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The importance of listening in communication

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Abstract

Listening skills have been a great concern for both researchers and teachers trying to promote communicative competence. The purpose of this study is to find out to what extent listening is important in gaining communicative competence. 100 university level preparatory class students were chosen as subjects of the study. Students took formal listening and speaking classes for one term and at the end of the term they took a written exam for listening class and an oral exam for speaking class. The data obtained from the exam results were analyzed and interpreted.

Keywords: Listening skills, communication, preparatory class students, formal listening, communicative competence.

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1. Introduction

Listening skills have been a great concern for language teaching theoreticians and teachers since it is regarded as one of the prior conditions of oral output in language learning process. For those who assume that second language learning is quite similar to native language acquisition, listening is a sine qua non in language learning in that listening is the primary tool of learners to create their understandings in target language and acquire the input. In general sense, language learning is a matter of input and output process, as Krashen (1981) formulated. According to this assumption listening skills cover a large part of the input and are an important agent in gaining the input in learning process. Since output highly depends on input, it makes listening skills crucial in the output process, too. In the light of this claim, listening skills can be assumed as a significant agent in oral production by establishing a background for communication.

2. Statement of the research problem

The major determiner of communication in target language is oral production. Learners who are entitled to communicate in the target language are the speakers of that language. Likewise, the ultimate point in which most contemporary ELT methods have been trying to reach is making the learners to be able to communicate in target language. However, communication – in other words speaking, is one of the most problematic parts of language learning. Considering the issue as input-output relation, it turns out that the coherence and harmony between input and output is crucial. Since there is a direct relation between input and output, the question is between which areas and to what extend? In this study listening is considered as input resource and speaking is considered as output performance and the importance of listening over speaking is questioned.

3. Literature Review

Cheung, Y. K. (2010) discussed the importance of listening comprehension in learning English as a foreign language and argues that more emphasis should be given to listening comprehension in his study. His study cited significant research findings in SLA and reviewed the relationship between listening comprehension and language learning suggesting that listening is prerequisite to other skills and it should be the primary skill to be acquired in language learning.

By drawing a framework that listening and speaking skills co-occur in real life discourse, Tavi, Z. M. (2010) conducted a study to prove that integrating listening and speaking skills in teaching process improves oral communicative competence. She collected data by a pre-post test and various tests which were designed for university level preparatory students and the data collected was analyzed by t-test. At the end of the study, the group which undergone the integrated teaching process was found to be more successful than the group practicing the skill separately.

Solak, E., & Altay, F. (2014) conducted a study to reemphasize the importance of listening skills in ELT context. The subjects of the study were 124 prospective English teachers of ELT Department at a state-run University in Turkey. The questionnaire on the "Beliefs on English Language Listening Comprehension Problems" was used to collect data to assess prospective teachers' beliefs about the English language listening comprehension problems they could encounter in unidirectional listening. Their study revealed that participants used top-down processes effectively during the listening process, but they were not so good at using bottom-up processes. In addition, no significant difference was found in terms of genders' perceptions of listening problems.

4. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to reveal to what extend listening is important in communication, particularly in oral production. To present a general understanding about the issue, several papers studied the related subject were analyzed and compiled systematically. Another

purpose of this study is to make some recommendations according to the results of the study for teachers and researchers for further study.

5. Research question

The purpose of this study is to find out the direct relationship between listening skills and speaking skills. In this study following question will be answered in the light of the data collected.

To what extend listening is important in communication?

6. Methodology

Listening skills have been studied by many researchers and the main point that researchers circled around is top-down, bottom-up processing. Richards (1990) defines bottom-up processing as the use of incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of a message. In this process, the message to be conveyed is analyzed and comprehension begins when the message is received. Also, according to Richards (1990) top-down processing is the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of message.

7. Research Participants

The participants of the study were chosen among preparatory students whose majors were electric-electronic engineering, mechanical engineering and civil engineering. At the beginning of the term all students were administered a multiple choice placement test including vocabulary, translation, comprehension, grammar and dialogue completing questions. According to the results of the placement test 100 students of A1/A2 level were chosen as participants of the study. The native language of all participants is Turkish. They are from the same age group ranging from 18 to 20.

8. Instruments and Procedure

At the beginning of the study a multiple choice test including vocabulary, translation, comprehension, grammar and dialogue completing questions was administered to the subjects in order to determine their proficiency level. Through the teaching process English File Main Course Books - elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate - (Oxford University Press) were used as course materials. After the teaching process, a listening exam including fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice was administered to the subjects and they took an oral speaking exam rated by two different raters. The topics chosen for listening and speaking activities were the same. At the end, the correlation value between listening and speaking exam results was found and interpreted.

9. Data Analysis

After the exams, data was compiled and the correlation number between listening exam results and speaking exam results was found. The correlation number is: 0,107228366. The correlation number shows that listening skills don't have significant importance on speaking skills. Though many studies approved the considerable importance of listening skills on speaking skills, this study found little correlation. There are some factors that affect the result of the study. First, the difficulty level of listening exam and speaking exam may be different since the teachers who prepared the exams was different though the same syllabus had been followed. It is a possibility that the different styles of teachers may be ended up in difficulty level of exams. Second, the ratings of each exam may be subjective. Each class's rater was different. The subjectivity of raters may create imbalance in the exam results. Third, subjects' anxiety level may change between exams. While some learners feel anxious in listening exams, others may feel anxious at speaking exams.

10. Recommendations for Further Study

This study showed that listening skills have little importance on speaking skills but there were some factors interfered in the data such as anxiety level of students, difficulty level of exams and subjective evaluation. In other sense, this study revealed that for further studies on this topic, these three factors should be taken into consideration beforehand.

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