



Developing Speaking Ability of Iranian EFL Learners via Auditory Input-Enhancement

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Abstract

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In this study, the authors tried to investigate the effect of utilizing auditory input enhancement instruction on the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners. Based on the results of Oxford Placement Test (OPT), 50 learners out of 70 Iranian intermediate female EFL learners with the age range of 18-28 from Najm language institute were selected to participate in the study. They were assigned to one control and one experimental group. The homogeneity of the two groups in terms of speaking ability was determined by comparing their mean in speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET) as the pre-test. The 10-session treatment was done through using auditory input enhancement for the experimental group while the control group had no treatment. At the end of the instruction period, the speaking section of another version of the PET as a post-test was administered to both groups. To test the hypothesis of the study an independent samples t-test was run on participants' scores. The results showed that the participants in experimental group significantly outperformed the participants in the control group in terms of speaking performance. The findings of this study have implications for students, teachers, and syllabus designers.

توسعه توانایی گفتاری زبان آموزان ایرانی از طریق تقویت ورودی شنیداری

در این پژوهش، نویسندگان سعی کردند تأثیر استفاده از آموزش تقویت ورودی شنیداری را بر توانایی گفتاری زبان آموزان ایرانی بررسی کنند. بر اساس نتایج آزمون تعیین سطح آکسفورد (OPT)، 50 زبان آموز از 70 زبان آموز زن ایرانی متوسطه بین 18 تا 28 سال از مؤسسه زبان نجم برای شرکت در پژوهش انتخاب شدند. آنها در یک گروه کنترل و یک گروه آزمایش قرار گرفتند. همگنی دو گروه از نظر توانایی گفتاری با مقایسه میانگین آنها در بخش گفتاری آزمون مقدماتی انگلیسی (PET) به عنوان پیش آزمون تعیین شد. در پایان دوره آموزشی، بخش گفتاری نسخه دیگری از PET برای گروه آزمایش انجام شد در حالی که گروه کنترل هیچ درمانی نداشت. در پایان دوره آموزشی، بخش گفتاری نسخه دیگری از PET به عنوان پس آزمون برای هر دو گروه اجرا شد. برای آزمون فرضیه پژوهش از آزمون تی نمونه های مستقل بر روی نمرات شرکت کنندگان اجرا شد. نتایج نشان داد که شرکت کنندگان در گروه آزمایش از نظر عملکرد گفتاری به طور معنی داری از شرکت کنندگان در گروه کنترل بهتر عمل کردند. یافته های این مطالعه برای دانش آموزان، معلمان و طراحان برنامه درسی پیامدهایی دارد.

Introduction

Nowadays English learning is crucial because English is the international communication medium. The language is necessary for different activities, including education, politics, and socio-economics (Medgyes, 2002; Mckey, 2002). Apparently, one of the most significant parts of language learning is the speaking skill. According to Ur (1991), speaking in language learning is equal to knowing everything in that language and this is a confirmation seal on the significance of speaking skill while learning a language. It is difficult to speak in the second language especially in the English class. In fact, speaking in a second language involves the development of a particular type of communication skill, which, in turn, differs from reading and writing skills (Bygate, 2001).

In addition, Chaney (1998 as cited in Kayi, 2006) stated that speaking is the activity of making and sharing meaning through the effective usage of verbal and nonverbal sign in different contexts. Iranian English teachers were responsible for employing various methods in order to make easy learning the speaking skill in the classroom, but some used methodologies mostly cause to failure (Rahimy & Sasapr, 2012).

As it is assumed that learners of language were not able to communicate easily and correctly, they need more practice to enhance their speaking ability and the teachers tried to solve this problem and they tried different strategies; for instance, they use short questions and short dialogues in the classroom to improve the students' speaking ability (Bashir, Azeem & Dogar, 2011).

However, based on the second language acquisition (SLA) theories, there is an idea that focuses on the formal features of second language input, and its effectiveness in optimal L2 development (Schmidt, 1990). Besides, it is extensively believed that input is required in order for acquisition to happen in the process of language teaching (Wong, 2005).

Moreover, Ellis (1995) stated that input enhancement is an influential option in language teaching which makes language learners to be aware of some exact target forms in the learning situation, as well it draws the learners' attention to them. Other researchers, among them Lee and Benati (2007), claimed that input enhancement is useful for language development; nevertheless, input enhancement does not ensure that input changes into intake unless language learners are able to notice the input exposed to.

Literature Review

According to Doughty and Williams (1998), input enhancement consists of two forms: a) typographic enhancement or written input and b) intonation-related enhancement or oral input. In this classification, the typographic enhancement is related to providing learners with input enhancement via techniques such as bolding, underlining, and highlighting the target language features. This type of input-enhancement is easy to achieve because the enhancement process is taken through the text itself. Another classification, the auditory input enhancement, refers to providing oral input enhancement using pronunciation-related features such as changes in intonation or pitch (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Based on the above-mentioned points, the researcher decided to integrate the input enhancement as one of the learning techniques in order to investigate if type of input, auditory, is beneficial to improving learners' speaking ability or not.

The main emphasis of language teaching is to provide learners with opportunities to communicate in the foreign language (Yu, 2009). In addition, speaking is an important aspect of EFL learning as it lets the learners produce the language, which is necessary for communicative objectives. Many researchers (e.g., Jindathai, 2015; Mazouzi, 2013) stated that speaking is considered as a means through which EFL learners are able to communicate with each other in order to accomplish their objectives, purposes, and state their ideas.

In addition, research has shown that the minimal exposure to speaking the target language and contact with native speakers have made Iranian EFL learners in general relatively poor at spoken English (Dahmardeh, 2009). In addition, the researcher experienced that the students face some difficulties in expressing ideas, choosing correct structures, lack of producing appropriate vocabulary and producing correct pronunciation. These problems occurred because the students have less exposure to speaking activity.

On the other hand, there is general consensus among the second language researchers that input plays an important role in the formation and development of the language learners' linguistic system. Reviewing many studies carried out on second language acquisition, Wong and VanPatten (2003) argued that “this complex and implicit linguistic system is not dependent on learner practice of language, but rather is dependent on exposure to what is called input” (p. 404).

As a teaching experience, the researcher experienced that some of the students keep silent all the time in class and they do not want to speak English. Even when they know the answer to a

simple question, they hesitate to talk. Likewise, through observations, it has been proved that L2 learners often seem passive and quiet in the classrooms. Motivating learners to interact in a classroom is accordingly a problem that most language teachers have in their classes (Tsui as cited in Liu & Jackson, 2009).

Moreover, there is not enough research to be able to state with certainty that auditory input enhancement is a proven alternative to other forms of learning, especially in Iran. In addition, no research has been conducted in literature to find if teaching this type of input enhancement, namely auditory, is effective in improving students' speaking ability. To investigate how auditory input can affect learners' speaking ability, the present study was carried out to shed lights on this issue.

Cook (2001) stated that the main purpose of language teaching is to provide most appropriate samples of language or the learner to benefit from the best input in the process of language learning. It should be mentioned that, all the activities that a teacher does provide the language learner with opportunities to face the language. In fact, it is widely believed that input is necessary in order for acquisition to happen (VanPatten, 2004, Wong, 2005).

A general finding of such studies revealed that attention is a necessary element for learning to take place. As stated by Schmidt (2001), the more attention given to input, the greater the language learning. To confirm his view, in his noticing hypothesis, Schmidt (1990) claimed that intake is that part of the input that the learner notices.

The concept of input enhancement has been emphasized in the process of teaching foreign and second languages. Many researchers, curriculum designers, and teachers make use of research studies in which input enhancement has been taken into account as one of the most important elements in language teaching processes. Therefore, having a good knowledge about the ways to input enhancement, especially auditory input would be of significance for language teachers and curriculum designers as well.

As a result, conducting the current study may be significant for teacher educators and teacher trainers as well as teachers in order to gain more awareness regarding the role of enhanced input in the process of speaking. Moreover, students could improve their speaking performance. With respect to material developers, they can draw on the results of this study to make informed decisions on how to adopt the approaches towards teaching speaking in different courses. Moreover, they may draw on the findings of the present study to reconsider the possible different

role of auditory input enhancement on the learning of grammar. This study tried to contribute to filling a gap in the literature regarding the study of this type of input enhancement on speaking ability of learners. Based on the purpose of the present study, this research question was raised.

Q1: Does auditory input-enhancement instruction have a significant effect on EFL learners' speaking ability? For the above research question, the following Null Hypothesis can be formulated:

H01: Auditory input enhancement instruction does not have a significant effect on EFL learners' speaking ability.

Method

Research Design

The participants of this study were selected based on convenience sampling method; therefore, this study enjoyed a quasi-experimental design (Mackey & Gass, 2016) with pre-test, treatment, and post-test design. Auditory input enhancement was considered as the independent variables while the learners' speaking ability was the dependent variable. Furthermore, all participants were female intermediate EFL learners, so gender and language proficiency was considered as the control variable of the study.

Participants

The participants of this study were 70 Iranian intermediate EFL learners studying in Najm language institute. They shared the same linguistic and cultural background and they were Persian native speakers whose age ranged from 18-28. Only those learners whose scores were one standard deviation below and above the mean were chosen based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The participants were female learners who were studying English for three years and they were at the same level of language proficiency based on the language institute's placement test. However, the researcher used OPT test to ensure the students' homogeneity at the beginning of the study.

Sampling Method

Fifty learners whose OPT scores fell between one standard deviation below and above the mean were selected to participate in the study. They were assigned to two classes. One of these classes, containing 25 homogenous participants, was considered as the control group and the other class, containing another 25 homogenous participants, was considered as the experimental group. The experimental group received auditory input enhancement technique as their treatment and the other control group followed the method suggested by the language institute.

Instruments

The instruments used in different stages of the current research were; a language proficiency test (OPT) and speaking pre-test and post-test.

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

Oxford Placement Test, which contains 60 items, is a standard test of proficiency. As a Proficiency test, it is expected to be norm-referenced and is intended to “measure global language abilities” (Brown, 2005, p. 2). One specific feature of a proficiency test, as a norm-referenced test, is that it should produce “scores which fall into a normal distribution” (p. 5), which allows relative interpretations of the test scores in terms of “how each student’s performance relates to the performances of all other students” (p. 4). The second distinctive feature of the test is that “the test must provide scores that form a wide distribution, so that interpretations of the differences among students will be as fair as possible” (p. 8). The OPT provides reliable and efficient means of placing students at the start of a course for teachers (Allan, 2004) (See Appendix A).

Speaking Pre-test

In order to measure the learners’ speaking ability, the researcher used the speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET) as a pre-test. According to the official websites of Cambridge ESOL, PET is an exam for people who can use every day written and spoken English at an intermediate level. It covers all four language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The speaking practice test in PET consists of four parts and the students were allowed to take interview about 10-12 minutes. In part one, of the speaking test, the examiner asked some questions about personal information of the students and each candidate interacted with the interlocutors

about 2-3 minutes.

Part two of the speaking test, was about simulated situation based on a visual stimulus which through these stimuli, the candidates interacted with each other. Making and responding to suggestions, discussing alternatives, making recommendations and negotiating agreement were recommended in this part which normally takes 2-3 minutes.

In part three of the speaking test, the candidates talked for up to a minute each about one photo on a related topic. This part was based on extended turn, responding to photographs and managing discourse in a longer turn which needs 3 minutes.

Part four was based on general conversation and the candidates talked about their likes/dislikes, preferences, experiences, habits, etc. They also talked and discussed on the topic of part 3 which took about 3 minutes' time. (See Appendix B). The purpose of the speaking pre-test was to determine whether or not the participants were homogeneous in their speaking ability.

Speaking Posy-test

In order to obtain the scores of the participants on speaking performance, the speaking section from another version of PET other than the one used for pre-test was administered to the learners (see Appendix C). It is worth noting that the purpose of the posy-test was to compare the performance of the two groups after the treatment.

Speaking Rubric

The rating scale used to rate the speaking section of PET by Jenny Quantana (2003) in this study was the one provided by Cambridge under the name of General Mark Schemes for speaking. The rating was done on the basis of the criteria stated in the rating scale including the rating scale of 0-5 which should be converted to 15 in line with the scoring guidelines (see Appendix D).

Course book

The course book used by two groups was the same, as this was a main variable to be controlled in the present study. The course book is American English File Book 2(2008). This textbook is used at Najm institute for intermediate learners, which contains nine units and mainly focuses on vocabulary and grammar, at an intermediate level. This book has a pertinent CD to practice the

pronunciation and repeat the sentences and a workbook. In this study, students dealt with all four units of this book.

Listening Materials

Eight listening texts were used in the current study. Four listening tasks were taught based on their course book while another four listening texts came from another supplementary course book at the time of the study. Indeed, these texts were chosen from *Tactics for Listening* (Richards, 1997).

Data Analysis

Several statistical analyses were conducted to answer the research question in this study. The appropriate statistical methods were used as follows: A comprehensive descriptive statistic of data obtained from OPT was provided. The means of two groups' scores at pre-test were compared using an independent samples t-test. The inter reliability of the speaking section of the PET both as a pre-test and posty-test was calculated through Pearson correlation. Furthermore, the means of two groups' scores at posty-test were compared using an independent samples t-test in order to compare the significant difference between the groups' means and to test the null hypothesis. The data analysis was done through the 16th version of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). This chapter provided the operational steps in conducting this research. Therefore, the chapter introduced the participant who participated in this study, as well as the instruments used in this study. Moreover, the procedure employed for the data collection as well as the design, the statistical analysis used in conducting this study were explained.

Results

As noticed in Table 1 below, the significance value equals .000 which is lower than the confidence level of 0.05 indicating that the means of the two groups on the speaking posty-test were statistically different. Since the mean of the posty-test scores for the experimental group is higher than that of the control group ($11.9 > 9.64$), it can be concluded that using auditory input enhancement has a statistically significant and positive effect on the speaking of EFL learners; therefore, the null hypothesis of the study is rejected.

Table 1

Results of Independent Samples T-Test for the Scores of the Two Groups on the Speaking Posy-test

Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances t-test for Equality of Means							
		95% Confidence Interval of the							
		Sig. (2-tailed) Mean Difference Std. Error Difference							
		F	Sig.	t	df			Lower	Upper
Speaking posy-test	Equal variances assumed	.006	.937	-5.548		.000	-2.280	.40743	-3.09 -1.46
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.5	48.0	.000	-2.280	.40743	-3.09 -1.46

To determine the strength of the findings of the research, that is, to evaluate the stability of the research findings across samples, effect size was also estimated. To calculate Cohen's d for independent samples t-test, the researcher used the following formula in line with Cohen (1988):

$$\text{Cohen's } d = (M2 - M1) / \text{SD pooled}$$

where:

$$\text{SD pooled} = \sqrt{((\text{SD1}^2 + \text{SD2}^2) / 2)}$$

$$\text{Cohen's } d = (11.92 - 9.64) / 1.435009 = 1.588841$$

Therefore, the Cohen's d calculated for the post-test scores of the control and experimental group was 1.58 which is considered to be a large effect size and thus according to Cohen (1988), the findings can be safely generalized across different samples.

Discussion

The present study aimed to find if using auditory input enhancement has a statistically significant effect on the speaking of EFL learners. The results of independent samples t-test indicated that using auditory input enhancement has a statistically significant and positive effect on the speaking of EFL learners.

With respect to the role of input in language learning, the present findings support the findings of the previous research conducted by Fahim and Vaezi (2011) which is on the effectiveness of visual/textual input-based enhancement on the acquisition of Verb-Noun lexical collocations by Iranian EFL intermediate learners and concluded that visual/textual input-based enhancement can be as beneficial as conventional method of teaching.

Likewise, the present findings are in line with the findings of Motlagh and Nasab (2015) who carried out a study to find out the role of input enhancement as positive factor and its impact on L2 vocabulary and they proved that using inputs were effective in responding to target vocabulary words and using input enhancement to answer target words are the most useful factors in the process of vocabulary learning.

In line with results of this study regarding the effectiveness of auditory input enhancement on learners' vocabulary learning, Dastjerdi (2011) investigated the role of input enhancement in teaching compliments. The result proved that the experimental group who were exposed to input enhancement performed better than the control group, indicating that the nature of speech acts could be employed in helping learners improve their interlanguage pragmatics.

Additionally, the findings of the present study are in favor of the results of the research done by Rezvani (2011) who conducted the study to investigate the role of output task and input enhancement in acquisition of collocations. The results revealed that both instructions had significant effect on acquisition of grammatical collocations. However, input enhancement group outperformed the output group.

Findings of this study are in line with the results of the study done by Khoii and Tabrizi (2011) who examined the role of input enhancement through multimedia on the improvement of EFL learners' writing ability. The results revealed that input enhancement had a significant effect on learners' writing and promote learners' awareness in L2 contexts.

Moreover, this study also supports the study conducted by Seyedtajaddini (2014) on the impact of audio input enhancement on EFL learners' grammar learning from varying proficiency levels. The findings of the study proved that there is a significant difference between two groups depending on the use of audio input enhancement indicating that the highly proficient learners outperformed the low proficient learners.

Findings of this study are in line with the results of the study by Motlagh and Nasab (2015) who investigated the role of input enhancement on L2 vocabulary. The results of their study showed that three types of inputs were effective in responding to target vocabulary words. These results proposed that using input enhancement in answering target words are the most useful factors.

For testing the research hypothesis, a comprehensive description of the finding was provided in this chapter. The description was followed by data analysis related to the participant selection process at the time of pre-testing, the post-test, and the hypothesis testing. The final section of this chapter was devoted to the discussion section to justify the findings of the study.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the current study, it can be concluded that language learning especially speaking ability simply cannot take place without having exposure to a sort of language input and various audiovisual input has the potential to provide the necessary language input for SLA improvement mainly in EFL contexts where social interaction as a basis of language input does not exist or is limited.

Through auditory input enhancement, students paid more attention to the words or points and they could enhance their learning ability and consequently their speaking performance. Therefore, it can be concluded that the main reason behind the efficacy of auditory input enhancement in the present study was that the method has attracted the attention of the learners which is exactly in line with the noticing hypothesis stated by Schmidt (2001). Moreover, the prior research done by researchers such as Krashen (1985) led them to put an increased emphasis on the role of input in

the learning of a language. Such researches have mainly concentrated on the importance of input in increasing the learners' knowledge of the target language.

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