

# Using Authentic Aural Materials to Develop Listening Comprehension in the EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences of authentic aural materials on listening ability of thirty female undergraduate psychology majors studying English as a foreign language. It basically focused on using authentic materials and real-life situations as part of the communicative approach. The results of the listening comprehension post test were compared to that of the pretest using a 2-tailed t-test ( $P < .05$ ). Analysis of the interviews and the questionnaire revealed that the use of authentic materials in the EFL classroom enhanced EFL students' listening comprehension ability. Results showed a statistically significant improvement in listening ability of the EFL students. Recommendations were offered to ease students' frustration that resulted from the speed of authentic speech. Pedagogical implications of the results were discussed along with the impact on EFL students' listening comprehension development.

**Keywords:** Aural, Authentic material, Listening comprehension, Real- life situation, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Listening is probably the least explicit of the four language skills, making it the most difficult one to learn. It is evident that children listen and respond to language before they learn to talk. When it is time for children to learn to read, they still have to listen so that they gain knowledge and information to follow directions. In the classroom, students have to listen carefully and attentively to lectures and class discussions in order to understand and to retain the information for later recall. Teaching listening can be hard for teachers and students both. Students who are fine with speaking at their own pace and reading may have trouble listening to a recording that is a regular-speed conversation. Listening is often confusing for an English learner. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Layers of sound. Unlike reading in which the learner is given a single text to follow, in real-life situations native speakers speak over each other, at different volumes and speeds and often with frequent interruptions. The written equivalent is having two or three texts mixed up with some writing bigger and some smaller and sentences interrupted by comments and other sentences.
- Accents. While written English is pretty much the same the world over, there are a myriad of accents in spoken English which can make it even more difficult for the learner to follow a conversation. The written equivalent is having different handwriting plus having the same words spelt differently depending on who is writing them.
- Intonation is the way in which a sentence is sounded. Native speakers do not speak in monotone but raise or lower the pitch of an utterance as they speak. The most common example is when they make a simple question.

There is no one-stop solution to this problem. However, in the classroom there are a number of strategies a teacher can use to help students listen well.

- Once the teacher has an idea about the problems a learner faces, s/he can better find solutions and effective methods of teaching. Thus it is important to explain to the class how the written sentence can differ from the spoken sentence because of the reasons above. When the students know that in certain situations articles, for example, are almost not spoken then they learn to "hear" this in an utterance.
- Many students are bound to the written word. When doing a listening exercise, the teacher can have all books closed so the students only listen rather than try to match the sounds to words on the page.
- The teacher can introduce accents into the class. The teacher can have the students listen to a "neutral" text and then the same in an accent and have them point out and analyze the differences in pronunciation.

Native speakers listen, in general, for two main reasons: 1. Specific information. 2. Gist. An example of listening for specific information would be to find out the departure time of a delayed plane over an airport system. An example of gist listening would be listening to a friend telling a story about something which happened during their lesson. This being said, listening activities in the class should use the same motivation. There must be a good reason for the students to listen and the teacher needs to give it to them. There is, for example, no point in just asking them to listen to a story for no reason. They need to know *why* they are listening. So, the teacher should not run a single "listening" lesson as it is not realistic and if s/he walks into the class announcing that, "today we are doing listening," s/he will probably not be greeted with great enthusiasm. Instead, the teacher should look at a genuine activity a native speaker might indulge in and base the lesson around this. For example, s/he can prepare a lesson where the class needs to listen to a spoken timetable and collect some information; or play bingo where the class needs to listen explicitly for certain numbers (or other items, Vocabulary are just as effective here). In other words, s/he can set a task and then run the tape. Normally native speakers only get one opportunity to hear something. With learners, of course, the teacher can make it easier by allowing two or even three plays. But if the students cannot "hear" something after that time, then the teacher needs to work out why they cannot. Perhaps the speaker is speaking too fast or they are using an unusual word. The teacher should not just tell the students the answer and forget it; rather, s/he can take a note of what went wrong and cover that point in the next lesson. With beginners the teacher needs to make sure the speaker is very clear and slow. As the students get more practice the teacher can increase the speed of delivery to a more normal rate. The following are some tips for the students to be effective listeners while listening to a lecturer in a pair work practice:

- Give 100% of your attention to the speaker by putting a hold on all other activities. Make an active effort to fight distraction and concentrate on your speaker.
- Respond to show comprehension and interest. This can be verbal or non-verbal, such as asking follow-up questions or nodding.
- Demonstrate understanding by restating his/her main idea. This is not to prove you are listening, but to show that you understand what s/he is telling you. It is also a way to clarify miscommunication before it gets too far along.

Some teachers warn against using film (only) as extended listening: is this a valid criticism? Students do tend to be enthusiastic about film, but if all it really provides is listening practice, there are plenty of good reasons to avoid it in favor of more communicative activities – or to make an effort to incorporate not only discussion which compels students to analyze what they have watched but also activities which play on the more creative aspects of film. The teacher may also be able to incorporate prediction of vocabulary using context as well as visual clues in a somewhat traditional way ("listen for a word that means ... and starts with 't'"; "is this slang term positive or negative"; "what do you think the speaker means by ...?"). Overall, it is also fairly rare for the teachers to use film – as in movies and TV – in the classroom to begin with (in Internet-friendly schools, video sharing sites like YouTube and YourSkool are becoming more popular). Despite conventional teacher wisdom to the contrary, the students can still enjoy and benefit from film, even if used in a more traditional way – in a reasonable proportion – and even if only to serve as a change of pace. Everybody loves movies. For the teacher any listening comprehension exercise needs preparation. It is not good to jump straight in and give the students a listening exercise and expect them to understand it completely. For one, this does not reflect the way in which one listens in real life. For example, real life listening scenarios will include: talking with friends, listening to the radio, listening to announcements, receiving instructions and so on. With each of these native speakers will usually have some idea of what they are going to be listening to before they hear it. If one is at a railway station, for example, and there is an announcement one will normally assume that it will relate to the train schedule, a delay, security baggage announcement or perhaps a lost child having been found. No one would expect the railway announcer to talk about what was on TV last night. And thus before playing the tape, the teacher should prepare the students and tell them that they are about to hear a conversation between an antique dealer and an old lady he is visiting and then get the students to predict what the conversation is likely to be about. The teacher can discuss this with the students and build up a list of likely vocabulary. When the tape is played the students will already know the meaning of possibly difficult words and will thus not get stuck in the translation phase of the listening comprehension. Sounds are sometimes difficult to discriminate in a language other than one's native language, especially if the sounds are not distinguished in the native language. There are several ways to test phoneme discrimination, that is, ability to tell the difference between different sounds. One way to test phoneme discrimination is to have the students look at a picture and listen to four words and decide which word is the object in the picture. The words chosen as alternatives should be close to the correct word. However, it is often difficult to find common enough words with similar sounds, and if unfamiliar words are used, they will not make good alternatives. Alternatively, the students could be presented with four pictures and be asked to choose the picture that matches the word that they hear. Another possibility is to give the students three words and ask them to indicate which two are the same. Finally, the students can listen to a spoken sentence and be asked to identify which one of four similar words

were used in the sentence. Items with full sentences have the drawback that the students can make use of not just phoneme discrimination but also knowledge of grammar and lexical items. This type of discrimination item is one that can be used for diagnostic purposes to see whether the students have particular problems with distinguishing between phonemes. However, it does not give the teacher any information about the students' ability to comprehend spoken English. The ability to recognize stress can be tested by having the students listen to a sentence that they also have in front of them. The students are instructed to indicate the word that carries the main stress of the sentence. While recognizing stress patterns is useful in English, the problem with this type of test is that it lacks a context. The students need to show that they can recognize the difference between "John is going today" and "John is going *today*", but they do not need to show that they understand that there is a difference in the meaning of the two sentences or what the difference is. Ability to understand the meaning of difference in intonation can be tested by having the students listen to a statement and choose from three interpretations of the statement. For example, the students might be given the statement "Vera is a wonderful musician" and be asked to decide whether the speaker is making a straightforward statement, a sarcastic statement, or a question. Since the context is neutral, however, it is sometimes difficult to avoid ambiguity. In real communication, listeners make use of their background knowledge, the context, etc., as well as the intonation to help them interpret the communicative meaning of an utterance. Probing into the conversational and academic listening abilities required by EFL college students should be very well considered. Iranian EFL students are studying English in their home country where English is not the dominant native language. Students who are from environments where English is not the language of the country have very few opportunities to hear the real language; these students therefore are not accustomed to hearing the language as it is produced by native speakers for native speakers. Consequently, students from the countries in which English is taught as a foreign language frequently have great difficulty understanding English spoken to them when they come into contact with native speakers of the language. Authentic materials refer to oral and written language materials used in daily situations by native speakers of the language (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Some examples of authentic materials are newspapers, magazines, and television programs. This exploratory study sought to examine the influences of the use of authentic aural materials on listening ability in students of English as a foreign language. This descriptive study examined how the use of authentic input in an EFL classroom eased students' learning in English-language listening.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Question

The research question asked in the present study is the following:

What are the influences of authentic aural materials on the listening comprehension in students of English as a foreign language?

### 2.2 Participants

The site of the study was set at Al-Zahra University in the north of Tehran in Iran. Thirty female undergraduate psychology majors, who were enrolled in an EFL class at Al-Zahra University, participated in the study. The students attended the class two days a week, for two hours, from 1:00 to 3:00 in the afternoon. The average age of the students was 19 years. The students had all been learning English for an average of 6 years, beginning in guidance school. The teacher-researcher informed the students about the basic procedures of the research study. The students were notified that participation in this research would consist of their regular attendance in the language class, two interviews, and completion of a questionnaire. In order to ensure that student performance was not influenced by the goals of the study, the teacher-researcher did not explain the purpose of the study to the students.

## 3. Instruments and Procedure

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the EFL class cooperated in the research and participated in two interview sessions for data collection. The first interview was conducted during the first week of the language program in order to obtain information about the students' educational background and their English-language listening experiences. The second interview was conducted during the last week of the language program in order to determine the students' attitudes and points of view on the use of authentic aural materials in EFL listening.

Class observation was also a means by which data for the current study were collected. Class observations were conducted from the beginning through the end of the data collection schedules, for a total of 25 days. The purpose of class observation was for the researcher to notice the authentic materials implemented in the classroom and to closely observe the students' listening and learning practices with relation to the teacher's instruction. The teacher-researcher kept an eye on the activities that were taking place in the classroom. Notes were taken on class activities and were categorized for the forthcoming analysis.

The textbook used in this particular EFL program was *Insight into IELTS* by Jakeman and McDowell (1999). The

listening module of the book was to provide EFL students with opportunities to listen to authentic texts. After listening to each listening part, the students were to perform various tasks in order to develop academic-listening skills: listening for the main idea, note-taking, orientating to the text, listening for specific information, identifying detail, seeing beyond the surface meaning, following signpost words and being aware of stress, rhythm and intonation.

The students participated in an IELTS test once at the beginning and once at the end of the semester. A paired t-test was conducted between the pretest and the post test results.

Generally, the teacher-researcher started each lesson with a few pre-listening exercises like discussion about the illustrations in the textbook, pronunciation of vocabulary items, and matching definitions with vocabulary item. Then the teacher-researcher normally introduced an audio-tape related to the listening tasks.

When the teacher-researcher began to play the tape for the first time, she generally paused the tape after a few sentences, to ask the students to identify the vocabulary items they had practiced during the pre-listening phase, before she continued the tape. After the students had listened to the tape for a few times, they did some exercises related to what they had heard. The exercises during the listening phase primarily involved indicating the main idea and the supporting details. Then, the teacher-researcher played the tape one or two more times so that the students could practice taking notes.

The teacher-researcher also assigned certain tasks that the students had to perform or complete, during the listening activity, such as answering questions and getting specific information about some points related to the listening material. When they were back to the classroom, the teacher normally had the students discuss and share their experiences, involving the outside activities, with the rest of the class.

#### **4. Results**

The analysis of data revealed that the students' listening comprehension appeared to have improved after being exposed to authentic aural materials in the classroom. That is, a paired t-test that was conducted between the pretest and the posttest results showed a significant difference between the means of the posttest and that of the pretest (see Table 1). The mean of the posttest (16.80) was more than that of the pretest (5.83) which proved the students' listening comprehension progress as a result of implementing authentic materials (see Table 2).

In order to check the correlation between the pretest and the posttest, the Paired Samples Correlations was conducted. The result showed that there was a strong positive correlation between the posttest and the pretest ( $r = .43, P < .05$ ) (see Table 3).

The results of the interviews indicated that although the students felt uncomfortable and had difficulty understanding the instructor's English on the first day of the class, they became more relaxed afterwards. All 30 students experienced the same problem in the academic class, that is, the unfamiliarity with vocabulary items. Having experienced some authentic aural materials in the classroom, the students found themselves feeling more comfortable than the time they started the class. 4 students (13%), however, mentioned that they felt still a little uncomfortable when they encountered English outside the classroom setting. The results from the interviews also revealed that 26 out of 30 students (86%) found that the listening practice they had in class assisted their listening outside the classroom by making them more self-confident and less nervous.

After being exposed to authentic materials, the students recognized the difference between English they heard in class and that they experienced in English programs they watched or listened to in the real world. According to the students, the language they listened to outside classroom (American or British movies, educational CDs, DVDs, etc) was normally spoken rather rapidly, generally had regional ways of pronouncing, and sometimes contained slang words and ungrammatical features.

#### **5. Discussion**

Students' existing knowledge or background knowledge plays a significant role in their comprehension of the aural texts (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Platt & Brooks, 1994; Rubin, 1994; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994). Listeners draw on their pre-existing knowledge to help them interpret the text and to create expectations of what they are about to hear (Bacon, 1992; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998). Academic listening materials require an extensive reservoir of background knowledge relevant to any given discipline; EFL students have difficulty understanding the information in spoken texts when they lack familiarity with the topic or the cultural elements in the discourse. The cultural differences can cause numerous misunderstandings and communicative conflicts. Much reason indicates empirically and quite conclusively that differences exist between cultures on how, why and when listening is demonstrated. Even within cultures that share different varieties of a common language, in this instance English, discrepancies are present (Farr, 2005).

It is an ideal to check students' comprehension in their own native language in order to ensure that the content, not the language, is being tested. However, a diverse EFL class makes it impossible to use students' first language to assess their comprehension (Garza, 1991). Typically, students have to produce some output to demonstrate their understanding of the text. Different types of student response can be following directions, selecting a picture, or drawing a picture. Other forms used in response to questions are verbal: yes/no, prosodic: mmh/uh huh, and gestural: nod/shake of the head (Bishop, Chan, Hartley, & Weir, 1998).

What is going on inside the student's head is inaccessible; therefore, external signals are observed to monitor whether or not the student has understood the spoken text. Brown (1986) states, "It is not enough for the student simply to nod from time to time in a sociable manner to signify understanding. Such nods may indicate anything from perfectly adequate understanding to total confusion" (p. 258). Consequently, the students should be required to produce some form of physical or verbal response to indicate how well they have understood a spoken text.

The findings of this research showed that comprehension in EFL students has improved after being exposed to authentic materials in the foreign-language classroom. Due to the structured listening practice and the familiarity with the teacher's English, students' listening comprehension in class appeared to have improved more than their comprehension outside classroom where certain authenticity features, such as pace, accent, and dialects, could impede the comprehension.

## 6. Conclusion

Listening comprehension has been neglected in research and practice until quite recently. Even now, we can not say that listening comprehension research abounds in the literature when compared to that of reading comprehension. This is why some researchers call listening "Cinderella skill in language learning" (Nunan, 1997, p. 47). However, it is true that listening is vital in language learning in that it provides input for the learner. Without understanding inputs, students can not learn anything.

The findings of this study indicated that listening comprehension in EFL students appeared to have improved after they had experienced authentic listening materials in class. A conclusion for this is that authentic materials should be implemented in any foreign-language classroom.

This research shows that students' high score on the Entrance Exam of University (Konkour), a test used to measure the English-language proficiency of students, does not assure the students' comprehension of a lecture. The listening skills of these students are still inferior. Therefore, it seems helpful to provide a course in developing academic skills prior to the students' entering academic classes in the university.

Listening comprehension refers to "the ability to extract information from auditorially presented language material" (Krashen, 1995). Listening, compared with speaking, reading, and writing is the most frequently used language skill in both the classroom and daily communication (Nunan, 1997). In a language class, comprehension of aural input plays a critical role in foreign-language learning. It is, therefore, important that listening be emphasized in the early phases of foreign-language instruction. Despite the significance of listening skill, a traditional language classroom focuses extensively on reading and writing skills, and exposes EFL students more to written input than aural input (Ferris, 1998; Leow, 1993). Recently, the interest in listening skill has increased markedly by the growing number of studies related to listening in foreign-language contexts (Sharpe, 2005).

Authentic language reflects a naturalness of form, and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context (Rogers & Medley, 1988). Since authentic texts are generated by and for native speakers of the language, they are perceived as being too difficult for EFL students to understand. Nevertheless, the listening-comprehension skill in EFL students tends to improve through exposure to authentic input.

In the past, students demonstrated successful listening by correctly answering comprehension questions presented after the material. Nowadays, however, it is more likely that students are required to complete a task while listening and/or as a follow-up activity that involves using information in the material in some realistic ways (Joiner, 1991). Lund (1990) even recommends a trend toward bringing classroom-listening instruction and practice as close to real world listening as is possible. Dumitrescu (2000) states that in selecting the right materials, the instructor needs to consider at least three basic aspects of the trainees' backgrounds: linguistic, conceptual and cultural.

In conclusion, since a goal of classroom listening is to prepare students for real-life listening outside the classroom, it is necessary to implement authentic aural materials at all levels of language instruction and listening-comprehension training.

## 7. Implications

From the pedagogic point of view, using authentic aural texts may be an effective teaching tool for EFL teachers in

science institutions and particularly those teaching undergraduate students in universities. The traditional approach to listening comprehension, at least shown by this study, failed to equip students with the skills required to understand authentic texts in their academic field. It is clear that using authentic aural texts in the specific context it was used, had a positive effect on students' processing of listening comprehension, and could be presented as a supplemental teaching tool.

Another implication of this study is that more time is needed to develop discipline specific listening skills and encourage using authentic aural texts inside the classroom so as to prepare students for independent listening. Also, since most of our students come from a teacher-centered learning background, they need help in moving from the state of dependence on the instructor to becoming independent listeners in the target language. This independence in listening can be achieved if students are first introduced to the techniques of listening, and, second and most importantly, if they are given a real chance to practice these techniques and gain familiarity in their use. The present study indicates that students found the sessions, devoted to practicing authentic texts, beneficial and enjoyable. During these sessions, students were exposed to a variety of authentic texts. Meanwhile, the teacher was constantly present, providing ongoing guidance as well as individual counseling for different minor problems the students met at the early stages, motivating them to listen, and helping them gain confidence in listening to foreign language. Already there is a general consensus that one learns to listen by listening. The teacher can herself role-model or bring a main course lecturer to talk about his or her experience in listening to English. This can come, for example, in the form of a think-aloud demonstration in order to model what is required for academic listening. Another role of the teacher is to set up the listening tasks for students to practice listening. These tasks can come in the form of challenging activities that motivate students to interact with the text and use their discipline-specific background knowledge to discuss certain points raised in the listening materials.

The teacher must also have access (especially in the early sessions) to a laboratory with adequate facilities. It is no exaggeration to say that for many of the students understanding English is a matter of importance, and some departments are already showing signs of readiness to invest in whatever teaching and learning resources might improve their students' proficiency in the target language. EFL teachers need to take advantage of this generally positive atmosphere in order to provide appropriate courses that respond to the specific needs of their students.

The best method of improving listening comprehension when learning English is to listen, test, and receive feedback. Students, who need to learn English and improve their comprehension, even if they live in a non-English speaking country, can benefit from the educational websites since they provide the necessary materials to learn how to comprehend English effectively through increasing their listening ability. If the students do not happen to live in an English speaking country, then the lessons provided on various resources can help them learn to hear English everywhere around them, even by listening to the radio in English to improve comprehension, expanding the ability to understand spoken English by listening to the news in English, and can help improve the skill sets involved in language learning by providing resources for practicing, listening, reading, writing, and comprehension lessons.

The teacher can play music in the foreign language for the students to listen to. Introducing a new medium for listening to the spoken language can help the students absorb the information better than simply reciting the language. The teacher can provide the lyrics to the music in combination with the music itself. This allows the students to combine their reading strengths with their listening comprehension to help enhance their listening skills. The teacher can also choose a familiar play, show or movie script, distribute the script in the foreign language and assign parts to the group and have them act out the play or scene. Using the language in dialogue, especially a dialogue they are familiar with, such as from a popular movie will help them to absorb the language and increase their comprehension. The teacher must only allow the foreign language to be spoken in the classroom. This forces the students to listen intently to all spoken communication and think critically to communicate.

Choosing spoken material that has some relevance to the students' experiences can help promote comprehension in listening activities. Most people find it easier to comprehend material that is relevant to their perspective, and this applies equally in the language learning context. The key skill in listening comprehension is translating sounds into meaning, and choosing material that is relevant to students aids this process. It may seem obvious, but choosing spoken language excerpts that the learners are likely to find interesting can help to promote comprehension. Using engaging topics and also regularly varying the topics can reduce the likelihood of students becoming bored and losing concentration. As with normal daily conversation, listening comprehension in the language learning situation is easier to achieve if the listener is interested in what is said. Listening comprehension is aided by engaging students in some form of dialogue. This can be anything from an in-depth two-way conversation to a more casual process whereby students have the opportunity to ask, and be asked, questions following the spoken language material being heard. Going through this type of process on a regular basis encourages the learners to pay more attention.

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Table 1. Results of Paired Samples T-test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	pretest - posttest	-10.96667	2.00832	.36667	-11.71658	-10.21675	-29.909	29	<b>.000</b>

Table 2. Results of Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	5.8333	30	2.16689	.39562
	posttest	16.8000	30	1.39951	.25551

Table 3. Results of Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	pretest & posttest	30	.432	<b>.017</b>