

Enhancing EFL learners' listening skill through intensivelisting activities

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Abstract

This paper concerns with improving listening skill in the Sudan universities through the intensive listening activities. In Sudan, teaching listening skill isn't an easy task, especially when there are many factors that impede the learning process such as: lack of suitable materials for teaching listening skill, Shortage of qualified teachers with good pronunciation, and lack of innovative methods for teaching listening skills. Two groups were selected for investigation. Two instruments for data collection and statistical analysis were used to gain results. These instruments are test and questionnaire. Reliability and validity were used to achieve consistent answers. These findings proved that listening skill problems can be solved via intensive listening activities. Also this *study* proves that Students who use listening activities in learning English language are better than those who do not.

Keywords: acquisition, interaction, Audi-aids.

Introduction

The way we listen is the way we speak. That means, the key of speaking well is learning how to listen effectively. Listening is a basic skill in language acquisition. It is an important skill because it is how we naturally learn a language. We as children hear words, see gestures and formulate vocabulary in a social context from those who live around us. We begin to learn our first language by repeating what we hear others say. Littlewood (1984) states that: "The child imitates the sounds and patterns which he hears around him." This close relationship between listening (a receptive skill) and speaking (a productive skill) is what produces verbal expression. Listening is one of the four basic skills through which a language is taught. It is one of the two skills that we use when communicating orally. According to Rost (1991)

“Listening is an active process requiring participation on the part of the listener .” For example when someone listens to a speaker, he/she processes the information mentally so as to construct an answer. During the listening process the listener is actively engaged. In learning a foreign language, it is important to listen to what is transmitted with a great deal of attention because this helps the listener to reproduce exactly, or almost exactly, what he/she hears. Therefore listening is not a celebrated skill; we listen in order to understand what has been heard. Moreover the speaker and the listener must be interacting in a social context. According to Larsen- Freeman (1986) “It is through interaction between speaker and listener that meaning becomes clear .” This clarity suggests an understanding of what has been heard. This entails paying attention to the pronunciation, the tone of voice, the grammatical structure and body language- when he/she is interacting face-to-face. Therefore the teacher must create adequate and contextual situations to fully and actively engage the student/ listener. But what is active listening? Active listening is the act of having the listener take part in the communication process. The listener focuses his/her attention on what the speaker is saying to confirm understanding. It is necessary that while listening the listener has an engaged attitude, that is, he/she has to involve him/herself in communication to assure the speaker that he/she is attentive to what is said. This also demonstrates some interest to the speaker in order to encourage him/her to speak. In the classroom teachers should pay attention to students if they want them to be active listeners. Brown (1990) believes that if students do not play an active role “this leads rapidly to boredom on their part and often, failure to learn much from the class .”

In learning a language, people listen then speak and later learn to read and write. This sequence clearly shows the important role of listening in learning languages. The first step of learning a language in normal circumstances is to listen to the target language, O'Connor (1981) mentions that "*language starts with the ear, when a baby starts to talk; he does it by hearing the sounds his mother makes and imitating them*". In another side, the four skills of a language: listening, speaking, writing and reading develop each other. In other words, what you learn and practice through the exercise of one skill is reinforced through further activities related to other skills. This point shows the integration of the language four skills. In English, as explained above, there is a strong relation between listening skill and the practical side of speaking skill which is considered pronunciation. According to scholars' previous writing, the researcher thinks that the way you listen is the way you pronounce states the following:

Vowels must be learnt by listening and imitating : I could tell that the English vowel /D:/ as in the word saw is made by rounding the lips and placing the back of the tongue in a position mid-way between the highest possible and the lowest possible positions, but it would be much more helpful if I could simply say the sound for you and get you to imitate.

Therefore, the research treats pronunciation from a practical point of view not a theoretical view. This treatment necessitates teaching pronunciation through listening by using effective listening activities.

Imitation is considered one of the most important theories that help learners to learn language effectively. The research thinks that all language learning theories may back up the theory of imitation using different ways. Since this research is about learning pronunciation, the research thinks that listening then imitation is considered one of the most effective ways for learning better features of pronunciation. O'Connor (1981: 1) state " *if a baby is born deaf he cannot hear these sounds and therefore can't imitate them and will not speak*". This may show the importance of imitation in language learning in general. Also, he adds that " *language starts with the ear when a baby starts to talk he does it by hearing the sounds his mother makes and imitating them*". Imitation can also be useful in learning pronunciation of vowel sounds. O'Connor (1981: 79) states:

Vowels must be learnt by listening and imitating: I could tell that the English vowel / D: / as in the word saw is made by rounding the lips and placing the back of the tongue in a position mid-way between the highest possible and the lowest possible positions , but it would be much more help full if I could simply say the sound for you and get you to imitate.

Temperly and Rivers (1978: 73) define listening skill as " *the major activities of paying attention, taking the sounds from the air and trying to get the meaning into mind* ". Another definition was presented by Yule (1996: 180); he states " *listening is the mental ability of perceiving and contrasting messages from stream of sounds* ". These two definitions concentrated on sounds as a means for conveying messages. That means the first step to learn languages and understand meaning is to recognize sounds which depends on listening skill. The research in this study investigates the effects of lack of using language laboratories in teaching pronunciation in one side, and the role of listening skill in teaching pronunciation in the other side. The research thinks that lack of language labs affect teaching listening skill, as

a result, listening skill affects pronunciation. In the following part the research will give more explanation about this relation.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching English listening skill can be a difficult task if the teacher can not create the appropriate environment. Problems begin when the classroom environment is inappropriate and/or the room's acoustics are bad. It is difficult to teach listening skill in a noisy environment. The noise inside the classroom normally happens when the teacher can not control the class. Listening activities are hard to understand if the sound is not good. In Sudan universities, classrooms are normally large, so it is imperative for the teacher to be creative in adapting the classroom environment to his/her needs. Also, The lack of appropriate listening equipment whether audio, visual or audio-visual aids compounds the problem of providing students with an authentic listening experience. Further, when equipment is available it often does not work well. Other factors that can negatively affect a listening class are student's low motivation and lack of interest. If we want to develop listening and speaking that are complementary skills, it is the teachers' task to develop motivation and interest of the students. There is a close relationship between motivation and interest. The teacher's performance and confidence are very important in teaching listening skill. A teacher should be able to sufficiently dominate what he/she has to teach and have a certain level of self-confidence to perform the class. There are teachers who do not have enough capacity to teach listening skills and this implies a low level of self-confidence on their part. Most of the time this problem exists because the teacher is not trained, or the training is not adequate to the level taught, or, even, he/she does not have enough practice in teaching this type of skills.

The Objectives of the Study

This study attempts to investigate the impact of listening activities on the performance of listening skills. The study aims:

1. To find out how listening activities play a great role in developing EFL university learners' listening skills.
2. To develop Sudanese EFL university learners' listening skills.
3. To identify the problems that students face when listen to English language.

4. To provide suitable strategies for students which help them to be capable of performing effective listening (class activities).
5. To solve the problems of EFL University learners when listening English language.

Materials and methods Subjects

This study was conducted in Khartoum state, Khartoum province. The population of the study was the students of Sudan university of science and technology, English language department. Students in this department study general ELT courses such as: listening, speaking, reading, writing, methodology, literature, etc. All the students in this department share the same circumstances such as: The academic year, the academic system, and the number and of courses.

Commonly, the study selected some students as a sample. Specifically some students of the first year were chosen to participate. The selection was according to the physical and cognitive growth. All the students study English language without concentrating on specific skills or in a balanced way. Moreover, they are native speakers of Arabic language with regard to a few number of learners who may have some local or tribal languages.

Two equal groups were involved in data collection procedures. The experimental group and the teachers' group. Each group consisted of 30 members. The experimental group was from the same department (The students of the first year secondary school), and the members of the group was male, age between 18 to 20 years. The teachers' group also consisted of 30 teachers of English from different universities. All of them were male with different age.

Instruments

To collect the data, the following instruments were employed in this study:

The listening skills Test:

To obtain practical samples of data, listening skill test was conducted. The purpose of this test was to limit the level of students' listening skills and the influence of intensive listening

activities on listening the target sounds. To obtain these goals, the test consisted of simple words and sentences that were selected on the basis of frequency and recognition. Some phonological terms were used to direct and draw the attention to the points being tested.

The test consisted of four questions, each question consisted of five branches. The first question consisted of lists contained words chosen on the basis of the degree of listening difficulty. These lists focus on allophones and silent letters. The second question consisted of lists focus on double consonants, double vowels and consonants and vowels sequences. The third question consisted of short simple sentences focus on intonation, weak and strong forms, the place of stress. The fourth question included some sentences tested the features of connected speech such as: assimilation, elision, linking and rhythm. The mentioned lists consisted of items from the most problematic areas in listening and they require intensive practice for the sake of tackling and controlling them.

The above-mentioned items attributed to aspects of pronunciation that need a high concentration for mastering them. Knowledge of phonetics and phonology may be useless in the case of school students learning English as a foreign language but listening effectively to the different features of pronunciation of English.

a) Auraltest

An aural test was also conducted to obtain practical samples of data. To limit the level of students' aural skills and the influence of language laboratories on listening to the target sounds. To obtain these goals, the test consisted of simple words and sentences that were selected to listen from the native speaker directly. Some phonological terms were used to direct and draw the attention to the points being tested.

The test consisted of four questions; each question consisted of five branches. The first question consisted of lists contained words chosen on the basis of the degree of listening difficulty. The second question consisted of lists focus on double consonants, double vowels and consonants and vowels sequences. The third question consisted of short simple sentences focus on intonation, weak and strong forms, the place of stress.

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tackling and controlling them.

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The Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of twelve points. These points investigated listening skill difficulties of Sudanese Students, the importance of using effective tools in teaching listening skills such as language laboratories in teaching listening of English, and the influence of lack of using audio-visual aids on students learning listening skills of English.

These points were conducted in a questionnaire to collect data from teachers from different university. This questionnaire confirms on the influence of audio-visual aids on handling the required features of better listening skills. Besides, it contained points to explore the role of effective teaching on learning a language as a foreign language and its listening skills in particular.

To achieve these goals, special attention was paid to the language used. The questions were sequenced in a manner as each question was put on a single line while the choices were distributed on two lines. They were put according to the alphabetical order of (a) – (b) - (c) – (d) and (e) with a box in front of each choice. Teachers should choose only support, oppose or withdraw. Besides withdrawing, supporting response contained two choices: agree and strongly agree, and opposing contained the choices: disagree and strongly disagree. This way of organization helped the study in saving time and effort in conducting as well as extracting results.

Data analysis

In this study, there are two instruments for data collection. First, oral aural skills tests were designed to measure the actual levels of learners' performance. This oral aural skills tests were in a forms of a pre-test and post - test. Second, a questionnaire was designed to collect data about enhancing EFL learners' oral aural skills through language labs facilities.

Pre-listening test

It was administered to the experimental group before the participants went over the training program. The study documented the performance of the participants to compare it with their performance in the post-test to see if there is a significant progress or not.

Table (1) Total marks of the pre listening test

Question No	Percent		
	Correct Answer	Incorrect answer	Total
1	44.25 %	55.75 %	100%
2	46.975 %	53.025%	100%
3	42.6%	57.4%	100%
4	45.35%	54.65%	100%
Total	45%	55%	100%

The purpose of the above table is to show the pre listening test results of the experimental group. The total average of the correct questions and incorrect questions. The responses showed that the total average of learners' correct answers was 45% while 55% for incorrect answers. That means the experimental group members faced difficulties in listening most of English listening elements. That proved the study's viewpoint that learners faced difficulties in listening skills.

Post oral test

After the experimental group had gone over a training program for three months using intensive listening activities. The same pre oral test was administered to the group again.

Table (2) Total marks of the post listening test

Question No	Percent		
	Correct Answer	Incorrect answer	Total
1	93.6%	6.4%	100%
2	93.8%	6.2%	100%
3	91.2%	8.8%	100%
4	92.6%	7.4%	100%
Total	93%	7%	100%

The purpose of making this table is to show the total average of the correct and incorrect results of the experimental group. The responses showed that the average of learners' correct answers was 93% while 7% for incorrect answers. Comparing this table with the pre-test, the study finds that there is a difference between the two results. That means the use of listening activities affects positively on the learners' of different listening skills elements. That means the result enhances the study's viewpoint by showing positive variables towards the influence of listening activities in teaching listening skills.

Generally, the listening test revealed that positive teaching of listening activities contribute to the development of the students' listening skills. Therefore, the hypotheses that were set to answer the main study questions have been validated and confirmed.

The Questionnaire

This instrument was done by a group of teachers of English language from different universities. It was intended to explain the responses of the teachers towards three main topics: Difficulties of Sudanese students with English listening skills, the role of effective ways of teaching listening skills and the influence of intensive listening activities on teaching English listening skills.

Table (3) Total percentages of positive, negative and neutral variables of the questionnaire parts. SA= Strongly Agree. A= Agree. N = Neutral. S.D = Strongly Disagree D = Disagree.

Par	Percentage					
	Positive Variables		Neutral	Negative Variables		
	S .A	A	N	S.D	D	Total
1	36.75%	45 %	4.25%	4.25%	9.75	100%
2	33.75%	44.25%	5%	4.5%	12.5%	100%
3	40%	50%	3%	1.75%	5.25%	100%
Total	110.5%	139.25 %	12.25%	10.5%	27.5%	300%

The purpose of making this table is to show the results of the teachers group attitudes towards the subjects of the parts of the questionnaire. The responses showed that the average of teachers' positive variables was 83.25% while 16.25% for negative variables. This table showed the total percentages between the questionnaire's parts. It enhanced the hypotheses of the study, and proved and the viewpoint of the study.

Results

To extract the research results, the researcher conducted his investigation under the following categories:

- 1- The role of the effective ways of teaching oral aural skill in solving listening and pronunciation difficulties.
- 2- The influence of using language laboratories on teaching oral aural skills.
- 3-The results were compared to examine the achievements of the research hypotheses at the level of the existence of Students oral aural skills difficulties, less oral aural skills difficulties of learners who use LL in learning English and the positive influence of its using on learning listening and pronunciation.
- 4-Tables in chapter four displayed the fact that, in all cases the experimental group has progress in learning. The experimental group that learned English by using language labs faced less oral aural skills problems and was able to listen and pronounce more accurate and fluent utterances. These were shown by the results provided by subjects as well as the improvement in their performance.
- 5- The difference between the pre and post -test in the experiment group in terms of using language labs in learning English in general and oral aural skills in particular was clearly

reflected in the degree of accuracy and fluency in listening and pronunciation. That means, the experimental group was able to benefit of the circumstances provided by language labs such as motivation and concern for good oral aural skills, teaching strategies, teaching methods, social interaction and good surrounding environment of the learning situation. All these factors made a close connection between learners in one side and the aspects of native speakers oral aural skills in the other side.

Findings

This study emphasized that:

Most of pronunciation difficulties can be solved by teaching listening skill through effective instruments such as language labs.

The extent to which learners succeed in producing accurate target utterances depended mainly on acquiring pronunciation through listening to native speakers using effective ways.

Obtaining better features of Oral Aural skills from tapes or compact disks previously prepared by native speakers or well qualified second language speakers or teachers, and using effective tools such as language labs in teaching, developed learners' accuracy and fluency.

Language labs increased learners' phonological knowledge as well as phonological competence.

Effective teaching of listening skill can lead students solve most of pronunciation problems.

LLs have a very important role in teaching English in general and oral aural skills in particular.

LLs raise students' motivation and interest.

LLs help students to develop themselves by activating self-learning process.

LLs affect teaching of English oral aural skills positively.

Students who use LLs in learning Oral Aural skills are better than those who do not.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this research paper we had analyzed best ways to teaching listening skills and focused on the problems teachers face in the Capeverdian classroom. When there are problems teachers should see the problems as challenges and look for solutions. In today's world English is a language spoken worldwide, so if we want our students to compete we should provide them with strong speaking skills which imply good listening skills.

Listening is not an easy task to teach. It demands a great deal of concentration on the part of the student. Teachers will not give successful listening classes if they do not have appropriate equipment, classroom environment and students motivation and interest. But we must remember that even when the equipment is appropriate it is also necessary to have access to listening materials which should be selected according to students grades and needs. After the teacher has these conditions done he/she has to decide which techniques can be used and which listening activities best help students to learn language in an effective way. If we teach students according to methodologies we contribute to make of them effective listeners and consequently effective speakers.

This research paper is a kind of teaching tool teachers have at hands that may help them when teaching students through listening. They will find in the work suggestions for how teachers can improve listening skills teaching in Capeverdian classroom.

It is necessary that all teachers be well trained in speaking skills. If listening depends on good pronunciation then it is necessary that we have a good command of pronunciation which will make of the students better listeners. It is also necessary to have a listening laboratory on the school grounds with all necessary conditions for listening classes, more and improved listening equipment like radio, tape-recorder, television, CD player, etc. Teachers themselves need to practice the language with the intent to improve their listening skills as well as other skills. This can be done by practicing language skills in coordination meetings, preparing lessons to be presented to fellow teachers in the coordination meetings for feed-back. Creating study practice habits where students have time to speak “English only”. Listening to music, documentaries and news on the radio and television, talking to native speakers face to face or on the Internet also helps.

Teachers need to participate in exchange programs where Capeverdian teachers can visit every summer an English-speaking country to practice the language and know the Anglo-Saxon cultures. Teachers also need in- service training to retain specific listening skills and creative methodologies. It is very important to gather our efforts in order to make NETA become a strong English teachers association because NETA will work as the English teachers’ voice in Cape Verde.

For colleagues who are interested in this topic I would suggest further research in the following areas:

1- The effectiveness of specific listening techniques on different cycle students;

2- Creating local resources to teach listening skills

With all this said and done, I believe that teachers will agree that it is possible to improve how listening skills are taught in Capeverdean EFL classrooms in order to produce fluent English speakers. This should be our goals.

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