

THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE LISTENING ON EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract: The teaching of listening seems to be an under-researched topic (Field, 2008) although scientists have asserted that listening is an integral part of language development. This study examines the employment of extensive listening as a method to enhance EFL learners' listening comprehension. The experiment in the study involved two intact classes with 42 learners attending an English program at a language center in Vietnam. An extensive listening program was set up for the treatment group to follow. The control group, in the meantime, was given listening exercises as homework. A pre-test and post-test was used to measure the participants' improvement in listening comprehension. The results showed that the treatment group significantly outperformed their control group counterparts. This suggests that extensive listening facilitates EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Key words: extensive listening, listening comprehension, EFL listening skills, listening strategies

1. Introduction

The fact that students are often assessed on their other language skills than listening is probably one of the most obvious reasons why it has been undervalued (Field, 2008). The practical complexities of collecting listening materials have worsened the problem, let alone the challenge of exploiting them for classroom activities. From the learner's perspective, listening seems to be the most difficult and even frightening skill (Field, 1995). One possible explanation for this is the lack of evidence that they are making progress in learning the skill. Learners may also feel insecure due to their failure at the beginning of their English learning journey, which is apparently unavoidable. These

nuisances all together have made listening lag behind other skills in language courses.

Fortunately, listening occasionally gains its prominence among language practitioners. Researchers have emphasized the role of listening in the development of spoken fluency since it provides materials for learners to form their speech (McErlain, 1999). Listening is so subtly interconnected with other areas of inquiry and development that it has relevance to almost all of us (Rost, 1994). A number of previous studies have attempted to examine how the listening skill can be taught using methods or strategies. One of the most widely known methods is extensive listening, which involves learners listening to comprehensible spoken input for pleasure.

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Various authors, who contend that this method brings about profound effects on learners' language proficiency development (Waring, 2008; Stephens, 2011; Chang & Millet, 2014), have advocated the method.

This study, therefore, set out to explore how extensive listening can cure the headache that usually tortures EFL learners while learning to understand English spoken language. An experiment was carried out among 42 EFL adult learners at the intermediate level. The 20 participants in the control group and 22 participants in the treatment group were following an English course at a language center. While the treatment group was attending the extensive listening program, the control group did listening exercises as homework. A pre-test and post-test were utilized to measure the learners' listening comprehension.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Listening Skill*

Linguists have proposed a few definitions of listening, but one of the popularly accepted views of listening is that it is an active process of getting the meaning from spoken texts (Rubin, 1995; Buck, 2001; Helgesen, 2003; Brown, 2006; Rost, 2011). The process is considered to be complex and thus requires the listener to contribute knowledge from both linguistic and non-linguistic sources. During this process, the listener has to decode the sounds to make meanings out of what they hear.

The importance of listening has been emphasized for a long time. Researchers such as Buck (2001) and Asemota (2015) assert that listening is essential for academic achievement. This is probably because students spend roughly 50 percent of their study time on listening (Nunan, 1998). It has been claimed that

listening competence plays a fundamental role in language learning (Boyle, 1987; Nation & Newton, 2009; Siegel, 2015). Listening is a way to build a map of meaning in the mind and therefore is the way of learning the language. It provides learners with rich input and information to build up the knowledge necessary for language use. Past research has also reported that listening is beneficial for pronunciation learning (McErlain, 1999) and vocabulary learning (Asemota, 2015).

Many theorists have proposed listening processing models (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brown, 2006; Nation & Newton, 2009), types of listening, methods, strategies and activities for teaching the listening skill (Rost, 2011; Asemota, 2015; Nguyen & Pham, 2019). However, there has not been any consensus on which strategies and methods are beneficial for learners' listening ability development. For example, some authors contend that bottom-up strategies work better with lower-level students (Goh, 2000). Meanwhile, several researchers have reported that a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies would help learners to develop their listening ability (Nunan, 2002). Yet others assert that such strategies as compensatory, pro-active and repair strategies are advantageous in listening instruction (Field, 2008).

Researchers have also proposed different sub-skill and strategy taxonomies (Siegel, 2015) and suggested language instructors to use authentic materials in listening instruction (Miller, 2003). Some language practitioners recommend that listening instruction should include a range of listening types, such as intensive listening, selective listening, interactive listening, responsive listening, and autonomous listening (Goh, 2000). Recently, listening instructors have put forward the concept of extensive listening

and advised language teachers to set up extensive listening programs, which they believe are propitious for EFL learners (Waring, 2008; Chang, Millett & Renandya, 2018).

2.2. Extensive Listening

Among other things, extensive listening has been used as a method to improve language proficiency for more than three decades. However, compared to its counterpart, extensive reading, the literature on extensive listening is relatively scant (Matsuo, 2015) and most of the research exploring this method has been done in first language learning contexts (Ivone & Renandya, 2019). The term extensive listening is often linked to listening for pleasure (Rixon, 1986; Field, 2008), listening to easy texts (Waring, 2008), or listening to a great amount of comprehensible input (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). There has been a consensus that extensive listening involves learners listening to massive oral input that is enjoyable and comprehensible. With this type of listening, the focus is on meaning, not form. To put it another way, learners should achieve high levels of comprehension and be able to listen at or below their comfortable fluent listening ability (Renandya, 2011).

Past research has reported the advantages of extensive listening in foreign language learning. Listening extensively allows learners to attain enough meaningful sustained practice, which facilitates language acquisition (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988). This kind of practice also effectively accommodates learners during their process of automatization. Learners can comfortably move from slow to fast, controlled to less controlled automatic processing of spoken units. Once learners have reached automaticity, they will be able to decode the sounds in an effortless

manner. This is why extensive listening is propitious for low-leveled learners (Waring, 2008). In addition, learners' motivation may increase as they can make choices about what they will listen to (Harmer, 2007). Likewise, other researchers have also found that extensive listening enhances learners' attitudes (Grahama & Santos, 2015) and thus fosters their ability to self-regulate their own learning (Cutting, 2004). Chang, Millett and Renandya (2018) reported that after their participants practiced extensive listening, they could comprehend the more complicated texts at faster speech rates. Along similar lines, Antle (2011) claims that extensive listening has a positive relationship with reading speed. These all suggest that the method has a profound impact on not only learners' listening fluency but also their development of other language aspects and psychological factors.

So far, linguists have proposed principles for extensive reading, but not extensive listening (Day & Bamford, 2002). Language practitioners may find the same principles useful for extensive listening, since extensive listening is usually seen as the less popular sibling of extensive reading. However, this lack of literature has indicated the need to carry out more studies on this topic in order to further our understanding of extensive listening.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question

This study aimed to investigate the effects of extensive listening on EFL adult learners' listening comprehension. An experiment was conducted to answer the following research question:

To what extent will the participants following the extensive program improve their listening comprehension as compared to the participants in the control group?

3.2. Participants

The experiment involved two intact classes at a language center. One of them was randomly chosen to be the treatment group and the other served as the control group. The treatment group had 22 students and the control group had 20 students. Both groups were taking a general English course at the intermediate level. They were admitted to the class based on their performance on a placement test. The test consisted of four components: listening, reading, writing and speaking. The highest score for each component was 25. The two classes scored similarly on the test, which was the reason why they were enrolled into the intermediate level classes. Regarding the listening component, the two groups performed similarly well. The control group did a little better, scoring 17.1 out of 25 while the experimental group scored 16.7 out of 25. In other words, the two groups theoretically were at the same level of English language proficiency at the beginning of the course. The participants were all living in the local city and aged from 19 to 34. Most of them had studied English for about one and a half years.

3.3. Materials

The materials used in the study included a pre-test and post-test, extensive listening resources and the textbook for the English course. The pre-test and post-test were designed to measure the participants' listening comprehension. Each test consisted of 25 questions taken from the listening section of a PET (Preliminary English Test) test.

The extensive listening materials consisted of 100 recordings, each of which told a story. At the beginning of the course, we encouraged the students to bring to class two to five stories that they enjoyed reading. Altogether, 124 stories were contributed, but only 91 stories were chosen. Each of them

contained around 600 words. The others were either too difficult or/and too long for the intermediate level, or contained sensitive content. Nine stories were collected from the Internet to add to the library. The texts were checked using an online readability calculator and text inspector programs. This was to make sure that they were comprehensible for the learners. Finally, five native English teachers working at the center were asked to read the stories and record their voices to create the listening library.

The textbook used for the usual English course was *Breakthrough Plus Level 3* (Craven, 2019). The book consists of twelve units, each of which contains sections of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation along with skills expansion. It was designed to be used for general English language courses in which learners can systematically develop the four language skills.

3.4. Procedure

At the beginning of the course, both groups sat the pre-test, then the treatment group followed the listening program while their control group counterparts were given listening exercises as homework. The exercises were taken from the book *Tactics for listening - Developing level* (Richards, 2019). The book was supposed to suit learners at transitioning from pre-intermediate level to the intermediate level. The recordings in the listening library were sent to the treatment group members via email. They were asked to save the files to their cell phone or computers, whichever is more convenient for them to replay. During the experiment, consultation sessions were held for those participants who needed help, either technically or mentally. Besides, the learners from both groups were asked to fill in a listening inventory to record what they did during the experiment. The inventory form consisted of information about the name of the stories (for the treatment group) or the code of the exercises (for the control

group) and how much time they spent on the listening task. This was to make sure both groups followed the instructions and did what they were supposed to do. The examination of the listening inventories indicated that the participants from both groups did not employ any other methods of listening during the treatment. It was also shown that the amount of time they spent on listening at home was roughly similar. The course lasted two months and at the end of the course, both groups sat the post-test.

4. Results

In this study, the participants' listening comprehension was measured by calculating the number of correct answers they had on the pre-test and post-test. The highest score a student could get was 25.

Comparisons of each group's scores on pre-test and post-test as well as the two groups' scores on the post-test were made to see if the treatment group did any better than the control group after the treatment.

With regard to the groups' performance at the beginning of the treatment, the results showed that the two groups had similar average scores on the pre-test (See Table 1). The best learners in both groups scored 12 out of 25 and the modest ones scored 7. The independent *t*-test results showed no significant difference between the treatment group (M=9.05, SD=1.50) and the control group (M=9.10, SD=1.37), $t(38) = -0.12$. This finding is in agreement with the results of the placement test administered before the course and thus validates the idea that the two groups started at the same level of listening competence.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Listening Comprehension on Pre-Test for Both Groups

	N	Range	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Variance	SD	Skewness
Treatment group	22	5	7	12	199	9.05	2.24	1.50	-0.25
Control group	20	5	7	12	182	9.10	1.88	1.37	0.21

On the post-test, the treatment group and control group scored 18.55 and 15.25, respectively (See Table 2). The data indicated that while most of the treatment group members had average scores of at least 18, the majority of the control group had scores of 16 or lower. The lowest score among extensive listening participants was 16 and that among the control participants

was 12. The independent *t*-test results showed that the treatment group (M=18.55, SD=1.60) attained significantly better comprehension than the control group (M=15.25, SD=1.71), $t(38) = 6.46$. The result suggests that extensive listening brings about substantial improvement in listening comprehension.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Listening Comprehension on Post-Test for Both Groups

	N	Range	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Variance	SD	Skewness
Treatment group	22	5	16	21	408	18.55	2.55	1.60	0.22
Control group	20	5	13	18	305	15.25	2.93	1.71	-0.01

As it can be seen from Table 3, the treatment group made an increase of 9.50

whereas their control group counterpart made an increase of only 6.15. The learners

who did extensive listening obtained increases of at least 8 points, outperforming most of the learners in the control group. The independent *t*-test results showed that the treatment group ($M=18.55$, $SD=1.60$),

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Listening Comprehension Gains for Both Groups

	N	Range	Min	Max	Sum	Mean	Variance	SD	Skewness
Treatment group	22	3	8	11	209	9.50	1.02	1.01	0.00
Control group	20	5	4	9	123	6.15	2.03	1.42	0.32

Taken together, the results suggest that the learners who followed the extensive listening program made a significantly bigger improvement in comprehension as compared to the control group.

5. Discussion

The study examines the benefits of extensive listening for EFL adult learners at the intermediate level. It was found that the learners who listened extensively outperformed the control group on comprehending oral texts. There were significant differences between the two group's performances on the post-test. This finding supports those reported in previous studies (Waring, 2008; Chang, Millett & Renandya, 2018). The treatment group's remarkable achievement could be attributed to the repetition of language items and language features. According to Wodinsky and Nation (1988), sufficient exposure to repeated lexical and grammatical items is necessary for language acquisition to take place. Through listening extensively to the oral texts, the treatment group were repeatedly exposed to the same words, structures, sounds and discourse features. This could have facilitated their language acquisition.

Another explanation for the improvement that those participants obtained may be automatization. Automatization is the process of becoming

compared to the control group ($M=15.25$, $SD=1.71$), achieved significantly greater improvement in comprehension, $t(38)=8.85$.

automatic in recognizing words. Some researchers have assumed that low-leveled learners have to save cognitive resources for word recognition, which is usually slow and laborious. However, as they progress, they will be able to identify words faster. This allows them to save more attentional resources for more complicated tasks (Segalowitz et al., 1998; Samuels, 2002). It could be therefore hypothesized that the treatment group reached a higher level of automaticity thanks to extensive listening and hence could then save more cognitive resources for comprehending the oral texts.

In this study, the participants in the treatment group did not have to do exercises as they listened extensively, but the control group had to complete the listening tasks that accompanied the oral texts. This might have affected the groups' gains in comprehension from the pre-test to post-test. Perhaps the freedom from burden had allowed the learners who did extensive listening to boost their confidence. In foreign language learning, failure can be a painful source of insecurity, which may result in delayed language development.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the impacts of extensive listening on EFL learners' listening comprehension. An experiment among 42 adult learners at the intermediate level was conducted over a

period of two months. The participants' listening comprehension was measured using a pre-test and a post-test. The study has found that the learners who did extensive listening made significantly bigger increases in comprehension, compared to their control group counterparts.

A limitation of this study is that there was no data on the control group's performances during the treatment. The participants in this group were asked to do listening exercises taken from some books. However, their scores on these exercises were not recorded. A natural progression of this work is therefore to analyze the control group's performances to see if this type of information will further our understanding of how listening competence is developed. A further study could assess the long-term effects of extensive listening by administering a delayed post-test to see if the treatment group's increase in comprehension would maintain.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that extensive listening produces positive effects on EFL learners' listening comprehension. The finding corroborates with those in previous studies and further our knowledge of how important repetition and automatization are in language learning. It could therefore be suggested that EFL teachers and instructors set up extensive listening programs for the sake of their learners' listening competence development.

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GIÁ TRỊ CỦA PHƯƠNG PHÁP NGHE MỞ RỘNG ĐỐI VỚI MỨC ĐỘ ĐỌC HIỂU CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ

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Tóm tắt: Giảng dạy kỹ năng Nghe là một chủ đề ít được nghiên cứu (Field, 2008) mặc dù nhiều nhà khoa học đã khẳng định nghe là một phần không thể thiếu trong quá trình phát triển ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu việc sử dụng phương pháp nghe mở rộng để phát triển mức độ nghe hiểu cho người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ. Thực nghiệm được tiến hành với hai lớp học tiếng Anh tại một trung tâm ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam. Trong quá trình theo học khóa học tiếng Anh ở trung tâm, nhóm thực nghiệm thực hiện chương trình nghe mở rộng, còn nhóm đối chứng được giao các bài tập nghe ở nhà. Kết quả cho thấy so với nhóm đối chứng, nhóm thực nghiệm có mức độ hiểu cao hơn nhiều ở bài kiểm tra cuối đợt thực nghiệm. Điều này chứng tỏ phương pháp nghe mở rộng có giá trị tích cực đối với sự phát triển mức độ nghe hiểu của người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ.

Từ khóa: nghe hiểu, nghe mở rộng, kỹ thuật nghe, dạy nghe hiểu