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The Effect of Explicit Pronunciation Instruction on Listening Comprehension: Evidence from Iranian English Learners

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Abstract—This study was an attempt to examine the effect of two methods of instructing English words' pronunciations on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. Pretest-posttest design was employed to scrutinize the possible improvements of three classes of intermediate English learners (two experimental and one control group) as listening comprehension was concerned. A 25-item listening test was constructed inspired by the Cambridge Key English Test listening materials to measure students' listening ability. All groups were exposed to the same listening test as the pre and the post-test, however, only the experimental groups received the special treatment regarding the phonetic symbols and phonemic transcription, segmental features (group A) and supra-segmental features (group B). After the application of the study's treatment, data analysis process initiated which indicated that experimental groups who received explicit pronunciation instruction had a better performance than the control group on the final listening test. In addition, the findings suggested that the experimental group which received segmental pronunciation instruction had a better performance than the experimental group which received supra-segmental pronunciation instruction. Generally, the findings imply that pronunciation instruction can positively affect the listening comprehension ability of intermediate EFL learners.

Index Terms—pronunciation instruction, listening comprehension, segmental features, supra-segmental features

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most urgent problems facing non-native speakers of English is listening comprehension which it is usually the big obstacle on learner's way to achieve English language proficiency. Many non-native speakers have studied grammar and vocabulary for many years but are unable to speak like or at least near to native speakers. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is inability in pronouncing the sounds of words properly which consequently can affect on listening comprehension. Wei (2004) pointed out that even when the non-native speakers' vocabulary and grammar are excellent, if their pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level; they are unable to communicate effectively. If listeners can't differentiate between sounds, they may not be able to convert meaning. One of the reasons why listening is a difficult skill to acquire may be related to various features of spoken language like the use of intonation, tone of voice, rhythm, etc (e.g. Wei, 2004; Gilbert, 1995; Arvariti, 2009).

Although listening comprehension plays the important role in communication and it is one of the most vital skills in the English teaching and learning context, it has never received the priority it deserves. According to Gilbert (1995), listening comprehension attracted little attention in terms of both theory and practice, while the other three skills (reading, writing and speaking) received direct instruction attention, teachers often expect students to develop their listening skill by osmosis and without help. Arvariti (2009) have stated that when learners of English are asked about the most difficult English language skill, most of them would reply listening comprehension, also, there is evidence that this assumption is true (e.g., Echelberger, 2013).

To solve this problem, many different ways have been applied and many researchers and teachers used different techniques and strategies. Based on Hişmanoğlu (2006), pronunciation teaching is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of the communicative competence. On the other hand, the poor pronunciation can cause the misunderstanding in communication and the listener can't get the precise speaker's message in conversation and even in listening audio text. Hence, it is necessary that English pronunciation instruction should be viewed in the same light as the other aspects and skills of the English language.

Pourhosein (2011) stressed that the teaching of English words pronunciations has to aim at intelligible pronunciation considered as an essential component of communicative competence. The students should be encouraged to concentrate on right pronunciation and to check their own pronunciation in their speaking and reading. Teaching pronunciation can help to a better understanding of speakers and even improves their ability to speaking and communicate. According to

Ghorbani (2011), speech production is affected by speech perception. Also based on Hişmanoğlu (2006), pronunciation has remained one of the most difficult skills to teach and remained unknown in the classroom. In order to apprehend what is meant thoroughly, one has to be aware of the nature of spoken language which is directly related to the phonological features of the language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Relationship between Pronunciation Instruction and Listening Comprehension*

The importance of the pronunciation is undeniable and it inevitably determines the major part of the oral language. According to Hişmanoğlu (2006) sounds play an important role in communication, and pronunciation instruction is an essential factor in the field of foreign language teaching and teachers must attribute proper importance to teaching pronunciation in their classes. The communication is dependent on the speaker and the listener perceptual understanding which requires an intelligible pronunciation skill; in the view of Gebhard (1996) there is a close link between pronunciation and listening comprehension since the ability to perceive and produce speech requires the knowledge of sounds, intonation, and stress pattern and how speech is organized.

Kenworthy (1987) enhanced the importance of pronunciation teaching in terms of intelligibility. He indicated that foreign speakers need to be intelligible, so that they can communicate. Pronunciation instructing of sounds can help students to distinguish words from the passage in listening comprehension. Also work on supra-segmental features of pronunciation would be very useful for a learner in understanding longer utterances. Pronunciation instruction is of great importance for successful oral communication to take place since it is an important ingredient of the communicative competence (Hismanoglu, 2006). So in order to comprehend spoken messages, the learners should acquire how the sounds pronounced. Listener may to comprehend need to phonetic, phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic information.

Harmer (1993) stressed on the need for gaining certitude that language learners can always be understood and says what they want to say. Students need to master “good pronunciation”, not perfect accents. Lundsteen (1979) have stated that listening is the first language skill to be appeared. Chronologically, children listen before they speak, speak before they read, and read before they write. Like reading, listening is member of receptive skills, and it is the basis for other skills, and also is necessary for second language as well as first language acquisition. Listening and speaking can't be separable; they are two sides of a coin. In fact, listening help to learning other skills especially speaking. To become a fluent speaker in English, advancing in listening skill is required. Listening not only help learners to understand what people are saying to them, it also helps them to speak clearly to other people. Lundsteen (1979) defined listening as the process in which spoken language changes into meaning in the mind.

The process of speech recognition is very complex, for example, Jahangard (2007) have stated that, “listening is attending to and interpreting oral language. The student should be able to hear oral speech in English, segment the stream of sounds, group them into lexical and syntactic units (words, phrases, sentences), and understand the message they convey” (p. 73). It shows that the listening is a complicated skill, and it requires to the precise and complete program to acquiring; it needs to apply appropriate techniques and procedures to progress.

Listening comprehension includes recognizing the sounds of speech and processing them into words and sentences. When learners listen, they use their ears to receive sounds (letters, stress, rhythm and intonation etc.), then focus on different features and instructing them can be effective for listening comprehension. Based on the research of Larsen-freeman (2000), effective listening requires concentration and the use of other senses - not just hearing the words spoken. Then people who have difficulty concentrating are typically poor listeners. Listening in second language should be taking more attention because it is very important for ability to receive messages accurately in any communicative process. Listening is a key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood and communication breaks down and the hearer can easily become frustrated or irritated.

B. *Pronunciation Instruction*

Due to the time restrictions on most courses for EFL, often the case of pronunciation teaching receives relatively the least attention. But since poor pronunciation may cause serious misunderstanding, it is important for teachers to know how provide pronunciation instruction in the classroom. Gilbert (1995) stated that the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent, if people can't hear English well; they are cut off from the language if they can't be understood easily, and they are cut off from conversation with native speakers. It is clear that the pronunciation integrated to listening and it should be considered. Since the pronunciation instruction is hard and time consuming, in the most of classrooms it has been neglected.

The function of pronunciation instruction is to provide students with the tools that they need to gain accurate control within the sound system that they are learning (McNamara, 2002). However, the role of pronunciation in the EL classroom and the most effective methods of instruction have long been debated. Throughout the 1940's to the 1960's, pronunciation was widely considered to be an essential skill in learning English, primarily taught through the system of audio-lingual methodology (McNamara, 2002). The underlying premise is that the goals of pronunciation instruction are, first, helping students acquire knowledge, awareness, and skills that will address intelligibility and comprehensibility while, second, promoting the use of effective communication strategies when engaging interlocutors

from diverse backgrounds (Moore, 2001; Nakashima, 2006). In the program presented by McNamara (12002), pronunciation is viewed as a process of modifying pre-existing sound patterns toward increased speech intelligibility. Theories of speech production and comprehension support the idea that L2 production is dependent upon the learner's ability to establish corresponding categories in the brain (Noske, 2011).

Gilbert (1995, p.1) described pronunciation as the "poor relation of the English language teaching world". In a survey of Canadian English language teachers, only 30% responded that they had any formal training in pronunciation pedagogy (Kansakar, 1998). Far too frequently, pronunciation instruction occurs at an intermediate or advanced level, where it has been considered to be "remedial training" and is an indication that the pronunciation levels of the learners in the class has fossilized at a fairly low level (Hesmangolu, 2001).

To speak a foreign language, learners should be aware of the phonological features of the language. This fact signals the importance of the pronunciation component in language learning and their effects on listening comprehension. Pronunciation is connected to language teaching and in recent years, pronunciation teaching by different ways auditory, visual, etc. has become very popular within the field of foreign language teaching. As Table 1 depicts phonetic features of English and their definitions (presented from Ladefoged (2006)) which can be broadly classified into two main categories of segmental and supra-segmentals based on which two approaches of pronunciation instruction were designed and applied in this study.

TABLE I.
PHONETIC FEATURES IN ENGLISH

Phonetic features of English	
Segmental features Segments are phonological units of the language, such as consonants which include stop, fricative, approximant, nasal etc. and vowels are include (a, o, u, i, e), diphthongs and triphthongs.	Supra-segmental features Supra-segmental features refer to those properties of an utterance that apply to groups of segments, rather than to individual segments
Consonants	voiced voiceless
Vowels	single
	diphthongs triphthongs
	Stress It refers to the use of extra respiratory energy during a syllable articulation. Intonation It refers to the rising and falling pitch over an utterance. Intonation can be defined as pitch movement in spoken utterances. Linking It refers to the way the last sound of one word is joined to the first sound of the next word. Assimilation This means one segment become more like another, or two segments become more like each other. The sound is assimilated because it is influenced by the place or the manner of articulation from the sound neighboring. Pitch the pitch of a sound is an auditory property that enables a listener to place it on a scale going from low to high, without considering its acoustic properties. Elision It refers to the omission of an unstressed vowel, consonant, or syllable. Rhythm the rhythm depends on some factors: one is where the stresses fall, but equally important are factors such as whether the language contrasts long and short vowels, whether sequences of vowels can occur, whether vowels in unstressed syllable can be reduced, and what syllabic structures are allowed.

This study intended to show the possible effect of teaching pronunciation on listening comprehension's improvement of a sample of EFL learners. Furthermore, the study tried to compare two methods of pronunciation instruction based on the final performance of the participants who underwent these two methods. It was an attempt to find reasonable answers to the following research questions:

- Does explicit pronunciation instruction of English words' have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?
- Do different types of pronunciation instruction (segmental versus supra-segmental pronunciation instructions) have different effects on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 57 English learners of both genders at an English learning institute in Iran. They were at the intermediate level of English proficiency and studied at the levels 1 and 2 of True Colors series (Hesmangilu, 2011) while their ages ranged from 15 to 19.

The institute offered 6 hours of instruction for the learners weekly and each semester takes 7 weeks. The institute followed integrated skills approach; along with the core course, listening, reading, writing and speaking skills are

supplemented with particular activities for each skill. The classes are equipped with technological devices and the teachers make use of them constantly. Regular video classes are held in which students receive natural input through movies in English. Participants of the study were randomly selected and put in three groups, two experimental and one control. There were 19 learners in each experimental group, a total of 38 experimental students. Control group contained 19 students. The following Table shows the details about the participants.

TABLE II.
PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

Participants	Experimental group(A)	Experimental group(B)	Control group(C)
Male	8	7	9
Female	11	12	10
Total	19	19	19

B. Instruments and Materials

First, the listening subtest of Cambridge Key English Test 4- test one was used to homogenize the participants. The second set of instruments which used, were Cambridge Key English Test 4- test two which used as the pre-test and post-test. KETs are examination for students of other language studying English as a second or foreign language. They test reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The listening part of these tests which used in this research consisted of five parts which each part include five questions which made 25 questions in total. In first part participants listen to five short conversations. There is one question for each conversation which they should put a tick under the right answer. In second part, participants should listen to conversation and according to it; they should answer to the questions 6-10 and write the letter A-H next to each person. In third part, participants listen to another conversation and then should answer to questions 11-15 and tick A, B or C. In fourth part, they listen to another conversation and then should complete the questions 16-20. In the last part they should complete the questions 21-25 based on the heard conversation.

In addition, a TV set and a DVD player used as the audio-visual equipment. Also the other materials which used in this study include the chart which was a system of symbols for writing the sounds of English, a guide to these symbols along with videos to show how to pronounce each of the sounds. And also the researcher asked the students to use a good dictionary which was completed with the pronunciation transcription. The participants in different groups performed the following activities along term.

TABLE III.
CLASS ACTIVITIES OF THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS

Group	Activities
Experimental group A	1-regular activities according to course book. 2- Practicing the segmental features (consonant sounds, voiced, unvoiced, vowel sounds, single, and diphthongs). 3-listen to related materials. 4-the word transcription. 5-pronounced the words and repeating them.
Experimental group B	1-regular activities according to course book. 2- practicing the supra-segmental features (linking, intonation, stress, rhythm, assimilation, elision, pitch) 3-listen to related materials. 4-the word and sentences transcription. 5-pronounced the words and sentences and repeat them.
Control group C	Doing the regular program of institute without any special pronunciation instructing. Reading and vocabulary exercises.

C. Procedure

The pretest-posttest design was employed for the study's accomplishment. There were three groups (A, B and C). Groups "A and B" were the experimental and "C" was the control group. The listening pretest was administered to each group on study's commencement. Then, the treatment was held for seven weeks for experimental participants. Pronunciation practice of the segmental features (consonant sounds, voiced, unvoiced, vowel sounds, single, and diphthongs) as treatment for group "A" and practicing supra-segmental features (linking, intonation, stress, rhythm, assimilation, elision, pitch) as treatment for group "B". The participants in the experimental groups received half an hour of explicit instruction on pronunciation activities in every session; then, they listened to the related material audio. Then, the subjects asked to pronounce the words using their transcription. The final step was listening to the audio again in order to enhance listening ability. The subjects in the control group only listened to the same audio exercises without spending any time on pronunciation activities. To see the significance of the study's treatment, the same listening test was administered for the participants of all groups as the posttest at the end of the last session.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

In order to answer the research questions, two experimental groups (A and B) and one control group were formed. A pre-test was administered for the participants of all groups to see if the listening comprehension of the participants in both the control and the experimental groups were similar. After the pre-test, the experimental groups received a seven-week special pronunciation instruction. Meanwhile, the control group continued its regular classes offered by the institute. After seven weeks, all groups were taken the same test as the post-test which was administered to examine the possible improvement of the experimental participants at the end of seven-week instruction. To examine the pre-existing difference between the experimental and the control groups, the performances of control and experimental participants on listening comprehension pre-test were compared with the aid of a one-way ANOVA on study's commencement.

TABLE IV.
THE MEAN COMPARISON OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL PARTICIPANTS ON THE LISTENING PRE-TEST

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.368	2	.684	.222	.801
Within Groups	166.105	54	3.076		
Total	167.474	56			

According to the results of the ANOVA analysis there wasn't a statistically significant difference between the pre-test results of experimental participants and control participants ($p = .801 > .05$). After gaining certitude that the listening comprehension of all the participants was approximately similar the study's treatment began and its efficacy verified on the listening comprehension post-test. The descriptive statistics of the post-test showed that the mean for experimental group "A" was 20.42, for the experimental group "B" was 19.73 and for the control group "C" was 18.94, i.e. the mean of experimental groups were slightly higher than control group's mean. In order to see whether this difference is statistically significant, one-way ANOVA test analysis was ran.

TABLE V.
THE MEAN COMPARISON OF EXPERIMENTAL AND CONTROL PARTICIPANTS ON THE LISTENING POST-TEST

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	20.667	2	10.333	3.689	.032
Within Groups	151.263	54	2.801		
Total	171.930	56			

According to ANOVA analysis results there was a statistically significant difference between the post-test results of the experimental and the control participants ($p = 0.032 < .05$). This implied that that explicit pronunciation instruction brought about a significant improvement for the experimental participants. Figure 1 shows the means of the control and experimental participants on the listening comprehension pre and post-test.

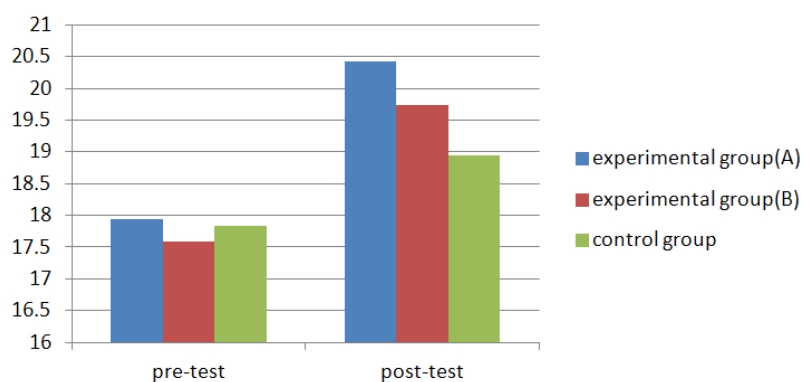


Figure 1. Pre and post-test means of the experimental and control participants

Finally, the performance of experimental participants of two groups (groups "A" and "B") were compared on the listening post-test to find out which one of the pronunciation instruction types has been more successful in improving the learners listening proficiency. According to the descriptive statistics of the post-test the mean of experimental group "A" was slightly higher than the mean of experimental group "B". In order to see whether this difference is statistically significant, an independent sample *t*-test analysis was run.

TABLE VI.
THE MEAN COMPARISON OF THE TWO EXPERIMENTAL PARTICIPANTS ON THE LISTENING POST-TEST

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	6.491	.015	1.362	36	.182	.68421	.50238
Equal variances not assumed			1.362	29.359	.184	.68421	.50238

According to independent samples *t*-test results, there was not a statistically significant difference between the post-test results of experimental group “A” ($p = .182 > .05$). Although, this difference was not statistically significant but according to means of groups, it became clear that experimental group “A” performance was better than their peers in group “B” and this shows that segmental pronunciation instruction type has been more successful in improving the learners listening proficiency in compare to supra segmental pronunciation instruction type.

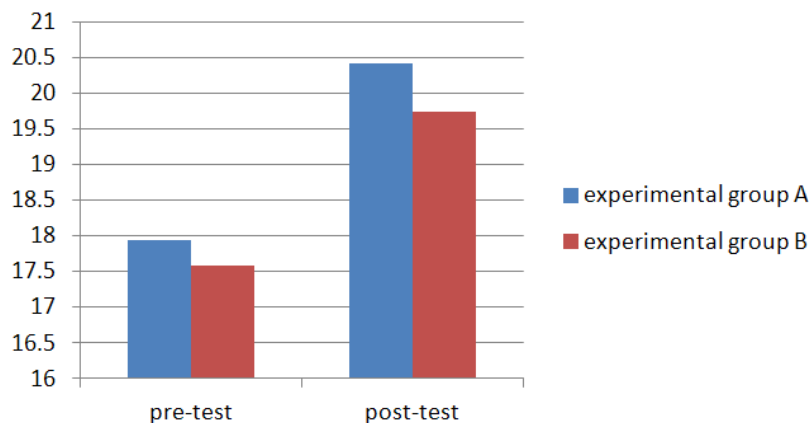


Figure II. Means comparison of the experimental participants who underwent two different approaches of pronunciation instruction

B. Discussion

According to the employed statistical analyses conducted by the researcher, there was a statistically significant betterment observed in the experimental participants after a seven-week of pronunciation instruction. In a similar way, the control group has also demonstrated a development after a seven-week of regular classes. The results suggested that pronunciation instruction has an effect on the listening comprehension skills of EFL students. Meanwhile, according to the findings, the experimental group “A” (segmental) has performed better in comparison with the other experimental group “B” (supra-segmental) although the difference was not statistically significant.

As mentioned earlier, the listening comprehension skill is a complex skill and requires a heavy processing. On the other hand, it is a crucial element in English language learning and how to develop listening is a subject of debate to many researchers. The good listener can be a good speaker and this skill can be affected on other skills. Learners should be trained in bottom-up and top-down processes, to use the both together because one alone is not enough to develop listening comprehension. However, using strategies alone will not aid in improving this complicated process.

According to literature, integrating various techniques into classrooms such as benefiting from authentic materials, and use of technology were useful to acquire this skill (e.g., Arvariti, 2009; Noske, 2011). Using technology can promote the development of listening comprehension by providing learners with compelling, interesting material (e.g., Poulston & Bruder, 1976) and it can also aid listening comprehension development by enhancing listening input (Nakashima, 2006). Using authentic materials include use of songs, TV serials, movies, documentaries; and using technology includes use of videos, computers, and the Internet.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of the study suggested that the experimental groups improved their listening comprehension significantly at the end of the seven-week pronunciation instructing. These increases may be attributed to the pronunciation instructing which these groups received. As suggested by the literature (e.g. McNamara, 2002; Gilbert, 1995), listening comprehension can be developed through training learners in the pronunciation. There have been very few studies into the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction (Kansakar, 1998) despite its obvious importance for successful communication.

The reason behind the effectiveness of the pronunciation instruction can be explained in reference to the literature on listening comprehension. The literature not only suggests integrating listening with pronunciation but also employing both the segmental and the supra-segmental features focusing on sound discrimination, intonation, stress, and so forth, all of which existed in the training. The pronunciation instruction in the present study included both the segmental and supra-segmental features of pronunciation.

In pronunciation teaching, researchers have also pointed out that L2 learners might not necessarily put into practice in spontaneous speech what they learn under controlled tasks (e.g., Gebhard, 1996; Jahangard, 2007). This is why a communicative component in pronunciation instruction has been advocated to develop fluent and comprehensible L2 speech (Hinkel, 2006).

In conclusion, the results of this study pointed out that explicit phonetic instruction benefits L2 learners overall, which confirms previous results. These results demonstrated that even adding only a relatively time-limited explicit

pronunciation component in a primarily communicative classroom can lead to beneficial results in production for learners. In addition, the qualitative analysis demonstrated that complex classroom interactions of instructional focus and teacher implementation can make a difference in learner development, as demonstrated in the differences in explicitness between the experimental and control groups in this study. Finally, although supra-segmental instruction is indeed necessary and important, the difference in outcomes between the two treatment groups suggests that explicit segmental instruction may give learners a better improvement in comprehensibility.

Pedagogical Implications

In light of the study's findings, it seems reasonable to accommodate the pronunciation components of English language teaching in class activities with a more attention given to the relationship between listening comprehension and pronunciation instruction since both skills contribute to each other. Pronunciation has been a neglected component of English language teaching, which has not received the attention. This negligence may be due to the lack of teachers' attention at language schools, or it may be because of time limitation in the classes. However, as this study has indicated, pronunciation plays an important role in the ELT world, particularly in developing listening comprehension.

There are a number of limitations to the present study suggesting that the findings should be interpreted with caution. This study was limited to 57 students that participated in the experiment at the institute. And in respect to the numbers of students, the researcher had to perform the experiment in two consequently period. And another limitation had to do with the shortage of time; the study had to be conducted in a limited time period, so the instructing lasted only seven weeks. Although some development has been observed in all groups, a seven-week period is not enough for a language skill to develop, especially for listening, which is one of the most difficult skills. Since, the classes participants were studying in were not determined by the researcher right before the research; they were already set by the institute at the beginning of the first semester. Therefore, individual differences among the classes were not controlled by the researchers, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Also, the present study was conducted only with intermediate level students; it may not be possible to generalize the findings since the results might change with different proficiency levels.

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