
- c) eat during the day
- d) breathe during the day

3. The kangaroo rat's back legs help him to move.....

- a) slowly across the desert
- b) swiftly across the desert
- c) searching for food across the desert
- d) dangerously across the desert

4. His large ears enable the rat to become aware of his possible

- a) friends b) fellows
- c) environment d) enemies

5. The kangaroo rat never needs to drink water because of his.....

- a) nose and his staying in his hiding during the day
- b) ears and his staying in his hiding during the day
- c) nose and his middle ear.
- d) ears and his middle nose

The listening passage and its questions which the third and the fourth groups of students (after having read the reading passage first) had to listen and answer were:

"The kangaroo rat lives in a desert area of the southwestern United States. It gets its name from its jumping ability. Proportionately it has the same long, powerful legs as the kangaroo. It also has a strong tail on which to sit. Only 3 inches in length, the kangaroo rat can jump with amazing accuracy and land directly on top of an insect, its principal food. When two kangaroo rats fight, they do so in midair. Two fighters leap into the air and hit each other with their sharp claws while still in the air. Probably the most interesting thing about the kangaroo rat is that he never drinks water. Since he lives in an area of little water, he gets moisture from desert plants. These provide him with all the liquid that he needs." [7]

1. It is understood that the kangaroo rat lives in a region that has.....

- a) no water
- b) a small amount of water
- c) lots of moisture
- d) waterless plants

2. Kangaroo rats' legs are.....

- a) as strong as those of kangaroos
- b) as long as those of kangaroos
- c) just the same as those of kangaroos
- d) proportionately the same as those of kangaroos

3. As understood, kangaroo rats move by.....

- a) jumping
- b) walking
- c) moving their tails
- d) moving their claws

4. Kangaroo rats generally eat.....

- a) desert plants
- b) moisture
- c) insects
- d) other kangaroo rats

5. They use their sharp claws in order to.....
- a) move
 - b) hit each other
 - c) eat
 - d) fight with kangaroos

4. FINDINGS

The results of the answers given revealed that students had more difficulty with the listening task. While 13 students out of 35 could answer all five questions following the reading passage in the first group, none of the students in the third group could answer all five questions correctly. The scores of the students in the four groups are as listed below. Line 'a' refers to the number of correct answers and line 'b' refers to the number of students giving that many correct answers.

Group I - Reading:

a	0	1	2	3	4	5
b	-	2	3	4	13	13

Group II- Reading after listening:

a	0	1	2	3	4	5
b	-	-	1	3	11	20

Group III- Listening:

a	0	1	2	3	4	5
b	5	13	7	6	4	-

Group IV- Listening after reading:

a	0	1	2	3	4	5
b	-	1	3	8	12	11

A general ANOVA technique was used to compare the four-group means simultaneously. Furthermore, students' t-tests were applied to compare the results of the first and second groups; third and fourth groups; and second and fourth groups, the results being:

- Reading (Gr.I) versus Reading after listening (Gr.II) $p < 0.005$
- Listening (Gr.III) versus Listening after reading (Gr.IV) $p < 0.01$
- Reading after listening (Gr.II) versus Listening after reading (Gr.IV) $p < 0.01$

As can easily be seen, while there is a statistically significant relationship between the first and the second groups, the difference in the scores of the third

and the fourth groups is highly significant. This, of course, affects the comparison between the second and the fourth groups, making it highly significant as well.

5. CONCLUSION:

Since the ability to predict is equally important in improving both the listening and the reading skill, and since a general knowledge on what is going to be heard or read helps both the listener and the reader to comprehend more, an experiment was carried out to see whether listening or reading is more influential in giving learners a chance to increase their comprehension. While the first group of students just read and answered the questions of a reading passage about kangaroo rats, the second group of students first listened to another passage about the same animal. They were thus given a general information about the kangaroo rat. This could enable them to come up with more and correct predictions about the content of the reading passage. After the second group of students answered the questions following the passage, it was obvious that this group had scored higher than the first, proving once more that a general knowledge on that specific subject and therefore the ability to predict are very important in improving the reading skill.

The third group of students were made to listen to the passage about the kangaroo rats and answer the questions following, whereas the fourth group of students were first given the reading passage which would help them to get a general idea of what they will be exposed to in the listening passage. The information they obtained from the reading passage was expected to increase their ability to predict more accurately as they listened to the same passage given to the third group of students. When the results of the third and fourth groups of students were compared, the distinction was even more obvious than that of the first and second groups of students. Listening as a pre-reading activity had caused only 7 students to answer all of the 5 questions. However, reading as a pre-listening activity had caused 11 students to answer all of the 5 questions.

The results of this study alone may be insufficient to claim that reading is more influential in improving the listening skill rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, it can encourage more foreign language teachers to make use of reading as a pre-listening activity especially if their students find listening a difficult skill to improve.

7. REFERENCES

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