

Activating Students' Background Knowledge and Achievement in EFL Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the effect of activating students' background knowledge on EFL listening comprehension. To do this, forty foundation year engineering students were assigned to two twenty-student groups: The students in the control group listened to five listening texts then answered listening comprehension questions about these texts; whereas the students in the experimental group were given pre-listening activities including pre-questions, picture discussion and pre-teaching of difficult words then listened to the same texts and answered the comprehension questions. A focus group of fifteen students from both groups were asked about their attitudes toward English listening comprehension. The "t" test analysis of the mean scores on the listening comprehension test showed statistically significant differences in favor of the experimental group. The students in the focus group showed mixed attitudes mainly negative toward listening comprehension. The research concludes with recommendations about the importance of using pre-listening activities and changing the students' attitudes toward English language in general and listening in particular.

Keywords: *Listening comprehension, Pre-Listening activities, Picture discussion, EFL, FYES, Note-Taking, Cornell method.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Listening is the most significant part of communication as it is the first skill used for language acquisition and it is also one of the four major skills which are essential to develop language proficiency. We gain 45% of language competence from listening, 30% from speaking, 15% from reading and 10% from writing (Renukadevi, 2014). In spite of its importance, listening has long been the neglected skill in second language acquisition research, teaching, and assessment. However, in recent years there has been an increased focus on L2 listening ability because of its perceived importance in language learning and teaching. Students in the Arab world in general and in KSA in particular find listening to English language texts challenging because of a number of reasons. First of all, they are not familiar with native English as almost all the teachers of English are non-native speakers. In addition, students face troubles in understanding because of the vocabulary barrier and the cultural differences. This study aimed at solving these problems through explaining the difficult words and resolving cultural gaps in the pre-listening stage.

1.1. Questions of the Study

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

Does listening comprehension improve significantly through activating students' background knowledge prior to listening?

Do FYE students have positive attitudes toward listening comprehension in English?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature about listening comprehension stems from the two main processes used for understanding a certain aural text. Bottom-up processing which is used by learners when they rely on specific components starting from morphemes to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings of the second language for aural comprehension. The other process is top-down processing where listeners use world knowledge, topic understanding, or personal experiences to form hypotheses to interpret the text (Nunan (1991) cited in Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) and Ehsanjou and Khodareza (2014)). Any failure in the components of these two processes will definitely cause failure in comprehension. The obstacles that face listening comprehension, the teaching strategies that promote this skill and students attitudes toward listening comprehension will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.1. Obstacles Facing Listening Comprehension

A common impression among teachers of English in KSA is that students face troubles in listening comprehension. Whenever they have a listening comprehension test, they have a presupposition that it is going to affect their final grade. This impression refers to students' weakness in both bottom up and top down processes. They are incompetent in vocabulary and syntax and they are not aware of the knowledge of the world and the culture of the target language that enable them to interact with authentic listening comprehension tasks. Chen (2005) explored the difficulties faced by EFL learners while acquiring listening comprehension strategies during a training program. The findings indicate that there are different types of difficulties. Students' affective statuses, their belief about listening activities, listening habits, information processing capacities, and English proficiencies, were among the learning obstacles that are associated with the internal factors of learners. Other barriers concerned the nature of listening strategies and the listening material used.

2.2. How to Promote Listening Comprehension

In order to provide the most effective classroom experience for EFL or ESL language students, you should expose them to listening (Richards & Schmidt, (1983) cited in [Keihaniyan \(2013\)](#)). At the beginning, it is by listening that they can have the most direct connection to the meaning of a new language. Through listening, learners can build an awareness of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent skills ([Keihaniyan, 2013](#)). Based on the aforementioned, teachers, educators and researchers should consider the importance of listening and how to familiarize students with this basic skill. [Hayati and Jalilifar \(2009\)](#) conducted a study to probe the relationship between note taking strategy and students' listening comprehension ability. The results were in favor of the note-taking strategy which proved to have a positive effect on students' language competence ability. Students who took notes on the basis of the Cornell method were better on the post- test than those who took notes according to their own method. [Hayati and Jalilifar \(2009\)](#) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. [Gilakjani and Ahmadi \(2011\)](#) investigated the factors influencing English listening comprehension and how to improve this skill. [Sedeghi and Heidaryan \(2012\)](#) studied the effect of teaching pragmatic discourse markers on EFL learners listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners. Results of the multiple choice test analysis were in favor of the experimental group exposed to training on discourse markers.

[Keihaniyan \(2013\)](#) looked into the effect of computerized pre listening activities, the use of key vocabulary and pictures on the comprehension of English narrative texts and the significant difference between the two computerized pre listening activities. The results showed that computerized pre listening activities have significant effects on the listening comprehension of English narrative texts. [Amerian and Farahian \(2014\)](#) proved that explicit teaching strategies like meta-cognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies helped learners improve their listening comprehension. [Ehsanjou and Khodareza \(2014\)](#) aimed at investigating the impact of pre-listening activities (preview of questions & studying unfamiliar vocabularies) on listening comprehension and which one is more effective and helpful as a pre-listening activity. The results indicated that preview of questions can be effective in teaching listening comprehension and studying unfamiliar vocabulary has no significant effect on improving learners' listening comprehension. [Zohrabi et al. \(2015\)](#) investigated the effect of pre-listening activities on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension of authentic English movies. The analysis of the quantitative data and the results of the posttest showed that the learners who received pre-listening activities did better in the posttest. Furthermore, the analysis of feedback indicated the positive effect of pre-listening activities on the EFL learners' listening comprehension of authentic English movies.

2.3. Attitudes toward Listening Comprehension

Generally speaking, students in KSA have negative attitude toward English listening comprehension. This refers to the lack of interest and the poor training teachers receive at schools. In addition, students are not exposed to native English outside the classroom which makes them believe that they don't need it in their daily life. [Shahid et al. \(2016\)](#) investigated Saudi EFL learners' attitude toward using CALL in listening comprehension. The findings showed that students had positive attitude toward using CALL. This attitude varies according to students experience in using the computer in learning. [Lin and Duy \(2014\)](#) examined whether video-based internet materials have a significant effect on international students' English listening comprehension, and investigated their attitudes toward the video-based internet materials. The students in the experimental group did better on the listening post test than those in the control group. In addition, all participants in the questionnaire believed that the internet - based activities are good and useful for English listening and they feel motivated while using the internet.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 40 FYE students at KAU, Jeddah, KSA during the academic year 2016-2017. The participants were all native speakers of Arabic language studying English as a faculty requirement. They were divided into two groups of 20 students.

3.2. Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study: A listening comprehension test, five listening comprehension texts for the treatment, a “t” test and a focus group for students asking them about their attitudes toward English listening comprehension. The listening comprehension test used as a pre and post- test was validated by a group of experts in TEFL with various years of experience and piloted on ten students other than the sample of the study. The seven listening texts were chosen from Headway Plus/Oxford. The “t” test was used to analyze the differences in the mean scores of the pre and post -tests.

3.3. Treatment

After the pre- test, the students in the experimental group start to deal with the listening comprehension texts as recommended by the researcher. Prior to each listening, the teacher activates students background knowledge through asking pre questions about the listening text, explaining the vocabulary items he thinks difficult for students and resolving cultural differences if any. However, the learners in the control group were given the same listening tasks without the pre-listening activities. In the end of the experiment both groups were post-tested.

3.4. Design

To investigate the effect of using the pre-listening activities, a quasi-experimental design was used for the present study. This design consisted of administering a pre-test given to the participants in both groups. The independent variable (using pre-listening activities) was then applied to the experimental group. Following the treatment, both groups did a post-test. The scores from the pre- and post-test were then compared to determine the learners’ response to the treatment. The “t” test was used to see if there are any statistically significant differences between the mean scores. Finally, fifteen students in the sample of the study from both groups were asked about their attitude toward listening comprehension.

4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

4.1. Results Related to Question 1

Does listening comprehension improve significantly through activating students' background knowledge prior to listening?

In order to answer question one, a t-test was made and the results were as follows:

Table-1. Shows the results of the control and the experimental groups on the pre and post test

Control Group	Mean	N	St Deviation
Pair 1 Pretest	10.85	20	2.23842
Post test	13.35	20	
Experimental Group			St Deviation
Pair 2 Pretest	12.45	20	2.000 35
Post test	18.42	20	

This table is taken from the results of the "T- test" of the pre and post tests results of the experimental and control groups.

Table (1) shows the mean scores of the control group and the experimental group on the pre- test (10.85) and (12.45) respectively as well as the results of the post- test (13.35) and 18.42). The very close means of the two groups on the pre- test show that the two groups are almost the same which means that any significant difference in the means on the post-test will be attributed to the treatment; that is activating students' background knowledge prior to listening comprehension. Table (1) also shows the standard deviations of both the control and the experimental groups.

Table-2. Shows the paired sample test of the control and the experimental groups Paired Samples Test

Post Test	Means	STDEV	df	T calculated	T critical
Control Group	13.35	2.23842	19	6.7	2.1
Experimental Group	18.42	2.000 35			
t critical is (2.1) and t calculated is (6.7)					

This table is taken from the results of the "T- test" of the pre and post tests results of the experimental and control groups.

4.2. Results Related to Question 2

Table-3. Shows the students' responses to the focus group questions

No #	Questions of the focus group	Common responses	Quotations
1.	English, like other languages, has four main skills- Listening, speaking, reading & writing- which of them is the most difficult?	Most of the respondents thought that listening is the most challenging skill.	Fahad," <i>listening is difficult because I don't remember our teacher used a CD player in the classroom.</i> " May 16 th , 2017
2.	If Listening is your most difficult skill, why is it difficult?	The majority of respondents said that listening comprehension is difficult because it is rarely used by teachers, even the English language exams exclude listening. Others said that they are not accustomed to native English spoken very fast as almost all teachers are not native speakers of English. Few students said they don't understand the meanings of some words. Two students in the group said that some cultural issues prevent them from understanding.	Ibrahim," <i>when listening starts, I get lost. It is very fast, I can't follow. There are many words I don't understand.</i> " March 26 th , 2017
3.	Do you like to be good at listening? Why/ why not?	Most of the students in the group said that they like to be good at listening because they need it for study and as a life demand if they have the chance to study abroad or to work in local companies in KSA. Few students said they don't need it because they think they can manage in Arabic.	Waleed, " <i>I like to be good at listening because my dream is to study in Canada.</i> " May 20 th , 2017
4.	If you like listening, which types of listening texts would you like to listen to?	Their answers vary, three students said they like songs and the rest said that video films and you tubes are their favorites. Two students said they are interested in news in English.	Khaled," <i>when my friends talk about films they attend especially at weekends, I feel envious.</i> " April 25 th , 2017
5.	In your opinion, what makes students like listening and find it easy?	More and more practice in listening will make it familiar to students. Including it in midterm and final exams will make students more motivated to practice listening at least before exams. In addition, attractive teaching strategies and explaining difficult words and cultural issues will help students understand listening comprehension better.	Turki, " <i>If the teacher chooses easy texts spoken at a reasonable speed and repeats three times, I think it will be easier.</i> " May 18, 2017

This table is a summary of the answers of the students in the focus group about their attitudes toward listening comprehension.

Table (2) shows that *t* statistical or calculated (6.7) for the post test is much bigger than *t* critical (2.1); this means that the difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in favor of the experimental group is statistically significant. This difference in the mean scores is attributed to activating

students' background knowledge prior to listening comprehension tasks. The clear improvement of students' performance while doing listening comprehension tasks over the seven weeks is enough proof that activating their background knowledge prior to listening is a very beneficial strategy.

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To achieve its goals, the study addressed two main research questions: Do pre-listening activities have any influence on FYE students listening comprehension? What are FYE students' attitudes toward English listening comprehension? As shown in table (2) above, the "t" test results were in favor of the experimental group as "t" calculated is bigger than "t" critical. This means that the students who were taught listening comprehension through activating students background knowledge prior to listening gained more progress in this skill and consequently get better achievement. When students go through this stage, they become ready for listening in terms of getting familiar with the topic, resolving any cultural issues and most importantly paving any difficulties concerning vocabulary items. Amerian and Farahian (2014); Ehsanjou and Khodareza (2014) and Zohrabi *et al.* (2015) studied the effects of pre listening activities on listening comprehension and concluded that these activities have positive effects on listening comprehension. Doing this immediately engages students, helps them use English, and sets them up for more successful listening comprehension. This can be done through visuals, discussion, and personalization. If you don't activate your students background schema when teaching English as a foreign language, your students might not be interested in listening, have a purpose for listening, or even be ready to successfully listen. Pre-listening tasks aim to deal with all of these issues: to generate interest, build confidence and to facilitate comprehension. These pre listening activities may include asking questions about the text to familiarize students with the topic. Rajae (2015) engaged students in activities such as matching items, answering multiple choice questions, true/false questions and reordering pictures. Hayati and Jalilifar (2009) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. It might also include picture discussion, videos, you tubes, or any other material that sets the scene for the coming listening text.

In agreement with the mentioned advantages, in the focus group conducted at the end of the study, the experimental group subjects believed that intensive work on the pre-listening activities helped them process information more easily. Most of them referred the difficulty in listening comprehension to problems related to native authentic English spoken very fast and vocabulary and cultural issues that are strange to L1. "*When listening starts, I get lost. It is very fast, I can't follow. There are many words I don't understand.*" Ibrahim, March 26th, 2017. When asked about what makes students like listening and find it easy, their answers vary between choosing mild tasks spoken slowly and preferably simplified in terms of vocabulary and structure. "*If the teacher chooses easy texts spoken at a low speed and repeats three times, I think it will be easier.*" Turki, May 18, 2017.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study were in favor of the experimental group with regard to performance in listening comprehension. This better performance in the listening test seems to be the result of activating the background knowledge of the subjects in the experimental group. The result of this study that echoes other studies done in this context supports the idea that activating students' background knowledge has positive effect on their listening comprehension. In fact, it is important for teachers to recognize that students' existing knowledge contributes significantly to their comprehension. Through the pre listening activities, teachers can assess what pre knowledge students have about the topic. This will enable them to go beyond dealing with the linguistic information in order to help students understand and make their learning more active. The result of this study and others indicate that

helping students make connections to their previous knowledge in order to build a mental schemata with which to link the new information might facilitate listening comprehension. Students' comments in the focus group may also provide insight for educators. Many students have indicated that they experience difficulty understanding authentic texts spoken very fast. Their comments suggest that more exposure to authentic speech in addition to activating their prior knowledge might be helpful. In order to prepare students for oral communication as it exists in real life, it is necessary for teachers to expose them to natural, native-like speech. In planning lessons, teachers should incorporate authentic listening materials from a variety of registers as well as realistic listening tasks. They can do this successfully by starting with mild tasks then moving to more challenging texts.

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Appendices

Appendix (1) the pre listening activities used to activate students' background knowledge prior to listening

Passage 1/ New Headway Plus- Upper Intermediate/ T 1.6- P: 124

1. Do fathers usually care much about their elder sons or daughters in your culture?
2. Do you live in a big city? What is it like to live in a big city?
3. Do people go to work in your city?
4. Compare these two pictures of London and Tokyo.



5. What do these words mean?

Jet-lagged, frightening, masses, accommodation, subway

Passage 2/ New Headway Plus- Upper Intermediate/ T 4.12- P: 129

1. Do you usually introduce your friends in your culture?
2. Is it ok to ask about the nationality?
3. Is it customary to decline an invitation for a certain dish in your culture?
4. Do you usually use very formal language like: "Do you think I could have a class of water?"
5. What do these words mean?

Conference, parmesan parsnips, roasted, sparkling, still

Passage 3/ New Headway Plus- Upper Intermediate/ T 7.6 - P: 132

1. What kind of prizes people usually get when they win competitions in your culture?
2. What is this picture for? Describe it.



3. Is it common in your culture that you leave work and travel to nurse mom or dad if they need you?
4. Is it customary to invite a friend to spend three days with you in New York?
5. What do the following words mean:
Excitement, competition, brilliant, impressed, overlook

Passage 4/ New Headway Plus- Upper Intermediate/ T 7.6 - P: 132

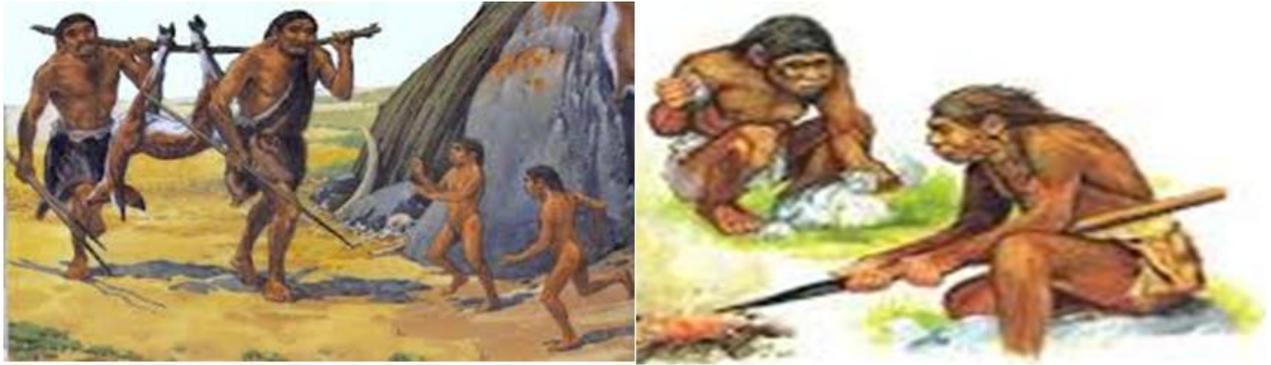
1. Have you ever been to Egypt? If yes, what is the weather like there?
2. What are very important things to see there?
3. Is it advisable to go to the desert in hot weather?
4. What can you see in the picture? Do you like to see this?



5. What do the following words mean?
Extremely, profusely, dehydrate, dramatically, heat exhaustion

Passage 5/ New Headway Plus- Upper Intermediate/ T 10.2 - P: 135

1. How old is the first man on earth?
2. What was his life like?
3. How did people of today know about him?
4. Describe these two pictures:



5. What do these words mean?

Prehistoric, shepherd, sheltering, starvation, carnivores

Appendix (2): The focus group questions used to know the students' attitude toward Listening comprehension

1. English, like other languages, has four main skills- Listening, speaking, reading & writing- which of them is the most difficult?
2. If listening is your most difficult skill, why is it difficult?
3. Do you like to be good at listening? Why/ why not?
4. If you like listening, which types of listening texts would you like to listen to?
5. In your opinion, what makes students like listening and find it easy?

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