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IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION OF TEXTS READ BY INSTRUCTORS, PEERS AND NATIVE SPEAKERS

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By

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This study is an attempt to gauge Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension of different texts read by Persian and non-Persian speaking EFL learners, Persian speaking English instructors and native English speakers. The globalization of English has witnessed an increase in the number of non-native English speakers born in different countries and those learning English in EFL contexts. These learners often learn English as a foreign language and they will never leave their countries and encounter neither other non-native English speakers nor native ones. This fact highlights the EFL learners' problem of intelligibility and comprehensibility in other contexts. This study attempts to answer to two questions: (i) While listening to oral readings, do Iranian advanced learners perceive the English of their peers with similar L1 background or/and age to be better than that of their instructors or native English speakers?, and (ii) While listening to oral

readings, do Iranian intermediate learners perceive the English of their peers with similar L1 background or/and age to be better than that of their instructors or native English speakers? The data was collected using a quantitative research method with a descriptive design and cross-sectional method. The subject of the study is a group of 64 female Iranian EFL learners (aged 18-24). They are divided into two groups of advanced and intermediate based on a placement test, and then subdivided into four subgroups based on the Latin Square. Two sets of semi direct CD mediated comprehension texts followed by multiple-choice questions were administrated. The data is analyzed using ANOVA. The findings show that for the advanced groups, the difference between aural perceptions is significant and the similarities of L1 and/or age background cause a better result in their listening comprehension tests. On the other hand, although the difference in the scores from the listening comprehension tests is significant for the intermediate groups, the similarities of L1 and/or age background did not cause a better comprehension. The advanced groups perceived their Persian-speaking peers the best, followed by their instructors, non-Persian speaking peers and finally native English speakers. The intermediate group, however, perceived native English speakers the best, followed by their instructors, their Persian-speaking peers and finally non-Persian speaking peers.

KEFAHAMAN PENDENGARAN TERHADAP TEKS YANG DIBACA OLEH PENGAJAR, RAKAN SEBAYA DAN PENUTUR BAHASA PERTAMA OLEH PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA ASING DI IRAN

Oleh

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Pengerusi: Dr. NOOREEN BT. NOORDIN
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Kajian ini bertujuan mengukur kefahaman pendengaran pelajar-pelajar EFL Iran tentang pelbagai pembacaan oral oleh pelajar EFL yang merupakan penutur dan bukan penutur Bahasa Farsi, pengajar Bahasa Inggeris yang merupakan penutur Bahasa Farsi dan penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pertama. Globalisasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris telah menyaksikan peningkatan dalam jumlah bukan penutur Bahasa Inggeris yang dilahirkan di negara asing dan mereka yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris dalam konteks EFL. Pelajar-pelajar ini selalunya mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing dan tidak akan meninggalkan negara mereka dan bertemu dengan pelajar-pelajar bukan penutur Bahasa Inggeris yang lain mahupun pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pertama. Fakta ini telah menonjolkan masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar EFL dari segi kejelasan dan kefahaman dalam konteks yang berlainan. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menjawab dua soalan: (i) Semasa mendengar pelbagai pembacaan oral, adakah pelajar-pelajar tahap tinggi Iran memahami Bahasa Inggeris yang ditutur oleh rakan-rakan mereka (dengan latarbelakang bahasa

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pertama dan/atau umur yang sama) lebih dari yang dituturkan oleh pengajar mereka atau penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pertama?, dan (ii) Semasa mendengar pelbagai pembacaan oral, adakah pelajar-pelajar tahap pertengahan Iran memahami Bahasa Inggeris yang ditutur oleh rakan-rakan mereka (dengan latarbelakang bahasa pertama dan/atau umur yang sama) lebih dari yang ditutur oleh pengajar mereka atau penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pertama? Data telah diperolehi menggunakan kaedah kajian kuantitatif dengan kaedah "cross-sectional" serta rekabentuk deskriptif. Subjek untuk kajian ini merupakan sekumpulan 64 pelajar wanita EFL Iran (berusia 18-24 tahun). Mereka telah dibahagikan kepada dua kumpulan (Tinggi dan Pertengahan) berdasarkan satu ujian penempatan. Kemudian mereka dibahagi lagi kepada empat kumpulan kecil berdasarkan Latin Square. Dua set teks kefahaman 'semi direct CD mediated' diikuti dengan soalan aneka pilihan telah diberikan. Data yang dikumpul telah dianalisa menggunakan ANOVA. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bagi kumpulan tahap Tinggi, perbezaan di antara persepsi pelbagai pembacaan oral adalah signifikan, dan persamaan latarbelakang bahasa pertama dan/atau usia mengakibatkan persepsi pembacaan oral yang lebih tinggi. Sebaliknya, walaupun perbezaan skor dari pelbagai pembacaan oral adalah signifikan untuk kumpulan tahap Pertengahan, persamaan latarbelakang bahasa pertama dan/atau usia tidak mengakibatkan persepsi pembacaan oral yang lebih tinggi. Kumpulan tahap Tinggi paling senang memahami rakan-rakan penutur Bahasa Farsi mereka, diikuti dengan pengajar mereka dan penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa pertama. Kumpulan tahap Pertengahan pula paling senang memahami penutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa

pertama, diikuti dengan pengajar mereka dan akhirnya rakan-rakan penutur

Bahasa Farsi mereka.

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This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. Members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTFEL: American Council on Teaching of Foreign Language Association

ALM: Audio-lingual Method

ANOVA: Analysis of Variance

BM: Berlitz Method

CA: Communicative Approach

CI: Comprehensible Input

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

DM: Direct Method

ELT: English Language Teaching

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

FL: Foreign Language

GTM: Grammar Translation Method

H: High

HEP: High English Proficiency

HL: High Level

I: Instructor

IV: Independent Variable

L1: First Language, Mother Tongue

L2: Second Language, Foreign Language

LS: Latin Square

M: Mid

AEP: Average English Proficiency

ML: Mid level

N: Native speaker

NM: Natural Method

NN: Non-native Speaker

OA: Oral Approach

P: Peer

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

SLT: Situational Language Teaching

TPRA: Total Physical Response Approach

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background of the Study

The growing globalization of the world economic market has increased travel opportunities, and better communication facilities have created a situation in which people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds need to communicate with each other. When individuals need to resort to a language, which is not their mother tongue (L1), they use a lingua franca, a common system of communication (Seidlhofer, 2005). This seems to be English, which has become the universal lingua franca, is one of the communicative tools used in such circumstances.

About 20 years ago, Kachru (1986:20) presented some interesting information, which suggested that English has some 300-400 million non-native speakers. Findings that are more recent roughly show only one out of every four users of English in the world is a native speaker of the language (Crystal 2003). By considering these facts, it seems that, non-native speakers are going to interact and become intelligible and comprehensible to a wide range of other English speakers, both native and non-native.

Smith and Nelson (1985:333-42) believe that native speakers are no longer the sole judges of what is intelligible in English. More and more non-native speakers of English are interacting with other non-native speakers. In such cases, they must decide what is and what is not intelligible.

Taylor (1995) also mentions that native speakers are not always more intelligible than non-native speakers, and non-native speakers need exposure to both native and non-native varieties, in order to improve understanding and perception of the target language. That is, as long as a person speaks any variety of educated English, although phonologically non-native, he is expected to be intelligible to his listeners (Rafigzad, 1985:371-380).

Communication in English may involve interaction among native/native, native/non-native and non-native/non-native speakers. While those who learn a second language have the opportunity to interact with many English language speakers, foreign language learners do not, and most probably, they communicate with non-native speakers with similar first language backgrounds. Thus, it seems obvious that we need to teach non-native learners of English to understand non-native speakers as well as native speakers (Taylor, 1995).

Newmeyer and Weinberger (1988: 34) contend that there is a direct relationship between learning a second language (L2) and teaching it. Learning an L2 was traditionally equivalent with learning one or two language skills and ignoring other skills or aspects of L2 learning. Although listening comprehension lies at the heart of language learning, it is one of these skills which is neglected by teachers and learners did not receive appropriate attention (Vandergrift, 2007).

Listening is the ability to identify and understand what others are saying, and it involves a number of basic processes. Some processes depend upon linguistic competence, while others depend upon previous knowledge that may not necessarily be linguistic. Yet there are other processes that depend upon psychological variables, which are the processes of interpretation in which listener match what they hear with what they already know (Rost, 2002).

Research, in this regard, can be divided into those studies conducted in ESL and EFL contexts. It should be pointed out that the first chance of foreign language learners to speak the foreign language is with other learners or instructors in the learning contexts. This study tries to focus on EFL contexts; How L2 learners handle the situation of facing native/non-native speakers

and understand them can be an interesting debate in the field of second and foreign language acquisition.

With the globalization of English (Crystal, 2003) the number of non-native English speakers who were born in foreign countries and who learned English in EFL contexts and thus lack native proficiency in English is increased (Liu, 1999:85).

In general, there are two conditions in listening activity in the EFL contexts-- understanding a native speaker and/or a non-native one. These two conditions can be subcategorized into seven situations. In the EFL context one may confront these seven occasions:

1) Understanding English native speaking teachers

2) Understanding non-native English teachers with similar L1 background as learners

3) Understanding non-native English teachers with different L1 background as learners

4) Understanding non-native English learners, peers, with similar L1 background as learners

5) Understanding non-native English learners with similar L1 background in different age groups

6) Understanding non-native English learners, peer, with different L1 backgrounds

7) Understanding non-native English learners with different L1 background in different age groups

This study is an attempt to examine the listening comprehension of L2 learners in EFL context, with different interlocutors from situations 1, 2, 4, and 6 described above.

1.2   Statement of the problem

It seems that the scenario for the 21st century is that English-knowing bilingualism will be soon a norm throughout the world (Pakir, 1999). But when it comes to the question of intelligibility and comprehensibility of non-native speakers, in the English language most of the time, it is assumed that one of the interlocutors is a native speaker, and most of the work done to date has assumed that intelligibility means intelligibility to a native speaker (Taylor, 1995).

The assumption is that foreign language learners of English need to be intelligible to native speakers and they should increase their comprehension

skills in order to understand native language speakers who pronounce English in a bafflingly wide variety of ways (Taylor 1995).

Based on Kachru's (1986) findings, there should be more non-native speakers of English than native ones, and that transaction and interaction among non-native speakers (with no native speakers involved) may well outnumber those that involve speakers interacting and communicating with native ones (Doel, 2007).

On the other hand, although intelligibility involve both perception and production (Swain, 1995), most of the emphases, in second language acquisition, is on pronunciation teaching in ESL contexts, which concentrates on production, considering it to be separate from listening comprehension. Dickerson (1987:11) contends that scholars concentrate so hard on teaching performance skills, how to articulate and perceive vowel and consonant sounds, how intonation patterns should sound, how to make good rhythm that we forget patterns and when and where stress falls in words and phrases. There is a system of rules for perception and pronunciation and learners need to acquire this system too. We often hear "Do you speak…?" but one rarely hears the question of "Do you understand…?" and no one would anticipate hearing a student say, "I would like to learn to understand…" Perhaps this problem originates from the listening

comprehension process which is internal and thus not subject to direct, external observation, and correction (Chastain, 1988:192), or perhaps It is because of the social need to improve production more than perception of native and non-native speech on the part of foreign language learners (Llisterri, 1995).

However, it is logically possible for a foreign or second language learner to have high perception of individual phonemes or words and yet to have poor perception from connected speech (Pennington, 1998).

In the interaction among non-native/non-native speakers, two situations are possible; the interaction among non-native speakers with different L1- which is more natural and convenient - and interaction among non-native speakers with similar L1. Most probably, we can trace this kind of interaction among the foreign language learners who can only have access to the foreign language in schools, institutes, universities, etc, where they may have the chance of perceiving what is provided by their instructors or peer groups (Ferguson, 1998).This is the same situations that Iranian EFL learners are confronted. They do not have any chance for English language interaction except in English classes, which can only provide them communication between their peers with the same L1 and their instructors.

1.3   Research objectives

This study tries to compare listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners of native/non-native readings delivered by a variety of learners and instructors. It also attempts to find out the existing gap between the findings of different researchers concerning listening comprehension of L2 learners from different readers--native, instructors with similar L1, peers, and non-native peers. The study also attempts to pinpoint the pedagogical aspects of these findings with regard to the improvement of theoretical and practical research in course designing and L2 teaching. More specifically, the study aims to achieve the following specific research objectives:

1. To determine whether there is a significant difference among intermediate Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension of different oral readings, which is read by English native speakers, Persian speaking instructors, peer with Persian as first language and peer with a different first language.

2. To determine whether there is a significant difference among advanced Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension of different oral readings, which is read by English native speakers, Persian speaking instructors, peer with Persian as first language and peer with different a first language.