The Effect of Visibility of The Speaker and Recorded Voice on Iranian EFL learners' Listening Comprehension Ability

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of visibility of the speaker and recorded voice on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension (i.e. whether looking at the speaker's face and visual cues influence the extent of listening comprehension or not). This study also compared the degree of listening comprehension of EFL learners in different conditions: audio-only and audio-visual. One hundred and seven males at the age of 16 to 17 were selected from 117 subjects after they were homogenized by Nelson test. They were randomly divided into control group and experimental one .The control group was exposed only to audio files whereas the experimental group was exposed to the audio-visual files. Based on the results, both the audio-only and audio-visual aids can enhance listening comprehension of learners. However, the higher mean score of the experimental group not only suggests that lively scenes can improve listening comprehension, but also verifies that combination of visual and auditory aids is more satisfying for listening comprehension than auditory stimuli alone.

Key words: Visibility of the speaker, Recorded voice, EFL learners, Listening comprehension.

1. Introduction

"Listening comprehension might be the language skill that is the most difficult to investigate, hence the least understood in second language research" (Vandergrift 2010, p.160). This is

explained by a number of variables, such as the fact that listening involves many complex processes on different levels and that it engages both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. "Up until 1970, researchers did not focus on listening specifically. Instead, it was believed that theories of reading comprehension also applied to listening and also that listening would develop independently as learners were exposed to the target language" (Osada 2004a, p.57). After 1970, researchers agreed that although there seems to be a correlation between listening and reading, "...listening involves a set of skills in its own right" (Osada 2004b, p.1). As a result of this change, "listening comprehension is currently considered the most prominent aspect of language, as it is believed to facilitate the other language skills; reading, writing and speaking" (Vandergrift 2011, p. 455, see also Plass & Jones 2005, p.478). Correspondingly, Vandergrift argues that "learners of English as a second language (L2-learners) have to understand language input from reading and listening in order to improve their productive skills: speaking and writing" (2011, p.455).

Some studies focus on the use of multimedia in second language learning, for example Jones (2002) investigated the influence of visual and verbal annotations on listening comprehension of second language students of French. While the students with access to both visual and verbal annotations performed best, the students with no annotations available showed that lowest results on understanding on passage and learning the vocabulary (Jones 2002). The interviews with test-takers conducted by Jones (2003) collaborated her results of her 2002 study and provided "qualitative evidence for generative theory of multimedia learning that suggests that the availability and choice of visual and verbal annotations in listening comprehension activities enhances the students' abilities to comprehend the material presented and to acquire vocabulary" (p. 41).

Positive effects of visuals were also reported by Perry (2001), who claims that listeners become more active when listening is accompanied by visual cues. He also states that some learners might find it difficult to concentrate on listening for a long time, which is why visual cues might help and keep some learners active for a longer period of time (p.15). Perry (2001) is also convinced that visual cues make the learners become more active in the process of listening comprehension, as he emphasizes that: "...the non-verbal aspect of speech is an integral part of the whole communication process" (p.666). Hedge (2006) also emphasizes the importance of visuals

and explains that by seeing the speaker, comprehension is facilitated since it reveals the relationship between the people involved in the conversation (p.246).

Cabrera and Martinez (2001) studied the effects of visual cues on Mexican learners of English and found that those who were exposed to visual information improved comprehension, as compared to those who did not have access to visual cues. A similar study was carried out by Jones and Plas (2002), who concluded that learners of EFL remembered more from a text when they were exposed to both visual and verbal annotations (as cited by Meyer 2005, p.480). Ockey (2007) also studied the effect of visual cues in listening comprehension and the learners' attitude to the use of video and still-images in listening comprehension. Ockey concluded that "some learners found the video-stimulus very helpful, whereas some learners thought the video was of no help and that it constantly distracted them" (p.520). This phenomenon is also described by Öman (2001) whose studies on Swedish learners show that many of them had a positive attitude to the use of visuals in listening comprehension, whereas some said that it hindered comprehension.

Canning-Wilson (2000) studied video and listening comprehension on EFL learners and found that scenes that were backed up by an action or body language were considered easier to understand by the subjects, compared to scenes where the speakers did not use body language. She concludes that visual cues are important for comprehension, but emphasizes that video might facilitate understanding for some learners, but also be distracting to others. Furthermore, she points out that "the learners in the sound-only conditions were less successful in maintaining concentration in listening" (2000, p.6). The present study intended to investigate the effect of visibility of the speaker and recorded voice on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The investigation was carried out on 117 male EFL learners at the age of 16 to 17 in grade 9 at a secondary school in the city of Arak. The learners who had lived in an English-speaking country were excluded in order to achieve uniformity. Obviously, the validity of the results would increase if the participants had learnt English more or less under the same circumstances. The participants were divided into two groups of control and experimental. To assure the criterion of

homogeneity, 107 students were selected from 117 learners based on the results obtained from a Nelson test which was conducted at the beginning of the study.

2.2. Instruments

To carry out this study, the following instruments were used:

1) **Nelson test**: Nelson Test was carried out in order to homogenize the students. In this test, the students were asked to answer 50 multiple choice questions in 60 minutes. The test was according to the level of students. The researcher made sure of the reliability of this instrument through KR-21.

2) **Listening Comprehension Test**: In the listening comprehension test the students were asked to answer 15 multiple choice questions in 20 minutes. This test was carried out to determine the group's listening comprehension level. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) suggested that a pilot study "will significantly improve the quality of the data obtained" (p. 173). Therefore, it was decided that The Nelson test and listening comprehension test be pilot-tested with a group of 10 students from the same population but from different classes. The purpose was to check clarity and comprehensibility of the content of the tests in order to meet determined researcher's goal. The purpose of judging validity is to estimate if a test accurately measures what it is intended to measure (Hughes, 1989). Two university instructors helped to check the validity of the test. The modification had been made to reflect a reasonable domain of the content before the study was formally conducted. It is worth mentioning that the researcher made sure of the reliability and validity of the instruments in this study.

2.3. Procedures

Nelson Test was given to 10 students who were in the same level of the participants in order to pilot the test and make sure of its reliability. To assure the criterion of homogeneity, 107 subjects were selected from 117 population based on the result obtained from Nelson test .Then participants were divided into two groups. Fifty three participants were placed in the control group and 54 participants were placed in the experimental group randomly.

By applying a listening comprehension test containing 15 multiple choice items from Tactics by Richards (2010), made the researcher sure that the subjects were relatively at the same level in

listening comprehension ability. This test was considered as the pre-test for both control and experimental groups.

After a while, the post-tests were applied. This was tested by playing the subjects a recorded voice broadcasted on TV and thereafter letting the subjects answer 30 multiple-choice questions. All the subjects listened to the audio file twice, but just about half of them were exposed to the video on the second listening. The study followed the structure of experimental research, as described by Gass (2010). This means that an experimental group received focused attention on one particular part of language, which in this case was the impact of visual cues in listening comprehension, whereas the control group was exposed to the same variable, the audio file, but without the element of visual cues.

This study didn't measure the impact of facial expressions and gestures individually, but rather the effect of all non-verbal elements in collaboration were considered. In the experiment, the subjects listened to the recording and were asked to answer multiple-choice questions that concerned what had been discussed in the audio and video file. There were ten conversations and every conversation had 3 multiple choice questions and the participants were asked to answer the questions after listening to each conversation. Before performing the actual test, the questions were piloted with a group of 10 students from the same population pool but from a different group. The purpose was to check the clarity and comprehensibility of the content of the tests in order to meet determined researchers' goal. With an aim of confirming the validity, the researchers asked two university teachers who had Ph. D. degrees to help. The modification had been made to reflect a reasonable domain of the content before the study was formally conducted. It is worth mentioning that the researcher made sure of the reliability and validity of used instruments in this study. The intention was primarily to try the functionality of the questions and to investigate if the audio file and questions were easy to follow. The pilot study indicated that the questions seemed clear and understandable, as the participants scored 80% after the first listening and 100% after the second listening.

The procedure of the test was as follows: at the beginning of the session, the subjects received the questions from their teacher. It was the first time they saw the questions. The teacher told them that they were going to participate in a study on listening comprehension, but none of the subjects knew what the research questions were. They were also told about the topic of the conversations

in the audio file. Moreover, studies actually show that EFL learners' tend to improve comprehension when they have background knowledge of the topic. In order to prevent anxiety in the test situation, the teachers also emphasized that the answers would be collected anonymously and information of the participants would not be part of the subjects' assessment.

Before listening to the voice, the participants got some time to read through the questions. They were arranged in chronological order, as it would probably make it easier for everyone to follow the conversations. After having read through the questions, both groups listened to the voice and were thereafter given three minutes for every conversation to fill in the sheets. After two weeks, the non-visual group listened to the audio file again. The subjects of the visual group also listened to the audio file twice, but on the second listening they were exposed to the video. Apart from that, the procedure of the test was the same in both groups. The subjects finished the tests and submitted their papers to the teacher. The set of answers from each participant was organized in columns with the intention to separate the answers from the first and the second listening. Thereafter, the subjects' correct answers were added up, showing the total score of each group. The sum was also divided by the potential full score for each group in order to calculate the percentage of correct answers, which was necessary as the number of subjects differed in the groups. By doing this, the groups' overall improvement after the second listening could be measured and compared.

3. Results

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics encompassed the means, standard deviations, and frequency counts obtained from the scores of students in the experimental and control group both on Nelson Test and Listening Comprehension Test. Inferential statistics comprised the application of two-way ANOVA to test the hypothesis at the .05 level of significance.

Table 1
One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		Nelson Test	Listening comprehension	Post-test(1)	Post-test(2)
N		107	107	107	107
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	25.5981	7.6822	14.9159	17.9907
	Std. Deviation	8.54274	3.11296	5.23075	5.35089
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.061	.151	.077	.098
	Positive	.061	.151	.077	.086
	Negative	-.059	-.095	-.075	-.098
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.627	1.561	.792	1.016
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.827	.555	.557	.254

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

Table 1 shows the results of Kolomorov-Smirnov test. To make sure of the normal distribution of scores, the researchers employed the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Since the sig was much greater than 0.05, it can be concluded that the data have normal distribution.

Table 2
Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
Listening Comprehension Ability	1.00	Visibility of The Speaker	54
	2.00	Recorded Voice	53

According to Table 2, listening comprehension ability is the dependent variable and other variables such as visibility of the speaker and recorded voice are independent.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

	Listening Comprehension Ability	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Nelson Test	Visibility of The Speaker	26.1296	9.25538	54
	Recorded Voice	25.0566	7.80142	53
	Total	25.5981	8.54274	107
Listening Comprehension test	Visibility of The Speaker	7.4444	3.06327	54
	Recorded Voice	7.9245	3.17350	53
	Total	7.6822	3.11296	107
Post-test(1)	Visibility of The Speaker	14.6667	5.34472	54
	Recorded Voice	15.1698	5.15056	53
	Total	14.9159	5.23075	107
Post-test(2)	Visibility of The Speaker	18.4259	5.35037	54
	Recorded Voice	17.5472	5.36572	53
	Total	17.9907	5.35089	107

As shown in Table 3, in Nelson test the average of listening comprehension ability for visual group is 26 out of 54 participants and for audio group is 25 out of 53. Moreover, in the pre-test the average of listening comprehension ability for visual group is 7.4 out of 54 participants and for audio group is 7.9 out of 53 .In the post-test 1, the average of listening comprehension ability for visual group is 14.6 and for audio group is 15.16. In addition, in the posttest 2, the average of listening comprehension ability for visual group is 18.4 and for audio group is 17.5. Based on the results, both visual and auditory aids can enhance listening comprehension. Furthermore, the higher the mean score of the experimental group not only suggests that lively scenes can improve listening comprehension, but also verifies that combination of visual and auditory aids is more interesting for listening comprehension than auditory stimuli alone.

Table 4
Mauchly's Test of Sphericity[b]

Within Subjects Effect	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon[a]		
					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Test	.276	133.652	5	.360	.594	.609	.333

Table 4 shows Mauchly test results and indicates that the hypotheses are confirmed because the Sig is greater than 0.05.

Table 5

Tests of Within-Subjects Contrasts

Source	Tests	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Test	Linear	1299.519	1	1299.519	133.800	.000	.560
	Quadratic	11769.827	1	11769.827	1185.854	.000	.919
	Cubic	4594.974	1	4594.974	659.999	.000	.863
Test * Listening	Linear	.491	1	.491	.051	.823	.000
	Quadratic	57.603	1	57.603	5.804	.018	.052
	Cubic	.021	1	.021	.003	.956	.000
Error(Test)	Linear	1019.804	105	9.712			
	Quadratic	1042.145	105	9.925			
	Cubic	731.020	105	6.962			

Table 5 shows the results of the within-subjects contrasts tests and indicates that the amount of Sig is greater than 0.05 and DF is equated with 1 and the amount of F is equated with 133.8.

Table 6

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances[a]

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Nelson Test	3.718	1	105	.057
Pre-test	.026	1	105	.872
Post-test(1)	.254	1	105	.615
Post-test(2)	.007	1	105	.934

Table 4 indicates Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances[a] whereas the Sig is greater than 0.05 in all tests, so variances are equal and for this reason two-way Anova test was suitable.

Table 7
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Measure:MEASURE_1 Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	117157.675	1	117157.675	1038.913	.000	.908
Listening comprehension	6.273	1	6.273	.056	.814	.001
Error	11840.792	105	112.769			

Table 7 indicates the results of the factor of between research tests that is listening comprehension ability.

Conclusion and Discussion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effect of visibility of the speaker and recorded voice on EFL learners listening comprehension ability. To assure the criterion of homogeneity, 107 subjects were selected from 117 subjects based on the result obtained from Nelson test. They were divided randomly into two groups of control and experimental .The control group was exposed only to audio files whereas the experimental group was exposed to the audio-

visual files. In order to find out the participant's listening comprehension level, a listening comprehension test from Tactics for Listening by Jack C. Richards (2010) was given to the groups and the subjects answered 15 multiple questions after listening to the audio file. After collecting the scores mean and standard deviation, the researcher was ensured that the subjects of two groups were in a same level in listening comprehension.

Two post-tests were taken from the experimental and control groups. The study was carried out to measure the impact of visual cues on L2-learners' listening comprehension. This was tested by playing the subjects a recorded voice broadcasted on TV and thereafter letting the subjects answer the multiple-choice questions. All the subjects listened to the audio file twice, but just the experimental group was exposed to the video on the second listening. The control group is exposed to the same variable, the audio file, but without the element of visual cues. After two weeks, the non-visual groups (control group) listened to the audio file again and the visual group (experimental group) also listened to the audio file twice, but on the second listening they were exposed to the video.

Based on the findings of the present study, it is found that both visual and auditory aids can enhance listening comprehension ability by helping EFL learners arouse their background knowledge or create new schemas. Furthermore, the significantly higher mean score of the experimental group not only suggests that lively scenes can improve comprehension scores, but also verifies that combination of visual and auditory aids is more satisfying for listening comprehension than auditory stimuli alone. This study tried to find how visual cues play a role in listening comprehension among English foreign language learners in comparison with delivering instruction for listening comprehension purposes using oral input alone. Though there are some limitations that were identified, this study shed some light on the correlation between the use of video to support oral input when attention to details is needed. In fact, this study showed that when students receive visual support (images) in a listening comprehension task, their chances of retaining specific details are greater, even though from a general aspect of recall of information, there were no significant differences. The attention was given to details rather than to mass information.

It is quite subsequent that researchers have argued that visual cues play a crucial role in helping listeners grasp more meaning and attain a better interpretation of what they hear. Visual comprehension has become inherent to listening comprehension with the development of technology and visual media (Hoven, 1999). Listening comprehension does not occur via oral input alone, but supported by visuals, students seem to retain more information and pay attention to details they would have missed without the visual support they can receive from the use of technology in its multiple forms in the language classroom.

This research study was motivated by the substantial increase in the number of English language learners in Iranian EFL context. Colleges and English institutes currently need to evaluate English language learners' language proficiency to determine academic instruction based on the student's language proficiency in English. It is a formidable challenge. While many learners succeed in school, many of them continue to struggle in learning listening strategies when they enter different universities. They have to know how to listen accuracy if they want to succeed in other language skills. In other words, listening techniques in one hand and other skills on the other hand, has become a challenge for both learners and teachers. Therefore, a consensus on what is the best techniques or strategies have become a challenging topic among different scholars in SLA and the use of some techniques in this study has been considered important.

The result of this study supports what Ginther (2002) has investigated in his study on French learners of English and found that visual cues enhanced learners' performance in listening comprehension. More over this study supports the study of Jones (2003) which is called *Supporting Listening Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition with Multimedia Annotations* , that suggests that the availability and the choice of visual and verbal annotations in listening comprehension activities enhances students' abilities to comprehend the material presented and to acquire vocabulary.

The established visual cues are demanding for non-native English speaking specially in schools and English language institutes. In order to investigate the effect of visual cues on improvement of listening comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners, in the present research study the data derived from the results were taken to account for the effect of conversational visual cues on listening comprehension.

The findings shows that the recorded voice or audio files help listening comprehension ability but this effect is not as effective as that of visual cues. These findings supports Canning-Wilson,

Balatova (1994) that found visual cues enhanced learners' comprehension in general, but did not necessarily stimulate the understanding of the text (Balatova 1994, cited in Canning-Wilson 2000, p.3).

The present research indicates that both visibility of the speaker and recorded voice are effective in listening comprehension ability but according to data derived from the results, visibility of the speaker is more effective than recorded voice in listening comprehension ability. On the other hand visual cues surpass recorded voice on listening comprehension ability. These findings support Sueyoshi & Hardison (2005) that studied the impact of facial cues on listening comprehension of Korean and Japanese learners of English. Sueyoshi & Hardison's aim was to investigate "...if access to visual cues such as gestures and lip movements facilitate ESL-students' listening comprehension more than audio only" (2005, p.661). Therefore, the results of the present study supports other studies finding.

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