

Listening in Beginner Language Courses: The Gathering Storm in the Saudi Context

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Abstract: The focus on optimizing the number of listening opportunities for learners in early language courses is a result of its importance as a natural stage of language learning and the concept continues to gain prominence in language learning theory and pedagogy across the international EFL (English as a Foreign Language) platform. Despite the increased focus on listening comprehension since the mid-1980s, and especially given the current popularity of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, much work remains to be done to better understand the implications of the development of listening ability in language competence. This is especially the case in Saudi Arabia where the prime source of listening input is generated in classroom settings with minimal exposure and input outside the classroom. This is in sharp contrast to many learning situations in English-speaking locations where classroom listening exposure and input are greatly outweighed by those available outside the classroom setting. As this paper investigates the impact of the development of listening ability on language competence in beginner-level learners at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia, using the CLT approach, it intends to inform instructional practices and curriculum design for beginner English language learners, especially within the given context.

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1. Introduction

The concept of the “silent period,” wherein listening is of prime importance, can be traced to Stephen Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input” hypothesis, one aspect of which recommends as much simplified input as possible via listening opportunities in an early language learning environment. Despite an increased focus on teaching other language skills, the time and resources allocated for developing listening ability remain inadequate, especially in the context of mandatory foundation year EFL programs at Saudi universities. The foundation year programs, which exist at most Saudi universities, have sought to present language in a communicative approach package but without sufficient consideration given to developing listening ability, especially in the early stages of Second Language (L2) learning. Given the nature of these one-year programs and the cultural context in which they operate, the listening input embedded in the communicative approach, as presented in beginning-level language courses, seems to take a back seat to reading skills which receive more emphasis due to perceived needs in the university context. However, there is ample evidence for the primacy of the role of comprehensible input in language learning, with listening input being the ‘polestar’ of second language learning (Dunkel 1991). Research also finds a significant correlation between listening ability and overall second language proficiency (Feyten 1991). Listening is believed to be the most critical language skill to learn at the

beginning of L2 learning as it provides favorable conditions for L2 development (Rost 1994).

The early focus on developing listening ability or the early ‘silent period’ associated with simplified input, corresponds to a natural interval of time when beginner language learners are usually unable or unwilling to speak or read in the new language, or the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen 1985). This naturally leads to the conclusion that there is a need for increased emphasis on promoting listening ability within targeted beginner L2 learners’ language development, and for treating it with the same level of importance in L2 language proficiency development as is ascribed to the listening-only stage in children’s L1 language acquisition.

The role of listening comprehension in the 1960s-era audio-lingual method that helped learners listen and repeat was later considered a key element in facilitating language learning. Listening ability was no longer believed to be an incidental product of language learning that did not require the same level of attention given to the other skills. On the contrary, it came to be considered a prime mover of the entire learning process, especially in the early stages. Recent research has repeatedly called for better understanding of the pedagogical implications of increased focus on listening ability inside the EFL/ESL classroom as it is believed to be the most important skill requiring initial attention (Moyer 2006). As listening is the most used skill in everyday communication, it is the skill that develops fastest. Because of this, it is the aspect of

second language acquisition that requires the most research in order to ensure its development as a facilitating tool for other language skills (Oxford 1990). In a setting such as Saudi Arabia where English is rarely used by the learners outside the classroom, the need for investigation of listening ability development in early language courses adopting the CLT approach becomes even more critical to the overall development of L2 competence.

The simple practice of decoding the linguistic and semantic features of the spoken message at this stage is often accomplished without first developing listening ability since the learners have no control over the nature of listening activities they are exposed to inside the classroom. Beyond that, they have little opportunity to consolidate listening input in L2 outside the classroom in such an EFL environment. Therefore, the results of this study will be interpreted from within the EFL Saudi context.

The focus of this paper is the explanation of the links connecting L2 listening theory, curriculum design, and instructional practice in an EFL setting. The purpose of this paper is to calm the local instructor and minimize the institutional frenzy to rush beginner learners to produce more language than learned, especially in spoken form. This obsession with language production in early language learning stages ignores the findings that beginner learners are subconsciously acquiring the language through listening, which is an active and complex process and different from other skills in many ways (Wong 2001). The findings of this paper are intended to inform instructional practices and curriculum design for beginner language learners, especially in a demographic where learning English is mandatory and taught as EFL.

2. The Present Study

This study attempted to determine the development of listening ability, in particular, how it impacts the overall development of English proficiency in beginner language learners. The study used a sample of 333 students randomly selected from a range of classes at the Beginner Level A1 in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in the English Foundation Year Program of the English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. The sample was twice given the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT), developed by Oxford University Press (OUP), prior to joining the ELI and after completing one module of 6 weeks, i.e., 108 teaching hours using a communicative integrated-skills curriculum. The conditions of the second assessment duplicated the first in all aspects. The test is computer-adaptive and automatically marked. A perfect score would be 120. According to (Purpura 2007), it specifically measures:

- **Section One: The Use of English**

This section measures students' knowledge of the grammatical and pragmatic resources underlying the English language. It includes three language knowledge tasks. The first task primarily aims to measure grammatical forms. The second aims mainly to measure semantic meaning. The third is a test of grammatical form and meaning. A fourth is designed to measure students' knowledge of the pragmatic, i.e. implied, meanings encoded in situated interactions.

- **Section Two: The Listening Section**

This section measures the test takers' listening ability. It includes three tasks, each intended to measure the students' ability to understand both the literal meanings encoded within the listening text and the implied meanings encoded either within the text or beyond the parameters of a listening text. Listening ability is assessed by means of short and long dialogues and an extended monologue.

The six-week curriculum for level A1 following original placement used the CLT approach with one major aural-oral course objective which was to enable learners to engage in simple oral communications in order to provide and obtain essential information, using appropriate pronunciation and vocabulary. This objective is served by a variety of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) such as:

- Can follow a short listening text about people and jobs which contains familiar words and phrases, delivered in slow, carefully articulated speech.
- Can understand a very short simple text about someone, picking out key personal information (e.g. name, job, family, likes and dislikes).
- Can recognize and say a limited number of words for places in a town or city.
- Can follow simple directions to places on a map when speech is slow and contains a limited number of familiar words and phrases.
- Can understand simple clear communication on familiar topics when delivered in slow, clear repeated speech.

Table 1: It shows the statistical results of the primary analysis in pre and post Listening (Lis-pre & Lis-post) and Use of English (Use-pre & Use-post) skills

	Lis-pre	Lis-post	Use-pre	Use-post
Mean	21.79	27.12	21.18	35.00
Standard Deviation	12.58	15.10	11.79	17.88
Skewness	0.05	0.36	-0.09	-0.01
Maximum	54.00	84.00	57.00	97.00

The beginner course was designed to take into account the learners' affective filter by incorporating more listening opportunities into the course than had previously been available. The pressure for overambitious and unmanageable goals of language production was also reduced. In an independent teacher survey conducted according to the ELI curriculum review plan 2012-2013, a huge 80.4% of 77 respondents said that current classroom listening practice for the Beginner Level received sufficient attention in the SLOs.

The collected data was statistically analyzed to investigate changes in student language skills. The main aim was to determine to what extent development of listening ability influenced the level of English language proficiency (as outlined with regard to the OOPT). The analysis was based on primary statistical calculations such as the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and maximum to obtain a clear image of the data, which assists in determining the appropriate method for carrying out the analysis. The data was used to investigate the following alternative hypothesis: The focus on developing listening ability of beginner language learners in the classroom improves overall language competence in an EFL setting.

The One Tail Student's t-test was used to determine the significance of improvement in overall language competence due to the development of listening ability. Regression Analysis was utilized to seek evidence supporting this paper's stated hypothesis. The primary statistical results show that listening ability and the level of practical English use improved by 6.4% and 16.6%, respectively, from the first to the second OOPT assessment. For both language skills, the standard deviation increased at the end of the module, which indicates that the disparity in the student competence level increased as shown in Table 1. Furthermore, the maximum score for both skills changed significantly at the end of the module. For listening ability, the maximum score prior to the start of the module was 54 rising to 84 at the end of the module. A similar degree of change was also observed in the level of English used, rising from 57 prior to the start of the module (1st OOPT) to 97 at the end of the module (2nd OOPT). This change was evidence of a correlation between improvement in listening ability and the proficiency of English use.

The One Tail Student's test was used to find out the difference between the means of the sample group. First, listening ability was examined. The result showed that the improvement in this ability was significant at 0.05 (p -value ≈ 0). Also, at the same significance level (0.05), it was found that the difference between the pre and post use of English

level existed at (p -value ≈ 0) Therefore, there was strong evidence against the null hypothesis.

Using the Regression Analysis approach, the Scatter Plot, Fig. 1, illustrates the distribution of the level of English use in relationship to listening ability. The trend line proves that a high score in listening ability leads to improved performance in the use of English. However, the correlation coefficient (r) between the two was set at 0.57, which proved to be significant at $\alpha=0.05$. It appeared that the correlation was not strong enough ($R^2 = 0.33$) to justify the direct relationship. This may be due to other factors that are not considered in this paper.

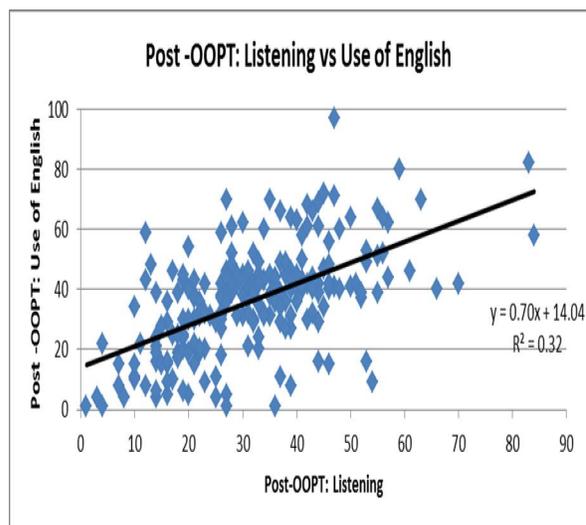


Figure 1: It illustrates the scatter plot of the Post-OOPT Use of English (Y-axis) and Post-OOPT Listening (X-axis)

3. Discussion and Implications

The study attempted to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the development of listening ability and use of English in ELI beginner language courses using the CLT approach. The results show that the increased listening input of the short six-week module appeared to help significantly the learners improve their listening ability and, therefore, their overall level of English use.

The results support generally held current beliefs in the field of second language teaching regarding the importance of increased early comprehensible listening input. The findings are consistent with previous studies advocating an initial strong focus on listening such as (Feyten 1991). Also, increased L2 competence via more careful and graded beginner classroom listening input was evident in this study as in previous studies such as (Vandergrift 2002), advancing the understating of the casual impact of the natural process of language acquisition.

The focus of the study was not simply on the implementation of an absolute silent period leading to overall language development since other simplified language production learning outcomes were involved, especially speaking and reading. The course targeted four major language objectives, including one for improving general listening ability. This would account for only 25-30% of class time. The assessment structure of the beginner language courses allowed students to consciously develop their listening ability and reflect on and evaluate associated language production skills in order to encourage learner autonomy and responsibility.

The curriculum provided comprehensible, yet limited listening passages, often brief and sometimes just models of basic conversation patterns. More extended listening passages tended to occur only once or twice per unit in the course materials and were sometimes grammar-based. More importantly, the beginner curriculum did not explicitly teach any listening skills or sub-skills. This may explain why 122 learners, according to the Regression Analysis, were not able to develop their listening ability, and hence, their use of English.

The study was limited and did not investigate other factors that might have played a role in increasing the language competence of the majority of the students due to the broad range of course objectives included in the module, which were presented and practiced using the CLT approach. The study was limited to charting language competence improvement in listening ability and use of English between the two administered OOPTs and did not investigate the types of listening strategies used to develop listening ability at this beginner stage.

A number of classes were observed prior to the 2nd OOPT to contribute to the scope of the study. Faculty members generally were observed to be utilizing a high proportion of available classroom time in beginner classes for pre-teaching vocabulary and setting context prior to listening activities. This resulted in actual listening practice being undertaken at a pace faster than the pace suited to this level, which ideally should be paced so as to allow learners sufficient time to take in and understand the provided input. Timing issues resulted in some faculty members not being able to pause listening activities where appropriate and as needed by their learners, with learners subsequently failing to obtain maximum benefit from these opportunities.

It is stating the obvious to say that any learner will be unable or reluctant to respond to listening input that he/she is unsure about in terms of content and meaning, and Saudi learners, in particular, are culturally very reluctant to risk losing face in front of their peers by making inappropriate or incorrect

responses to listening prompts. If they understand what they are listening to, then they can attempt to formulate an appropriate response. If not, then withdrawing and not responding is an understandably attractive option. A valuable contribution to Saudi listening learning at the beginner-level would be to reduce the temptation among such learners to utilize this option. A substantial increase in the amount of listening input, practice and comprehension so as to provide a more positive effect on language use in the early language process necessitates the following:

- A level-appropriate listening textbook providing a wide range of opportunities for listening input and practice, which teaches listening skills and sub-skills on a regular and systematic basis.
- Teacher training on how to effectively exploit listening passages and how to improve listening teaching through up-to-date best practices. Those responsible for the design and delivery of listening sessions for beginner-level learners should be encouraged to refrain from requiring premature responses from listeners and to focus on the developmental opportunities for listening ability available in such sessions, avoiding their over-use as assessment events.
- Sufficient space in the curriculum to allow faculty members the time needed to place more significant emphasis on listening. This entails the removal of some other course objectives and SLOs focusing on language production from the beginner curriculum in order to create the necessary space.

In addition, any effort to increase the amount of listening in early language courses requires that careful attention be paid to maintaining the level of vocabulary and grammar within comprehensible reach of the students and to ensure that topics are interesting, motivating, relevant, and as reflective as possible of the listening needs of learners, both within academia and in the wider world outside the classroom.

4. Conclusion

Listening continues to be the "Cinderella skill in second language learning" (Nunan 1997, p.47), especially in a wonderland such as Saudi Arabia where English learning is mainly confined to the classroom and listening is indeed worthy of intensive research necessary to elevate this Cinderella of the learning process to its long deserved great dress and heels. An EFL formal learning setting needs to involve as much comprehensible listening input and practice as possible to contribute to the development of the overall language competence of learners.

Listening should be accorded careful and attentive treatment by faculty members commensurate

with its significance to the learners. This is especially the case in beginner EFL classes, as learners at this level find it the most difficult skill with which to familiarize themselves and feel comfortable, and learner stumbling in this ability's development at this stage obviously runs the risk of adverse effects on subsequent L2 development. Development of listening ability does not occur by merely playing a listening text and immediately testing student comprehension, especially in a formal EFL setting where L2 listening input is limited to class activities. Students need to listen to as much comprehensible input as possible at the beginning of their L2 journey in order for it to benefit their language production.

While this study finds significant improvement in student listening ability which positively influenced overall L2 competence, further research in developing listening skills in early language courses adopting the CLT approach in an EFL setting may attempt to answer the following:

- What are the essential listening activities that beginner learners should participate in inside the EFL classroom, and what range of listening tasks should be associated with these activities?
- What are the essential listening strategies beginner language learners should acquire in an EFL setting to help develop their overall language competence?
- What impact do other language skills such as reading and writing have in improving the overall use of English of EFL beginner language learners?

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