The Relationship Between Prior Knowledge and EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension: Cultural Knowledge in Focus

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Abstract The present study investigated the impact of cultural familiarity on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. To do this, forty English language learners were selected at a private language institute in Isfahan based on their scores in FCE test and were randomly assigned to four groups of ten. A pre-test was administered to the four groups before any treatment. During the experiment, Group A had exposure to target culture texts. The participants in Group B had exposure to international target culture texts. The participants in Group C had exposure to source culture texts. The participants in Group D had only exposure to culture free texts. At the end of this treatment, the four groups took a post-test which was the same as pre-test to see whether the treatment had any influence on their listening proficiency. The results of the post-test showed that the four groups performed differently on the post-test, which indicated that greater familiarity with specific culturally-oriented language listening material would improve Iranian EFL learners' listening proficiency.

Keywords: Listening comprehension, Cultural knowledge, EFL learners, Source culture, Target culture

1. Introduction

Listening is probably the most important and fundamental of the language skills as humans spend approximately 60% of their time listening (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p.85). It is found that in daily life listening is used the most frequently (42%), followed by speaking (32%), reading (15%), and writing (11%) (Flowerdew, 1994). Chastain (1976, as cited in Chen 2003) remarked that listening is served as "the basis for development of speaking". Therefore when learning a second or foreign language, the first step is to make an effort to listen, just as in first language acquisition. Listening is probably the least explicit of the four language skills, making it the most difficult skill to learn. It involves physiological and cognitive processes at different levels (Field, 2002; Lynch, 2002; Rost, 2002), as well as attention to contextual and "socially coded acoustic clues" (Swaffar & Bacon, 1993).

However, at one time, listening was assumed to be a passive activity, meriting little research and classroom attention. But at present, some researchers have devoted some time to listening and it is recognized as an active process, critical to L2 acquisition and deserving of systematic development as a skill in its own right (Morley, 1999). In the past 10 years, much attention in second language learning research has been devoted to composing hypotheses and theories explaining crucial factors that may develop foreign language (FL) listening comprehension (Nagle & Sanders, 1986; Buck, 1991). Even though there is no generally accepted theory on FL listening comprehension development, some researchers (e.g. Richards, 1983; Christine & Christa, 1995) believe that listeners' linguistic knowledge and background knowledge are the essential factors that could affect their understanding of the foreign language.

It is necessary to understand how listening processes work and what affects them, since it play a central role in second or foreign language learning. A number of researchers have investigated the problems that language learners face while listening. Some of these problems include fast rate of speech (Blau, 1990; Chen, 2002; Griffiths, 1992; Huang, 1992; Long, 1990; Zhao, 1997), inattention (O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper 1989), background knowledge (Markham & Latham, 1987; Long, 1990; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992), lexis (Kelly, 1991), unfamiliarity of strategies used (Goh, 1997), and limited memory capacity (Wu, 1998).

Brown & Yule (1983) found four clusters of factors which can affect the difficulty of spoken language: the speaker (the number of the speakers, speech rate, the types of accent), the listener (the role of listener, the level of response, the interest in the subject), the content (vocabulary, grammar, information structure, background knowledge), and support (visual aids to support the text – pictures, diagrams, etc. It is believed in the literature that among these factors learners' background knowledge and content schemata can affect the quality of listening comprehension to a large extent. Research in reading supports the notion that activating background knowledge and applying this knowledge to new input greatly facilitates processing and understanding (Graves & Cook, 1980). Listening has been considered, like reading, as an active process of interpretation that goes beyond the simple decoding of the signal. In addition, its major purpose is the construction of meaning (Rost, 2002) by matching what listeners hear with what they already know, i.e. their background knowledge.

One aspect of background knowledge is culture that is embedded in even the simplest act of language (Hao, 2000; Kramsch, 1993). Kramsch (1993) maintains that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. Accordingly, cultural knowledge as a basis for language learning is now emphasized in modern language teaching.

2. Background to the Study

Listening comprehension is an active and conscious mental activity in which listeners achieve comprehension by using clues from contextual information, personal expectations, cognitive processing skills, and background knowledge and it is a simplistic that listening be regarded as a passive process of mere understanding of aural input. In fact, a great number of researchers have defined listening as an active and complex process (Rivers & Temperley, 1987; Byrnes, 1984; Call, 1985; O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Vandergrift, 1999). O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) viewed listening comprehension as " an active process in which individuals focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to their existing knowledge" (p.418).

It is said that listening involves the interaction between the context and linguistic knowledge that is a "bottom-up" (text-based) and top-down "conceptually-based" processing skill (Brown 2001). In bottom-up processes, listeners understand the spoken input and process sounds, words, phrases, sentences, ideas and the relationships among the ideas. In top-down processes, listeners predict the spoken input based on their existing knowledge or the previous relationships among the ideas. Therefore, listener understands what he hears and connects it to his prior knowledge of the world. A number of research studies indicate that more proficient learners approach listening while using both top-down and bottom-up process whereas less proficient learners use more bottom-up processes (O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper 1989; Bacon 1992, as cited in Chien and Li, 1997).

Listeners need to attempt to make sense of information at the same time they are internalizing that information. There is little time for listeners to reflect upon the information and have opportunities to ask for repetition. All learners may have something in common when dealing with comprehending spoken messages in that they integrate what they hear with their existing background and world knowledge when they construct and interpret meaning from information that they hear. In other words, language-learning difficulties may be overcome by making well use of learners' prior knowledge or what learners already know about the world. In the early 1960s, cognitive psychologists emphasized the importance of learners' background knowledge for

developing second language skills. According to Ausubel (1968), learning is effective when it is processed with meaningful materials related to the knowledge that learners already possess. Learners' existing knowledge base needs to be organized so that new information is easily matched with its cognitive structure. It is generally accepted that in both listening and reading comprehension, background knowledge is highly important for comprehending a spoken or written text.

While listening or reading, the learners skim parts of the text which are not related to their purpose and try to focus their attention to the semantic or logical relations of the text instead of processing all words of the discourse. If they encounter linguistic information that they do not know, it is the key words which provide them with a clue for comprehending the text. They then try to use the context and their background knowledge to comprehend the text. In this vein, comprehension is achieved just by processing the text word by word, but by linking the ideas behind the words to draw conclusions. The emphasis is placed on the underlying meaning of utterances which enable learners to overcome the problem of focusing on every word in the text (McNeill, 1997). Using clues from the context and their background knowledge to understand an overall text enables learners to reduce the intensity of listening effort (Hasan, 2000) as well as to improve their listening comprehension skill. Few empirical studies have explored the potential relationship between prior knowledge and listening comprehension.

Markham and Latham (1987) conducted research to assess the influence of religious-specific background knowledge on listening comprehension of adult ESL students. Sixty five ESL students who were categorized as Muslim, Christian, and neutral, respectively, participated in the study. The analysis of recalled data indicated that students adhering to a specific religious group recalled more ideas, and produced more appropriate elaborations and fewer inaccurate distortions regarding passages associated with their particular religion. The researchers concluded that background knowledge does significantly influence ESL students' listening comprehension.

In his study, Hadley (1993) found that background knowledge may be helpful in considering what kinds of knowledge could be used for comprehension tasks. He maintained that three kinds of background knowledge may be potentially activated in the second language comprehension process: 'linguistic information', which is related to the target language code; 'knowledge of the world', which includes the concepts and expectations stored from learners' prior experience; and 'knowledge of discourse structure', which is the understanding of how various types of discourse are generally organized. The limitation of processing the linguistic form activates only learners' linguistic information, whereas learners' knowledge of the world and of familiar discourse structure should be stimulated by language learning activities which provide relevant context.

In another study, Hohzawa (1998) found, by studying 58 Japanese English learners, that listeners with high prior knowledge understood more familiar text than unfamiliar text and more proficient L2 listeners understood more than less-skilled listeners in either familiar or unfamiliar text. Students were assigned to a background-information group (experimental group) and to a no background-information group (control group). A proficiency test was given to measure their prior knowledge about the topics of three news stories. Students in the experimental group discussed the content of the stories briefly after the introductions to the news stories were provided. Collected scores from a written recall-protocol and a comprehension test revealed that students who lacked background information tended to produce more instances of inaccurate recall of the text or distortions, which was similar to findings of Markham and Latham (1987).

In their study, Sadighi and Zare (2002) explored the effect of background knowledge on listening comprehension. Two TOEFL preparation classes allocated to EFL students took part in the study. The experimental group received some treatment in the form of topic familiarity, and their background knowledge was activated. Then a 50-item TOEFL test of listening comprehension was administered to both experimental and control groups. A statistical analysis of the results provides some evidence in support of the effect of background knowledge on listening comprehension.

Role of culture in language learning and teaching was investigated by Genc and Bada (2005). This study was conducted with the participation of the students of the ELT department of Çukurova University in Turkey. As a result of the study, a significant similarity between the students' views and the theoretical benefits of a culture class as argued by some experts in the field was observed. Regarding the benefits of learning about culture, attending the culture class has raised cultural awareness in ELT students concerning both native and target societies. This study illustrates how arguments of language teaching experts in favor of a culture class in language learning and teaching are justified by some sound evidence provided by the participants of this study.

Unlike L2 reading comprehension studies that have found that the reading performance of L2 learners is mainly affected by the level of language ability rather than by content knowledge and that the effect of content knowledge varies according to the level of L2 proficiency, L2 listening studies have shown somewhat inconsistent results. However, Chiang and Dunkel (1992) reported that content knowledge did not support comprehension of listening to monologue texts, whereas L2 proficiency played a significant role in the degree of L2 listening comprehension demonstrated. Similarly, Jensen and Hansen (1995) reported that listening comprehension performance of L2 learners was mainly affected by their level of L2 proficiency, not by their prior knowledge. Additional studies are required to establish the relationship between background knowledge and L2 proficiency in L2 listening comprehension, especially in examining the specific roles learners' L2 proficiency and background knowledge play in comprehension.

In the current study, expanding on this line of research, we tried to discover the effect of cultural familiarity on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. In other words, having reviewed previous studies on the relationship between background knowledge and listening comprehension, this study was conducted in an EFL context, Iran, to address the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between familiarity with the target culture (English and American) and Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension?
2. Is there any relationship between familiarity with international target culture (culture of different foreign countries such as Japan, Australia and France) and Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension?
3. Is there any relationship between familiarity with Persian culture (source culture) and Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension?
4. Do culture free materials have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

For the present study, forty students learning English at a private language institute in Isfahan were selected at the intermediate level based on their scores on FCE test. Then, the participants were randomly divided into four groups. The number of male and female participants was not equal. There were 24 female and 16 male students. Their age range was 16-32.

3.2. Instruments

Two types of instruments were used in this study as follows: First, FCE test containing 50 recognition items was used for selecting forty homogenous participants. Second, there were materials selected from sources such as New Interchanges and Top Notch Series to use for treatment. In order to account for the influence of culture on listening comprehension, four types of materials reflecting different cultures were focused: English and American culture, international target culture, Persian culture and culture-free texts.

3.3. Procedures

First, the FCE test was administered to seventy five EFL learners, both males and females, at a private language institute in Isfahan. After the scores of the proficiency tests were obtained, the mean and standard deviation of the scores were calculated and forty participants were selected at intermediate level to participate in the study. Then, they were randomly divided into four groups, Group A (English culture), Group B (International target culture), Group C (Persian culture), and Group D (culture-free). Over the course of three weeks (18 hours), each group practiced with listening comprehension materials that reflected a particular culture. Finally, the four groups took a listening comprehension test which included sample listening comprehension materials as mentioned earlier in this paper. The scores of the four groups were compared with one another to see the potential effect of treatment on students' listening comprehension in each group.

4. Results

a. The analysis of variance of participants' post-test scores in the four groups

The mean scores of the students of each group in the pre-test and post-test are shown in Tables1 and 2. As is observed, the score of the participants who listened to the culturally-oriented materials are higher than the other three groups.

Table 1. Mean scores of the four groups in the pre-tests

Condition	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
TCT	12.66	10	1.37
ITCT	11.2	10	1.66
SCT	11.0	10	1.62
CFT	10.83	10	1.82
TOTAL	45.69	40	6.47

Table 2. Mean scores of the four groups in the post-tests

Condition	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
TCT	15.73	10	1.82
ITCT	14.71	10	1.51
SCT	14.4	10	1.64
CFT	11.16	10	1.70
TOTAL	54	40	6.67

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the scores on the four groups in post-tests to be significantly different. Since the F-ratio is bigger than one, we can understand that there is some difference among the means. Similarly, to show the precise location of any significant differences between four groups, a dependent t-test was calculated. Additionally, post-hoc dependent t- tests indicated that regarding the effect of cultural background knowledge, the performance of all groups differed significantly ($p<0.001$).

The differences between the mean scores of groups A and B ($d =1.02$) were lower than the differences between groups A and D ($d =4.57$). Similarly, the differences between the mean scores of A and B ($d =1.02$) appeared to be lower than B and D ($d=3.55$), and A and C ($d =1.33$) lower than C and D ($d = 3.24$). On the

other hand, the difference between the mean scores of groups B and C (d = 0.31) was lower than that of groups B and D (d = 3.55) and groups C and D (d=3.24).

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA Test Results

Dependent Variable		Sum of Squares	df.	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Post- Test score	Between Groups	321.41	3	116.47	11.88	8.21
	Within Groups	1062.98	118	8.9542		
	Total	1399.39	121			

b. The results of Group A (Target Culture) on the pretest and posttest:

Regarding Group A performance, there is a significant difference between the participants mean scores in the pretest and the posttest. The statistical t-test was administered to make sure that the difference in the mean scores was significant. For Group A, the t-observed was calculated (4.09) for a degree of freedom of (18) which was higher than the t-critical of (1.441). The results confirmed that Group A performed differently in the two tests. As Table-4 shows, the difference between the means of the scores of Group A is statistically significant (P< 0.01, t-value = 4.09). This shows that the subjects in TCT group performed better in the test and this seems to be the result of the treatment (familiarizing them with the culturally-oriented materials). So the participants in Group A improved their listening comprehension during the classes through greater exposure to target culture texts as culturally-oriented language listening materials.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics related to the results of the pretest and the posttest of Group A participants

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-test
Group A Pretest	10	12.66	1.37	4.09
Group A Posttest	10	15.73	1.82	

c. The results of Group B (International Target Culture) on the pretest and posttest:

Concerning Group B performance, there was a significant difference between the participants mean scores in the pretest and the posttest. The t-test was run in order to make sure that the difference in the mean scores was significant. The t-observed was calculated (3.18) for degree of freedom of (18) which was higher than the t-critical of (1.441). The results therefore show that Group B performed differently in the two tests. In other words, as the table shows, the difference between the means of the scores of the Group B is statistically significant (P< 0.01, t-value = 3.18).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics related to the results of the pretest and the posttest of Group B participants

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-test
Group B Pretest	10	11.2	1.66	3.18
Group B Posttest	10	14.71	1.51	

d. Results of Group C (Persian Culture) on the pretest and the posttest:

With regard to Group C performance, there was a significant difference between the mean scores in the pretest and the posttest. To make sure that the difference in the mean scores was significant, the statistical t-test was run. The t-observed was calculated (3.12) for degree of freedom of (18) which was higher than the t-critical of (1.441). The results, therefore, show that Group C participants performed differently in the two tests. In other words, as the table show, the difference between the means of the scores of the Group C is significant (P< 0.01, t-value = 3.12). This shows that the subjects in SCT group performed better in the test and it seems to be the result of the treatment (familiarizing them with the culturally-oriented materials).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics related to the results of the pretest and the posttest of Group C participants

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-test
Group C Pretest	10	11. 0	1.62	3.12
Group C Posttest	10	12.4	1. 64	

e. The results of Group D (Culture Free) on the pretest and posttest:

There is not any significant difference between Group D mean scores in the pretest and the posttest. To make sure that the difference in the mean scores was insignificant, the t-test was administered. The t-observed was calculated (.48) for degree of freedom of (18) which was less than the t-critical of (1.441). The results show that Group D participants performed almost the same in the two tests. In other words, as the table shows, the difference between the means of the scores of the Group D is not significant (P< 0.01, t-value = .48). The participants in Group D could not improve their listening comprehension during the classes by exposure to culture free texts as one kind of specific language listening materials.

Table 7 Descriptive statistics related to the results of the pretest and the posttest of Group D participants

Groups	N	Mean	SD	t-test
Group D Pretest	10	10.83	1.82	.48
Group D Posttest	10	11.16	1.70	

The critical value of Group A was 1.441, which means that the difference between the t-observed (4.09) and the t-critical was significant. There was a significant influence on the listening comprehension of the Iranian EFL learners who listened to texts with English and American culture orientation. The critical value of T in Group B was 1.441, which is lower than observed T (3.18) of this group. There was a significant difference between the means. International culture texts had a significant influence on listening comprehension. The critical value of T in Group C was 1.441 that is lower than t-observed (3.12) of this group, it means the difference between the t-observed and the t-critical was significant. Texts with Persian culture orientation had a significant influence on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. But as it was clear from the above Table 7 that the t-critical value (1.441) of Group D is higher than t-observed (.48) in this group so there is not any significant difference between t-observed and t-critical. The t-value revealed that the four groups performed differently on the posttest and it shows that greater cultural familiarity with language listening materials promotes the Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As to the purpose of the study, the analysis of the data yielded a number of findings which are discussed in this section and their relevant implications will be drawn. It was observed that having background knowledge is a key feature of any kinds of listening materials, so language learners wanting to improve their listening comprehension should have greater exposure to two kinds of listening materials: target culture materials and international target culture materials. Through having greater exposure to specific culturally-oriented materials, for example, English culture materials, language learners improve their listening comprehension. Background knowledge, cultural familiarity and linguistic complexity are essential linguistic and meta-linguistic features for enhancing listening comprehension. Accordingly, having exposure to language materials in which these three features are highly observed can boost listening comprehension development. Cultural familiarization of the text has a significant effect on listening comprehension. Listeners are expected to achieve the writer's intended meaning by combining existing information with what they listen. In accord with previous research on the relationship of cultural familiarity and comprehension, this study found that participants performed significantly better on test questions that had culturally familiar content.

As it was observed, in the pre-test, subjects were unable to determine answers to the comprehension questions as they faced a lot of barriers in the form of new vocabulary and advertising concepts. As they tried to overcome this, the process of interpreting the text was interrupted. Therefore, they could not identify the main ideas and information in the lecture that they needed to answer the comprehension questions. The result of the study supports those of Markham and Latham (1987), Chiang and Dunkel (1992), and Schmidt-Rinehart (1994), since they all claimed that background knowledge and topic familiarity would improve students' performance in listening comprehension. Chang and Read (2006) also yielded similar results. They demonstrated that "topic preparation (TP)" is the most facilitative among four types of pre-listening supports across proficiency levels.

According to Anderson & Lynch's (2000) view of 'Listener as Active Model- Builder,' successful comprehension in listening takes place when the listener has schematic knowledge, knowledge of the context and systemic knowledge. The treatment lessons had successfully provided the subjects with these three categories of knowledge. In the treatment lessons, the subjects had the opportunity to learn key vocabulary items that were presented in the same context as they would hear in the lecture. Other activities that allowed them to relate content to their own experiences like identifying effective advertisements and the elements that make them appealing also gave them an insight into the field of advertising. Creating an advertisement for their own product gave the subjects a chance to put into practice their newly acquired knowledge on this topic. This familiarity of topic enabled the subjects to successfully identify the facts and details of the advertising techniques, as well as details that support these main ideas. This ability facilitated their understanding of the text which explains why they performed significantly better in the post-test. This is consistent with previous studies (e.g Schmidt – Rinehart, 1994) indicating that familiarity with the topic facilitates listening comprehension.

However, the findings of this study challenges those of Chiang and Dunkel (1992) and Jensen and Hansen (1995) who reported that L2 proficiency had a more prominent role compared to prior knowledge of the subjects with regard to their listening comprehension.

All in all, the findings of the study showed that the experimental groups had a better performance in comparison to the control group in their listening comprehension, and this better performance seemed to be the result of the background knowledge that the subjects obtained during the treatment. Findings regarding the positive role of background knowledge are consistent with the findings of the majority of L2 listening studies. It is important for teachers to recognize that students' existing background knowledge can improve their comprehension significantly. Taking time to assess the conceptual information the listeners bring to the text will enable teachers to go beyond dealing with the linguistic information in order to help students understand and make their learning more meaningful. The results of this study and others indicate that it is

useful to help students make connections to their background knowledge and build a mental framework to facilitate their comprehension.

Two major pedagogical implications can be drawn on the basis of the findings of this study. First, different kinds of pre-listening supports including cultural knowledge can be made as an essential part of listening comprehension activities. For example, for high-proficient learners, teachers can introduce a reading text containing similar topic and theme. In this way, listening and reading are integrated and to enhance the students' learning and students will be more willing to dealing with listening comprehension tasks.

Second, it is necessary to emphasize that listening is a multidirectional process, comprising interaction of many factors. Therefore, the students can understand that to comprehend efficiently, they should consider the text as a whole and try to activate their background knowledge rather than paying attention to every single word in the utterance.

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