

Improving Vocabulary and Pronunciation of Secondary Level ESL Learners Through Language and Meaning-Focused Listening- An Experimental Study

M. Lekha Swarna Priya¹, Prasantha Kumar N S²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

²Assistant Professor Senior, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India

Correspondence: M. Lekha Swarna Priya, Assistant Professor Senior, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India.

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Abstract

Listening plays a larger role in language acquisition and is a critical aim for students in order to receive information generated in the target language. Its successful acquisition requires students to absorb cognitive processes and then use them in their spoken interactions in order to promote understanding in a variety of communication settings. It is the instructor's job to choose the most effective methods for ensuring students' effective learning of this language ability by selecting projects and resources that best meet their unique and linguistic learning requirements and interests. The main purpose of this research paper is to emphasize the critical role of Language-focused and Meaning-focused listening in the process of English as a second language (ESL) learning through an experimental study. Since, listening skill contributes a major part in the enhancement of ESL learners' language proficiency, the feasible activities and strategies provided in this paper improve the vocabulary and pronunciation of secondary level ESL learners. The paper also discusses the processes of listening skill: top-down and bottom-up methods to emphasize the enhancement of ESL students' vocabulary and pronunciation. The researcher has chosen grade 9 students of a government school as a sample for the experiment.

Keywords: meaning-focused listening, language-focused listening, top-down process of listening, bottom-up process of listening, information transfer activities, note-taking

1. Introduction

According to some estimates, more than half of the time pupils invest interacting in a different language will be spent on listening (Nunan, 1998). Furthermore, Gillian Brown and others have demonstrated that both oral and literal learning of a new language require continual attention in first language educational settings (see, for example, Brown, 1978; Brown, Anderson, Shillcock, and Yule, 1984). ESL Learners typically undervalue the importance of listening skills because they emphasize speaking and writing since they believe that mastering these productive abilities is similar to becoming proficient in the target language (Nunan, 1998). For these reasons, a lot of foreign language courses have neglected the value of listening as a source of linguistic input and the function that this ability plays in regular conversation. In this respect, Vandergrift (2007, p.191) states: "Listening comprehension lies at the heart of language learning, but it is the least understood and least researched skill." Nation and Newton (2009, p.37) also share this view when they point out: [...] "We often take the importance of listening for granted, and it is arguably the least understood and most overlooked of the four skills [...] in the language classroom." Rost (2001) and Vandergrift (2011) both emphasize the significance of this linguistic ability, describing it as a necessary component of second language acquisition and a conduit via which humans process language in real time (Rost, 2001), since it internalizes language norms and supports the progress of additional language skills (Vandergrift, 2011).

Although research in the processes and methods of listening is expanding, it appears to be relatively the least known and least investigated of the four skills (Vandergrift, 2007). In truth, listening is considerably more frequently utilized language skill in everyday life than any other skill.

The following research was an attempt to enhance vocabulary and pronunciation of secondary level ESL learners, since those two are the most prominent elements in learning a language. The researcher had chosen 60 students of grade 9 from a government school as sample for the experiment. The results obtained were satisfactory.

2. Review of Related Literature

In a study conducted by Aparaj (1990), the researcher performed research on increasing auditory abilities in secondary school students using language activities. The study discovered a strong beneficial association between listening instructional strategies and improved listening ability in secondary school level EFL learners. Another study conducted by Mathew (2001); the researcher performed an experiment titled “Enhancing the Listening Skills of Regional Medium Learners in Order to Improve Reading Ability.” Among the study's findings were the following: (i) Although learners initially lacked LSRW abilities, they gained the ability to identify words and phrases as a result of their exposure to listening activities; (ii) learners gained the ability to identify terms which were not included in their program curriculum. Research conducted by the researcher named Ishler (2010) studied “The reason of difficulty in understanding oral English Transactional texts in Tunisian EFL learners”. The studies indicated that learners have listening difficulties when they are unable to grasp the texts due to their inability to employ their usual methods. In another study, Custar (2011) examines “The relationship between receptive oral language skills (listening comprehension) and academic success” using qualitative correlational research. Academic performance was shown to be positively associated with responsive oral language skills.

In his study, Parthiban (2011) examines “The effectiveness of task-based language teaching in improving listening skills of secondary school students”. The study's primary conclusion was that the TBLT Approach had a significant and beneficial influence on the Experimental Group students' presentation. A researcher, Hamouda (2012) carried out “The study on Listening Comprehension Problems”. The findings indicate that problems such as limited vocabulary, poor pronunciation, lack of listening materials, and the surroundings all contribute to impaired listening ability. The researcher proposes many ways for overcoming difficulties with listening comprehension, including modifying and refining listening resources and enhancing instructors' classroom approaches. Also, a study conducted by Varghese (2013) developed instructional material and evaluated its efficacy in enhancing high school students' language proficiency in English. The findings indicated that a lack of appropriate resources for teaching listening skills and a lack of reference to listening exercises in the textbook are the factors why active listening is not emphasized in English classes. The findings established that the lesson plan developed was extremely successful in increasing phonological awareness in English at the high school level.

According to the study of related literature, several researches have been done on the development of listening abilities in English at various educational levels. The review research implies that, a strategy focused listening helps in the development of ESL students' listening skill. However, there were no studies found in an attempt to enhance vocabulary and pronunciation of secondary level ESL learners through strategy-focused listening and activities. Hence, this paper attempts to provide the ESL learners and teachers, an insight about how language-focused and meaning-focused listening help in improving the proficiency level of the students' pronunciation and vocabulary usage through the experiment conducted and related LSRW activities.

3. Psychological Processes in Listening

3.1 Bottom-Up Processing

According to Hinkel (2006), bottom-up processing is a method of listening that is based on language comprehension features and attempts to enhance students' competencies to discern formal components such as terms, sentence boundaries, abbreviations, single sounds, and phonological combinations.

3.2 Top-Down Processing

Chaudron and Richards (1986) note, “Top-down processing involves prediction and inferencing on the basis of hierarchies of facts, propositions, and expectations, and it enables the listener or the reader to bypass some aspects of bottom-up processing”

In a bottom-up approach, for example, you might ask students to focus on a specific feature, such as “Please pay attention to the details of this listening activity, please pay attention to the speaker's gestures, please pay attention to tone, please pay attention to the speaker's attitude,” and so on. Students are urged to pay attention and notice subtleties in bottom-up processing. Even how to recognise the right accent in a word is covered, whether inter-syllabic or not. Because one looks at particular linguistic components within a listening activity and then breaks it down, it is akin to intense reading in certain ways. This is even referred to as “intensive listening.”

In a top-down process, on the other hand, it is less intensive and more extensive. Learners seek general meanings and put things together from past knowledge in a top-down method, which is more informal and global. Top-down

processing entails looking for the meaning of a single word or the gist of an idea. “What is the storey about?” Teachers might inspire children to accomplish this by asking, “What is the storey about?” What prompted the author to write this storey or article? “How does this article compare to other articles you have read?” and so on. All of a learner's prior knowledge is linked to a specific listening task in top-down techniques. The prior knowledge of the pupils acts as a key to unlocking the meaning of everything they hear.

It is possible to understand the spoken message without giving much preference to the grammatical structure of the information received. But, to speak to or write something one needs to make up the sentence in head. For this, there is a need to focus on the grammatical structure of that sentence and also attention must be given to the sentence structure of the language. So, meaning-focused listening and Language-focused listening are equally significant in learning a language.

4. Experiment

The researcher conducted the experimental study to grade 9 students of a government school in Vellore, located in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. The researcher chose 60 students for sample by using random sampling method. Since, the researcher chose secondary level, grade 9 would be appropriate. The researcher conducted the pre-test for the students. A video and audio of a children's tale was played in the classroom and the students were asked to summarize the story they listened to, in their own words. Through this assessment, the researcher evaluated the student's proficiency in vocabulary and pronunciation using a well-defined set of rubrics, referred from IELTS and Cambridge Assessment English. Then the researcher planned to do the intervention for 4 sessions using the activities that focus on strategy listening. The researcher prepared lesson plans (appendix) for the 4 sessions, where the reference for the lesson plan template was taken from an online course titled, “Teach English Now, Listening, Speaking and Pronunciation, a part of TESOL, by Arizona State University. After that the researcher conducted a post-test, with the same questions given in the pre-test, to all the students and evaluated them on the basis of the same set of rubrics used in the pre-test. The results of the pre-test and post-test were noted and analysed based on their mean values, where mean is the average of the obtained data.

5. Methodology

The intervention was conducted based on the strategy-focused listening. The following lesson plans clearly explain the four-hour session conducted to the students chosen for the experiment. In the beginning, the response from the students was less. But as they found interest in group activities and peer assessing techniques, the response was appreciable. Students actively participated in all the activities. Whenever they found difficulty in doing the activity, they were motivated to ask as many doubts as possible. At the end of the intervention session, the students found the class to be fun and innovative.

6. Activities

An interactive teacher will undoubtedly consider possibly the best listening exercises and will devote a lot of attention to their organization and assessment. One should bear in mind that a listening exercise is not a “break” in the lesson, but rather a chance for students to acquire knowledge, abilities, and accomplish goals.

Instructors often break down listening exercises in a variety of ways to ease learners' cognitive (learning) strain. Pre-teaching vocabulary or outlining essential ideas is a crucial method of breaking down listening exercises. The knowledge that students have learned can also be reinforced by using predictive exercises or follow-up questionnaires. A communicating instructor who is effective in this approach develops a positive support structure around each task they design in addition to existing speaking activities.

The term “information transfer” refers to a collection of tasks that involve a little bit of written language. Learners repeat the information they receive in these tasks by listening and responding by arranging a series of photos, creating a map, or generating a table. Thus, listening and drawing tactics fall within the category of information transfer techniques. Most activities for teaching information transfer focus students' attention on the details of the knowledge being conveyed. Information transfer activities are information transforming activities.

6.1 Listening to Stories

Listening to tales is the prototype teacher-led listening approach for meaning-focused input in children's courses. The teacher reads the narrative slowly. The majority of phrases are initially read twice. The instructor is always monitoring to ensure that the students comprehend what they are hearing. When students use new or unfamiliar vocabulary, the teacher instantly puts them on the blackboard and explains them using a translation, a gesture, a quick graphic, or a simple second language description. As the students gain familiarity with the narrative, the teacher reads a little more quickly.

6.2 Oral Cloze

In oral cloze practices, listeners are read a tale and the instructor sometimes stops (approximately every 50 words) to allow learners to predict the very next word in the story. The word should be obvious to guess, and the thinking

shouldn't take the focus away from the story too much. If the learners can generate only a few words in English, a set of possible phrases can be displayed on the board, or they can respond in their native language. Immediately following the students' guesses, the instructor provides the correct response.

6.3 The Missing Half

An article is divided into two, and is assigned in a way that, the first half of the article is read by half of the participants, while the other half read the following sequel of the piece. To find Student B partners, ask the Student A partners to seek for them (and vice versa). Encourage participants to read the text aloud to their partner, assuring they do not look at their companion during the reading. Give every pair of students a set of comprehension questions to complete (perhaps as a questionnaire or on the blackboard), assuring that Student A records the responses to questions related to the content being said by Student B while Student B responds to questions related to Student A's content.

6.4 What Is It?

The instructor discusses something, and the students must decide what the instructor is describing. The presentation begins with simply a few details then progressively reveals more. The meandering explanation continues with more hints until the students correctly determine what is being depicted.

6.5 Back-to-Back

This is more of a method to complete an information gap exercise, which can be a great deal of fun. The instruction to sit back-to-back for students may require relocating two seats such that they are facing apart. Now, in this configuration, students are given an information gap assignment. To fill in the gaps, each student must converse with the other. Creating a graphic or finishing a map benefit greatly from this method of information gap solving.

6.6 Cloze Passage

For one sort of listening cloze, learners are provided a manuscript that has had certain words removed – much like they would be in a typical cloze exercise. However, unlike syntactic cloze, this practice will likely to focus on specific words. In another type, the material to which learners listen has pauses, denoted by emptiness or the word 'buzz.' The learners put down the word that they believe should go in the space. This is best accomplished by the instructor reading aloud and determining when the learners are ready to go on, rather than by the use of pre-recorded content.

6.7 Same or Different

Typically, students work in groups on these tasks, with one person in the team holding an image that they explain to their teammate. The mate attempts to determine if the two images are identical or dissimilar. They are not permitted to display their images to one another. Numerous activities can be utilized in this manner. The activities may consist of a series of little images or a single huge image with numerous variations.

6.8 Listen and Choose

The students listen to a narrative and select the image that corresponds to the narrative from a group of similar but somewhat different images. The description must not be simple; they should include various extraneous details, be repetitious, and be engaging and vibrant.

6.9 Listen and Draw

The listen and draw activities have several versions. A few exercises may include working with unfinished drawings, interiors, outdoor sceneries, and automobiles. A more involved variant of this approach is giving tiny sketches of things that must be put correctly in a bigger image. The students listen and identify components of an image or diagram. This sort of exercise promotes vocabulary development.

6.10 Headbands

Make sure the user does not know whose name is on their headband before writing the name of a well-known personality on a headband. Instructors should put a handful of well-known sports figures on the headbands, such as Maria Sharapova, Mohammed Ali, or Lionel Messi, if the class is covering a course on sports. With specific instructions not to mention the celebrity's name, participants should circle the room and examine each headband. Instruct students to provide illuminating hints as they go around questioning each other to determine each other's identities. With the aid of this game, learners may practise asking and answering questions while also being introduced to a subject.

6.11 Padded Questions

Padded questions provide extensive listening practice while requiring little verbal response. For instance, the instructor may discuss her home and what it's like to live there before asking the learners, "Where do you reside?" Thus, each item consists of a straightforward inquiry followed by a lengthy discussion on the same subject. Padded inquiries are simple

to construct since teachers may speak from personal experience. They may comprise the following questions: Where were you born? What is your occupation? Which food you dislike? Are you a cricket player? etc.

6.12 Truth or Fiction

Give them the assignment of writing a surprise fact about themselves that is true while keeping it a secret from others. (For instance, I have eaten a whole cake by myself OR I have been to twelve different nations. Inform the class that the more unique the item, the better. The next step is for students to submit two incorrect assertions. They can also be unusual, but they must at least seem convincing in order to deceive their peers. As the other students in the class try to determine which of the three facts is "true" about each student and which is "fiction," each student reveals the three things they have written down one at a time. Students can vote on what they think would be true and what they think would be fiction after attentively listening to each truth and lie. In more advanced programs, the instructor can allow students to discuss issues in teams or pairs prior to actually casting their votes.

6.13 Note-Taking

Note-taking is specifically a meaning-focused listening activity. Additionally, it is a necessary ability for academic studies. Note-taking has two purposes: It enables for the storing of information and preserves details for future use. These two characteristics are commonly known as the storage and encoding effects. Students make use of note-storage effect by taking notes that they will later refer to in order to recollect or amend what happened during the lecture. Note-taking has an encoding impact at the moment the notes are taken. The term "encoding" refers to the process of converting one type of information to another, as seen in the information transmission activity. This may entail transitioning from a written to a verbal form, for instance. Additionally, it may imply a shift in the way thoughts are organized. For instance, it may include switching from a checklist to a pictorial format.

These are the activities that can be used in the classroom environment to implement vocabulary and pronunciation through listening. A few of the above-mentioned activities were used by the researcher in this experiment. The post-test was easy to conduct when compared to the pre-test. The students were spontaneous and supportive unlike the pre-test.

7. Analyses

The present study analyses the mean which is the most commonly used measure of central tendency. The mean is the average of the data, which is the sum of all the observations divided by the number of observations.

7.1 Pre-test Results

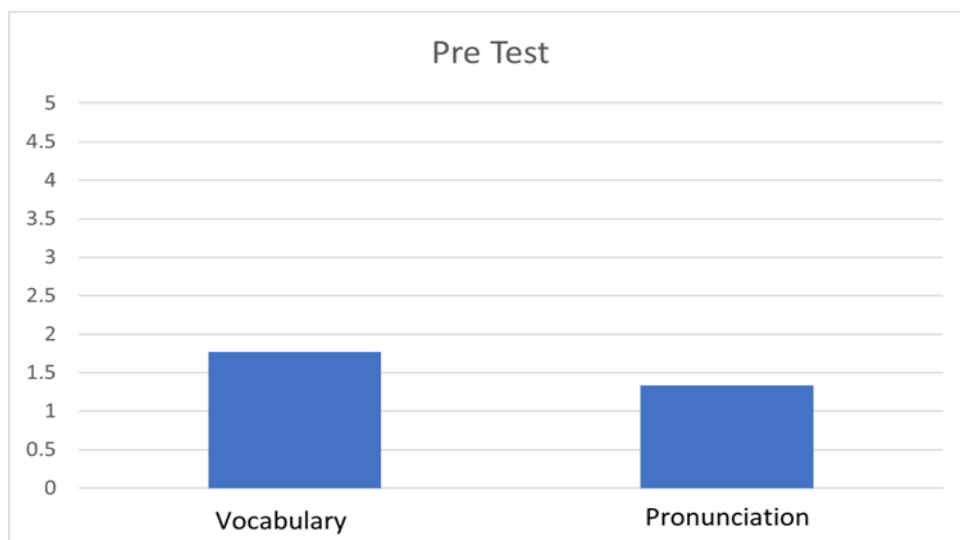


Figure 1. Pre-test results

Table 1. Pre-test results

Elements		Mean	Number
Pre-Test	Vocabulary	1.70	60
	Pronunciation	1.33	60

Table 1 and figure 1 shows the results of the pre-test for vocabulary and pronunciation. The mean value for vocabulary is 1.70 and the mean value for pronunciation is 1.33. Though many students were good at vocabulary, their pronunciation was very basic. It had a lot of mother tongue influence.

7.2 Post-test Results

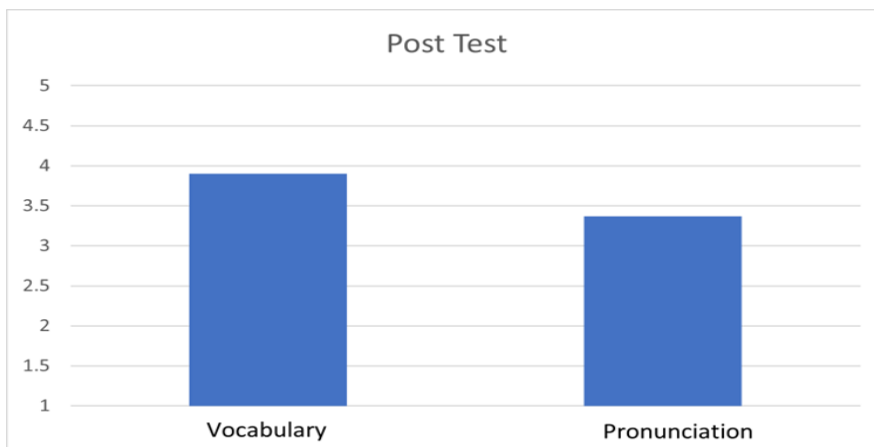


Figure 2. Post-test results

Table 2. Post-test results

Elements		Mean	Number
Post-Test	Vocabulary	3.90	60
	Pronunciation	3.36	60

Table 2 and figure 2 show the results of the post-test for vocabulary and pronunciation. The mean value for vocabulary is 3.90 and the mean value for pronunciation is 3.36. When compared to the pre-test, the improvement is notable. After the intervention, the difference in their pronunciation and their vocabulary was very evident.

Both the graphs and the tables show the results clearly. The improvement amidst the students is significant. Hence, the experiment was a success. Teaching vocabulary and enhancing pronunciation to secondary level ESL learners through Language-focused and Meaning-focused listening is effective. This research was conducted as a short-time sample experiment, whereas further research can be done with a well-prepared syllabus and lesson plans for a longer duration of intervention.

8. Conclusion

Three stages-pre-listening, listening, and post-listening-make up a standard approach for instructing listening. This paper focuses on listening activities and strategies in listening according to the three stages. This paper also highlights the crucial role of the teachers in handling all the task-oriented activities in implementing listening skills at different levels of learning stages. Sessions with meaning-focused listening lay the groundwork for the development of a second language and subject learning. Typically, these experiences will require enhancement through focused attention on auditory perception and interpreting abilities. Teachers must strike an important correlation between chances for listening skills training using meaning-focused listening and chances for bottom-up listening training with language-focused learning. Listening with a purpose may be a highly fun component of a language lesson. This is especially true if the learners are engaged in the activity and working with intriguing content. A critical ability of the instructor is to provide content in an entertaining manner.

To conclude, this research was an attempt to portray the different kinds of listening activities and its way of classroom application, experimentally. Both meaning-focused and language-focused learning to an ESL learner would support in improving their language proficiency, vocabulary and pronunciation, since listening skill proves to be the base for all the other three skills. A four-hour session can induce such a significant improvement among the learners. However, this article gives space for an in-depth study and empirical research for future researchers. Further study in Language-focused and meaning-focused listening activities could either be done with sample research with qualitative or quantitative techniques, or using case studies, etc. Computer-based listening activities would be another opening for further research in the field of listening.

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