The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on the Listening Comprehension: A Case of Iranian IELTS Candidates

Omid Ostad[1], Mohammad Tarang[2], Hamed Abbasi Mojdehi[3]*

[1]Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran
[2]University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran
[3]Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch, Iran

Corresponding Author: Hamed Abbasi Mojdehi, E-mail: haamed.mojdehi@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Listening skill has always been somehow a neglected area in the English teaching practice. Using contemporary ways, such as applying task-based instructions and activities in the classrooms, is proven to be helpful (Cubillo and Brenes, 2009; Nunan, 1999). The present study aimed at exploring task-based listening activities and their role on improving the listening comprehension of Iranian IELTS candidates. To this end, 40 learners (14 male and 26 female, aging 21 to 43) in IELTS preparation courses were selected form Sama IELTS Centre in Rasht, Iran. After Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the participants were randomly divided into two parallel classes (20 in each). Both groups took a sample of IELTS listening test, which comprised of 40 items in four sections as the pre-test, and another sample test at the end of the study, as the post-test. Accordingly, the experimental group received the treatment (task-based listening activities). The control group, on the other hand received the placebo, i.e. the traditional practice of re-listening, pausing, and answering the questions. The statistical analyses of the results revealed that the experimental group had outperformed the control group in the posttest.

Key words: Task-based Listening Activities, Listening Comprehension, Iranian IELTS Candidates

INTRODUCTION

Learning the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writhing) is of utmost importance for second language learners nowadays. Learning a new language, in a way, can be equal to learning the four skills in that language. However, in language learners' minds, the value and importance of each skill is different. Productive skills (speaking and writing) are usually considered more important than receptive skills (reading and listening). Listening, as a receptive skill, is the first stage in learning our mother tongue. As it was mentioned in Aitchison's (2007) model, children normally pass the crying, cooing and babbling stages (in which they use their five senses to receive information from the world around) before they start to produce (speak or write or draw). Therefore, it is safe to say that listening plays a significant role in the language learning process and communication in an individual's life. Listening comprehension is a complex process and needs different types of knowledge. Therefore, it is a rather difficult skill to acquire (Field, 2008; Graham & Macaro, 2008). Rost (2009) believed that listening is an active and important mental ability. It aids us to understand the world around and is half of the necessary elements in creating a successful communication (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). In fact, some researchers (Celce-Mur-

cia, 1995; Hedge, 2000; Oxford, 1993) pointed out that in a communication, people usually spend around 45 percent of their time on listening, while only 30 percent on speaking, 16 percent on reading, and 9 percent on writing. This probably shows that input, which is mainly provided by listening, is the most important part of a communication.

Over the last two decades, it seems that the listening skill has been a neglected area in the English teaching practice. Nunan (1999) even uses the term "Cinderella skill" for the listening skill and explains how it is a "secondary skill" and that "it has been overlooked by its elder sister, speaking" (p. 199). In fact, there is a general belief that being able to speak, read, or write in a given L2 would be enough for second language learners to communicate in that language (Nunan, as cited in Luchini, 2009).

Rise of the communicative language teaching approaches in the early 1980s and increasing emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, paved the way for the introduction of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in the field of second language acquisition. The role of teachers in this approach is considered to be providing relevant assistance with language form while the learners mainly are involved in the task and therefore, focus on the meaning rather than the form. As mentioned by Cubillo and Brenes (2009), with the task-based lesson, learners must go

The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on the Listening Comprehension: A Case of Iranian IELTS CandidatesMohammad Tarang

35

through a series of pedagogical tasks within a well-structured framework that contains a pre-task, a task-cycle, and post-task which includes manly the language focus. Several advantages are mentioned by experts for the use of tasks in the classroom. The main advantages are these: to do a task, language is used for a genuine purpose and real communication takes place; the learners learn not to sacrifice fluency for accuracy; and that when the task is finished and the students want to report the results to the class, they are forced to consider language form in general rather than concentrating on a single form, and as a result, the accuracy will improve as well. However, despite all the advantages of Task-Based Learning (TBL), several disadvantages are mentioned for it too. There are different variations of TBLT with different activities and types of task which may be the reasons why it is not always well-understood by teachers, as indicated by evidence from Hong Kong and elsewhere (e.g. Carless, 2003; Littlewood, 2004).

In a TBLT classroom in Iranian EFL settings, due to the shortage of direct contact between foreign language learners and English native speakers, the teachers usually have to emphasize on active group learning in the classroom, contrary to the traditional way which was lecturing for the learners. This way, they become more acquainted with the target language in actual use and as a result, they can accomplish the task. Furthermore, learners enjoy being in such a classroom, primarily because they believe TBL actually helps them do something useful and benefits their communication abilities.

Finding contemporary ways to teach language skills has always been a great concern for applied linguists and language teachers. Although applying TBLT and using tasks in the classrooms have been utilized in different contexts and for different situations in the last decade, using task-based listening activities and analyzing their effects specifically on Iranian IELTS candidates has never been done before. Thus, the present study intends to investigate the impact of task-based listening activities on Iranian IELTS candidates' listening comprehension.

The following null hypotheses were formulated:

$H_0 1$: Using TBI does not have any significant effect on IELTS candidates' listening comprehension.

$H_0 2$: There is no significant difference between male and female participants in terms of their listening comprehension in the end of the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening Comprehension

Listening has an imperative place in learning and acquisition. According to Rost (1994) and Ziane (2011), listening comprehension is very important because it is a process through which we get input, and without it, learning cannot happen. Ziane (2011) argued that listening has a significant effect on developing speaking. That is, we cannot develop our speaking ability unless we develop our listening skill. If a learner has a good listening ability in English language, it would be very easy for him to listen to the radio, to study, to watch films, or to communicate with foreigners. Therefore,

learners should have much practice and exposure to English in order to develop this ability.

Hedge (2000) mentions that it is surprising that listening skill had always been neglected and overlooked, given its important role in our day to day life. Nunan (1999) also confirms that listening skill is considered a "secondary skill", "means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves" (p. 199). But he continues and explains that the introduction of Krashen's theory of comprehensible input, and later the introduction of James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) as a language teaching method mainly based on Krashen's theory, were two important milestones which brought the listening skill into fashion. Krashen (1982) shed light on the important role of receiving input in the learning process. According to him, input is the very first step which determines the quality of the language production by the learner in the next steps. This influential theory was put into practice by Asher (1982) in a language teaching method which focused on actions in the classroom in order to maximize the input the learners receive. The term "input" in Krashen's theory and Asher's TPR is mostly implying to the listening. The proponents of listening has been increased in size after the 1980s.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

With the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the field of second or foreign language acquisition in the early 1980s and strong emphasis on learners' communicative abilities, TBLT has drawn the attention of many researchers due to its focus on process-based syllabi and directing actual language use toward communicative purposes. Although there is no single definition of TBLT, most scholars agree on three common characteristics: TBLT is a student-centered approach (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); it includes certain constituents such as goal, procedure, and specific result (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2005; Skehan, 2003); it supports content-based and meaning-based tasks instead of just form-focused activities (Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2007).

Task-based language teaching promotes real practice in the target language and offers different contexts for language study (Izadpanah, 2010). Willis (1996) believes that tasks are activities in whichthe learner uses target language for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. Skehan (1996) defines tasks as "… activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use", and reminds us that task-based instruction "… takes a fairly strong view of communicative language teaching" (p. 20). Li (1998) argued that TBLT facilitates language learning because learners are the center of the learning process and, in that way, it promotes higher proficiency levels in all language skills. Richards and Rodgers (2001) offer some assumptions which are believed to underlie TBLT. When it comes to the theory of learning, they propose that "tasks provide both the input and the output processing necessary for language acquisition", and furthermore, "task activity and achievement are motivational" (p. 228). Additionally, Richards and Rodgers (2001) high-

lighted that TBLT enhances the creation of learning tasks that suit the needs of the learners and helps them master all skills successfully by providing different class exercises to complete those tasks. They mention that "TBLT is motivated primarily by a theory of learning rather than a theory of language" (p. 226). As Nunan (2005) explains, for a TBLT classroom, the type and quality of tasks determine the syllabus design and the assessment for the course. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013) focus on communicative nature of task-based activities and explain that tasks "… are meaningful, and in doing them, students need to communicate. Tasks have a clear outcome so that the teacher and students know whether or not the communication has been successful" (p. 149).

Ellis (2009) emphasizes on the centrality and importance of tasks in a TBLT classroom and discusses some criteria that distinguish TBLT from regular teaching activities. He explained that this methodology focuses on the integration of language learning where students are expected to conduct creative activities, infer meaning from written and oral messages, and communicate. Finally, Tomlinson (2013) mentions that because the learners' focus in a task-based activity is on the 'meaning' rather than the 'form', these activities are usually successful in both. He names five basic characteristics for a task-based approach. He explains that "… a task specifies a non-linguistic outcome, sets an achievable challenge, requires language use in order to achieve the specified outcome, replicates real-life use of language, and has both a learner goal and a teacher target" (p. 114).

Richards and Rodgers (2014) find task-based activities practical and claim that using tasks as tools for second language teaching has been part of the mainstream of language teaching for a long time. Although, it must be mentioned here that in countries where teacher-fronted classes are vastly applied, students may need some time to adjust to the interactive nature of a typical TBLT classroom, as found in McDonough and Chaikitmongkol's (2007) study of a task-based EFL course in Thailand in which the students asked for more support and guidance from the teacher.

Listening is a significant part of communication. When language learning is mainly for communicative purposes, listening plays a vital role. For listening comprehension, supra-segmental elements, such as word stress, sentence intonation, tone of voice and pitch, as much as pronunciation, knowledge of vocabulary, and accent are influential. Learners have to have enough knowledge and experience about these elements, in order for listening comprehension to take place. It is believed that task-based activities could help learners to acquire the knowledge and experience due to their interactive and challenging nature.

Task-based Activities

Prabhu (1987) in his influential book Second Language Pedagogy identifies three different kinds of task, on which most of the activities in task-based classes are based. These three task types, based on Prabhu's ideas, are: a) information-gap tasks, b) Opinion-gap tasks, and c) Reasoning-gap tasks. In an information-gap task, the individuals in each group will exchange their information to other group members and, bit by bit, will complete a chart, a program, a table, or a puzzle. In an opinion-gap task, each person in the group will use his/her own feelings, personal ideas and preferences and help to complete the mission. In a reasoning-gap task, the students in each group will infer some new information from the information they already have, and then use their conclusion to achieve the goal or solve the problem. Activities in TBLT classrooms basically contain one of these three tasks or a combination of them. In this study, a combination of the three activity types are used. The students in each group, will listen to a listening section. This way, they receive the input (or the necessary information). Then, they put together the information and deduce or infer some new information from them. Next, they complete the task together. And finally, they give a report about it to the whole class. This process was employed in the present study.

Hedge (2000) gives a procedure for designing a listening activity. Based on her model, when dealing with a listening text in class, first you must "… help students to become familiar with the topic, to be exposed to some language features of the text…, to activate any relevant prior knowledge they have". Second, you must help learners to completely understand the instruction for the activity. Third, "Although the listening itself is done individually, students can be encouraged to check their responses in pairs or groups as soon as they are ready". In the fourth step, the teacher receives some feedback from the students and in return, should help the students to recognize the importance of their success in doing the tasks. And finally, the teacher is advised to talk about language features and focus on the form. This stage is named the "follow-up" in which the teacher "… will assist further development of effective listening." (p. 247). All of these stages were taken under consideration for designing the task-based activities in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A sample of 40 Iranian intermediate EFL learners participated in this study. These 40 intermediate language learners were selected out of 130 EFL learners who took a standardized English Placement Test (i.e. Oxford Placement Test) based on the results of their performance. The learners whose scores fell 31 to 40 on the Test were selected to take part in the study. This ensured that all the participants were homogeneous regarding their English proficiency and at the upper-intermediate level. All the participants were language learners for the IELTS courses at the IELTS Centre, Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch. The participants' age ranged from 21 to 43. Then, the participants were randomly divided into two groups. Members of both groups consisted of male and female participants.

The Design of the Study

The quasi-experimental design was employed in the present study. The independent variable is task-based listening in-

The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on the Listening Comprehension: A Case of Iranian IELTS CandidatesMohammad Tarang

37

struction and the dependent variable is learners' comprehension in listening section of IELTS test.

INSTRUMENTS

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (OPT), version 2, was administered to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. OPT is a renowned multiple choice item placement test, having 60 questions in grammar, reading, and vocabulary with one point for each correct item. The time allocated was 40 minutes as stated in the test. To mark the papers, the researcher used the assessment table provided at the end of the test. Only those students whose scores fell in the range of B2 (based on Council of Europe level), matching the characteristics of upper-intermediate, were selected for the purpose of the study.

Listening Comprehension Tests

The researcher chose two series of listening comprehension tests. These tests were used in order to demonstrate learners' ability to understand spoken English. Therefore, the researcher gave the tests to the learners and asked them to listen to an audio file and respond to the questions. The listening pre-test and post-test were selected from Cambridge Practice Test for IELTS, vol. 10 (2015). IELTS is a test which is used to measure the level of English proficiency of non-native speakers of English and is required primarily by many English language colleges and universities. Each listening test took 40 minutes. Listening includes four sections. Section 1 includes a conversation between two people and some questions are based on the conversations and learners have to choose/write the correct answer. Section 2 includes a talk by one person on a topic of general interest with questions. Section 3 consists of dialogues with up to four speakers and the final section is an academic lecture by one speaker followed by questions. Each section has 10 questions with each listening test containing 40 items. All of the tests which are used in the present study are validated.

According to Hedge (2000), teachers need to introduce necessary schematic knowledge before the main listening part (i.e. pre-listening phase), and some of the language which learners will encounter during the test after the main listening part (i.e. post-listening phase). In dealing with the items in the tests, pre, while-, and post-listening stages are employed.

The procedure

The course book used in both classes was Get Ready for IELTS (Listening). During 18 sessions (each session was approximately 90 minutes long), the experimental group was treated through task-based listening activities, including different kinds of listening tasks. Each session was basically comprised of three stages. In the first stage, the teacher and students worked with new vocabulary related to the topic and reviewed and discussed some common errors which most IELTS candidates usually commit. In the second stage, some short audio parts were introduced to the students which mostly contained the vocabulary or common errors discussed in the previous stage. In the third and final stage, a long listening section, which was very similar to that in a real IELTS exam, was played for the students.

The first two stages were exactly the same for both the control and the experimental groups. The difference between the two groups was in fact in the third stage which approximately took 30 minutes in each session. For the experimental group, in the third stage of each session, the listening audio track was played for the students and they were asked to use the information in the audio track to do a specific task. In doing so, they had to do activities such as ordering and re-ordering, filling the gaps, multiple choice, labelling, completing the table, etc. To clarify about the procedure of the activities in each class, the first four sessions of the course are described with details below.

In the first session, the students in groups of four, were asked to label the cities and countries in a big map while listening to the audio track, and determine the percentages of unemployment for each country, and finally report the results to the class briefly. The same audio track was played two times for the students in the control group, but they were asked some comprehension questions about the countries and the percentages of unemployment and they answered and discussed that; no tasks were involved.

In the second session, the students, again in groups of four, were asked to complete and order the documents of a lawsuit case with the information given in the audio track which was played for them twice. After completing the task, they had to report about it. The same audio track was played twice for the students in the control group in the second session of the course, and again they were asked some comprehension questions and then they discussed a formal lawsuit and its different parts.

In the third session, the students in the experimental group were asked to listen to an audio track and put together some different shuffled pieces of a film based on the information in the audio track, complete the film and then talk about the message and the idea behind the film. In the control group, just comprehension questions and discussion took place.

In the fourth session of the course, the students in the experimental class were asked to do a different task. They were supposed to find the cities and complete the table they were given based on the grids and other information in the audio track. They were allowed to use the internet to find the exact location of each grid and then discover the city and write it down in the table. Needless to say, the same audio track was played for the control group. But afterwards, the teacher asked comprehension questions from the students and they talked about the geographical concepts and measurement methods.

All the sessions in the course followed the same format. The participants in the control group in fact, were taught through the traditional approach to listening. That is, the learners listened to the tape for one or two times and then were asked to answer the teacher's questions. On the other hand, although the audio tracks used for listening sections were the same for both classes, task-based activities were

employed in the experimental group as explained above. The time spent for each one of these activities in each session was equal for both groups.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In the beginning, the data collected from OPT went through an independent samples t-test to guarantee the homogeneity of the control and the experimental groups. Then, to find out whether there is a difference between genders in terms of their performances within these domains, one-way ANOVA was used to compare and contrast these sub-groups. After conducting the pre-test, T-test and ANOVA were run to show if there is a difference between control and experimental group at the beginning of the course. These tests were also used to see if there existed any difference between sub-groups in terms of their performances at the time of conducting the pre-test.

Finally, after the posttest at the end of the course, independent samples t-test and ANOVA were again used to see if the treatment had any significant effects on experimental group and its sub-groups compared to the control group.

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the t-test for OPT which was used to see whether there was any significant dif-

ference between participants' test scores in the experimental and control groups.

As the Table 1 shows, the mean score for the experimental group in OPT was 25.90 and for the control group was 25.33 and the standard deviations were 1.66 and 1.82 respectively.

As the results of t-test for OPT in Table 2 represent, the *t* value for equal variances is 1.355, which with 38 degree of freedom has an exact two-tailed significance level of.215. The results indicate that the groups were homogenous on the proficiency level before starting the treatment. One-Way ANOVA was run to ensure that male and female subgroups, were homogenous with regard to their proficiency level before starting the treatment.

As Table 3 indicates, F equals 1.136 while the degree of freedom equals 3 and significance level of 0.343, which is based on the critical value of F (Fcr = 2.41), that is higher than the obtained F (F= 1.136), as a result, we can conclude that there was no significant difference among these four subgroups.

Researchers checked the vocabulary background knowledge to see how many of the words were known to the participants of both groups. Results indicated that the mean score of the experimental group on the pre-test was 14.30 and for the control group was 14.36 and the standard deviations were 5.95 and 5.90 respectively (Table 4).

Calculation of observed P-value between the experimental and control group (sig= 0.96) and comparing it with the critical value of P= 0.05, shows that the observed difference is not meaningful and the participants of the two groups were homogeneous and at the same level of vocabulary knowledge before starting the treatment (Table 5).

Table 1. Sample statistics for OPT

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Control	20	25.9000	1.66816	0.30456
Experimental	20	25.3333	1.82574	0.33333

Table 2. Independent samples t-test for OPT

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference
Equal variances assumed	0.351	0.566	1.355	38	0.215	0.56667	0.45152
Equal variances not assumed			1.355	37.534	0.215	0.56667	0.45152

Table 3. ANOVA for OPT

	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	10.450	3	3.483	1.136	0.343
Within groups	171.733	36	3.067		
Total	182.183	39			

Table 4. Sample statistics for the pretest

	N	Mean	Sandard deviation	Standard error
Experimental	20	14.3000	5.95471	1.08718
Control	20	14.3667	5.90431	1.07798

Table 5. Independent samples t-test for the pretest

	F	Sig.	t	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference
Equal variances assumed	0.032	0.0859	−0.044	0.965	−0.0667	1.53101
Equal variances not assumed			−0.044	0.965	−0.0667	1.53101

The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on the Listening Comprehension: A Case of Iranian IELTS CandidatesMohammad Tarang

39

Table 6. ANOVA for the pretest among sub-groups of experimental and control groups

As displayed in Table 6, F=.016 with DF= 3 and obtained P- value of more than 0.05, the researchers concluded that there was no significant difference among pre-test scores of control and experimental subgroups regarding their performance on the pre-test. After the treatment, the same statistical procedures were employed, and as Table 7 indicates, the mean score for the experimental group for the post-test was 29.00 with the standard deviation of 9.57 and for the control group it was 23 with the standard deviation of 9.88.

Levine's test for equality of variances shows that the variances are equal and there are no significant differences between them, but test of equality of means indicates t= 2.38 with the degree of freedom of 38 and the significant level of (sig= 0.020).

The reported P-value is lower than the cut-off point of.05, which means there is a significant difference between the performances of the participants in the experimental group comparing to the control group. Therefore, the first null hypothesis of the study was rejected and the researchers can conclude that using TBI has a significant impact on listening comprehension (Tables 7 and 8).

The results of one-way ANOVA which was run on the data obtained on the posttest show that F= 2.154 and that the obtained P-value is more than the critical P-value. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was not rejected. In the other word, genders do not differ significantly in terms of their listening comprehension after the treatment (Table 9).

DISCUSSION

The present study has attempted to investigate the effects of using task-based activities on the intermediate level IELTS candidates' listening skill. Task-based activities in this study were a combination of information-gap and reasoning-gap tasks. The main question the researchers asked and tried to answer was whether using task-based activities as a part of the syllabus for teaching listening skill could have a positive effect on the learners' listening skill or not.

The importance of learning and teaching English as a foreign language has created a daily demand toward applying effective strategies for teaching and learning the four main skills, as becoming expert in these skills is the ultimate goal of language learning. According to Vandergrift (1999), listening comprehension is a complex process in which listeners play an active role. They need to be able to discriminate between sounds, understand the vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret intonation and stress, and finally, make use of all of them within the socio-cultural context. Various research show that EFL/ESL learners tend to have difficulties decoding sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. The results of the study, as explained above, show that using TBI can have a significant effect on IELTS candidates' performance in listening comprehension tests. However, there is no difference found between male and female candidates in terms of their performances.

Task-based activities can create variety and increase students' involvement in the classroom. Using tasks to give a

Table 6. ANOVA for the pretest among sub-groups of experimental and control groups

	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	1.733	3	0.578	0.16	0.997
Within groups	2037.600	36	36.386		
Total	2039.333	39			

Table 7. Sample statistics for the pretest in experimental and control groups

Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Experimental	20	29.000	9.5367	1.74799
Control	20	23.000	9.88206	1.80421

Table 8. Independent samples t-test for the posttest

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference
Equal variances assumed	0.040	0.842	2.388	38	0.020	6.000	2.51204
Equal variances not assumed			2.388	37.942	0.020	6.000	2.51204

Table 9. ANOVA for the posttest among the subgroups

	Sum of the squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	623.967	3	207.956	2.154	0.104
Within groups	5406.133	36	96.538		
Total	603.000	39			

sense of purpose to the students and consequently making them interact with each other more, has been reported earlier as an effective approach in teaching ESL/EFL. A number of studies indicate that tasks can have a great effect on learning as well as pedagogy; that is, using tasks is practical both for teaching and learning. It is clearly stated by Nunan (2005) that tasks should become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment. The pedagogic considerations of task-based listening are mentioned by Ellis (2003) as well: "The research based on listening-and-do tasks has shown that such tasks are effective both as listening comprehension devices and as a means of presenting new linguistic material to students" (p. 66). According to Ellis (2003), "Like researchers, teachers can use listening tasks to provide the student with input enriched with specific features they (students) wish to target" (p. 37). Nevertheless, there are some considerations and concerns about listening strategy instruction. Ridgway (2000) has argued that learners may not have the cognitive capacity to consciously activate taught strategies and listen simultaneously, and isolating individual listening strategies for explicit instruction could be unrealistic. Andon and Eckerth (2009) bold the role of teaching context in applying TBLT and asked whether or not this approach could be used in any context and cultural background. This is in fact an important question. For instance, as it was mentioned before, in McDonough and Chaikitmongkol's (2007) study of a task-based EFL course in Thailand, the students asked for more grammar instruction and target language forms. They also wanted more support and guidance from the teacher. They believed that the students' cultural background, and specially teaching context, were the reason that made task-based instruction fairly not effective. To describe the role of teaching context, they explained that teacher-fronted methods were dominant in Thailand's pedagogy system at the time.

Another consideration for pedagogy and a major challenge for course designers and material developers using task-oriented approach concerns the task difficulty. Tasks, sometimes are complicated and hard to accomplish, and sometimes too simple. It is not an easy mission to find proper type of tasks suitable for a specific course with specific learners. In the present study, the researchers paid attention to some factors in order to design the proper type of tasks for learners. Initially, the learners' language proficiency level which was upper-intermediate, and their ages which were between 21 and 43, were taken into consideration. Additionally, the tasks have to be in accordance with the material in the course book. It goes without saying that the tasks have to be interesting and enjoyable. Finally, they need to be finished in less than 30 minutes in each session in order to be equivalent to the same listening section in the control group. The tasks were designed after analysis of all the aforementioned factors.

To mention some of the controversial aspects of task-based pedagogy, an important question is that 'how should the teacher evaluate the learners' progress exactly?'. It seems that in such courses, a clear and objective evaluation system needs to be designed. In this study, using standard listening comprehension tests as pre-test and post-test was the main evaluation tool. This way, the researchers were able to analyze the IELTS candidates' progress in listening skill. Other than the issue of having an objective evaluation system, it was claimed that implementing task-based activities would be nearly impossible in elementary courses due to their lack of basic language abilities; therefore, these activities are not suitable for all language courses. Of course, needless to say, the IELTS candidates in this study were upper-intermediate. As a result, they had the basic language requirements for doing such tasks.

The merits of task-based activities and approaches however, convinced a lot of teachers and researchers to use them in their classes. During the last decade around the world, more and more ELT researchers have joined to the proponents of task-based approaches. They mainly agree on the premise that promoting the use and development of listening strategies through explicit instruction, especially for task-based activities, can help learners become more efficient, effective and autonomous listeners (e.g. Flowerdew and Miller, 2005; Lynch and Mendelsohn, 2002; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004).

CONCLUSION

As it was mentioned in the introduction of this article, listening skill has not been treated as it should and it deserves. Despite the importance of listening skill and its significance as the primary tool for communication flow, most of the attention were put toward other language skills. Task-based Instructions and using tasks in the classrooms in general have been tested by researchers and were proved to be successful. However, applying task-based listening activities on Iranian IELTS candidates' listening comprehension was something that has not been done before. In this study, task-based activities were applied to improve Iranian IELTS candidates' listening comprehension. In case of language learning, specifically for IELTS candidates, there is always the pressure for time. The aim of the present study was finding a way to help IELTS candidates to improve their listening skill in the shortest possible time. The findings show that using task-based activities can have, in fact, a significantly positive effect on learners' listening skill.

Task-based approach attempts to overcome the problems of communicative tasks and enhance learners' proficiency in foreign language learning. The task supplies a genuine need to use language for communication, and the other components follow on naturally. Therefore, using tasks could be considered an attempt to engage learners in naturalistic learning processes as a means of enhancing language use and hence language acquisition.

Based on the data analysis and related discussion, it is revealed that task-based instruction could be an effective way for teaching and improving listening comprehension skill. Moreover, considering that the communicative environment of today's L2 classrooms can promote negotiation of meaning and interaction, the present study provides suggestions so as how to introduce learners into the realities of speech spoken at normal rates through the development of

The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on the Listening Comprehension: A Case of Iranian IELTS CandidatesMohammad Tarang

41

classroom activities that ease the anxiety learners undergo through listening comprehension exercises.

The findings of this study may have implications for teachers, textbook writers, and syllabus designers. By knowing the benefits and the efficacy of task-based instruction for higher level language learners, textbook writers and syllabus designers can provide textbooks with task-based activities and exercises. Language teachers also can apply different task-based listening activities to facilitate the learners' listening skill. Willis (1981) refers to a good friendly interaction between a teacher and the learners as "rapport" and states that "when there is rapport, it becomes enjoyable for students and the teacher to study together" (p. 188). Additionally, not only task-based activities are challenging and enjoyable for the learners, but they are also more productive.

There are a number of limitations and delimitations to the present study suggesting that the findings should be interpreted with caution. To begin with, the study had to be conducted in a limited time period. Although some development has been observed during this time period, but it may not imply that it could happen for any time period. Moreover, learners' earlier learning experiences were not considered in this study. It could have been better if the researchers prepared a questionnaire to find out whether the participants had any prior knowledge of task-based approach or not. Furthermore, the listening conditions during the tests may have affected the data collection because factors such as external noise and acoustics of the room were not controlled for. Therefore, it is suggested that the tests be implemented in a more controlled environment in the future studies.

Since it is beyond the limits of a single study to consider a wide range of factors, the study was restricted to upper-intermediate level EFL learners. This research was conducted on learners at Islamic Azad University, Rasht Branch. Carrying out such research on students from other universities or institute may produce different results. Fortunately, the element of gender was considered in this research and both genders participated in this study.

For those who are interested in carrying out research in the area of vocabulary development, the following suggestions are made: The present study investigated the effectiveness of task-based listening instruction on intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension. Further investigation is needed to provide stronger evidence for the effectiveness of task-based listening instruction on different levels of English proficiency. It is also suggested to implement task-based instruction for teaching other language skills (speaking, reading, and writing).

In the present study multiple-choice and short-answer questions were used to test learners' listening proficiency. Other ways of testing listening proficiency may provide more precise results. For future research, a larger sample of participants is suggested because it may provide additional evidence and expand understanding in listening comprehension instruction.

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