

The Effect of Task-Based Listening Activities on Improvement of Listening Self-Efficacy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study aimed at exploring the role of task-based listening activities in augmenting EFL learners' listening self-efficacy. To this end, 70 male and female Iranian EFL learners in Kish Air English Institute, Mashhad, Iran, participated in the study. To homogenize the participants' level of proficiency, the Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test was employed and the participants with the intermediate level of proficiency were selected. Accordingly, the number of the participants was reduced to 50. To measure the participants' level of listening self-efficacy at the pre- and post-tests, a listening self-efficacy questionnaire (20 items) was applied. Then, the participants were randomly divided into two groups: experimental (N=26) and control (N=24). The experimental group received task-based listening activities during the 19 sessions (30 minutes) of instructions, and the control group received the traditional practices (a question-and-answer approach). The results of independent t-test revealed that the participants' levels of listening self-efficacy in the experimental group was significantly higher than those in the control group ($P=0.05$).

Keywords: Listening comprehension, Task-based activities, Listening self-efficacy

1. Introduction

Self-efficacy, defined as a person's perceptions, beliefs and evaluations of his/her performances and capabilities to carry out specific tasks, is an effective factor influencing the process of language learning. Individuals with high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to contribute more effort and resilience when they encounter difficulties (Bandura, 1977, 1997). The importance of self-efficacy provides the necessary incentive to choose a much better approach for working and doing listening activities in language classrooms. It seems that task-based activities may potentially raise listeners' self-efficacy since the primary focus of such activities is on meaning and "seeks to engage learners in using language pragmatically rather than displaying language" (Ellis, 2003, p. 9). In other words, the engagement of one's previous performance in tasks, interpretations and probable success helps to create one's efficacy beliefs. Since interactive task-based activities engage learners in accomplishing tasks in pairs or groups, it is more probable to witness other learners' performances and in the case of the existence of any success while doing the activities, learners model others' achievement(s) which in turn impacts their improvement.

Indeed, observing others perform tasks, vicarious experience which is the second source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 1977, Pajares, 1997, 2002), can initiate and create assumptions and assurance in observers that they are capable of making progress if they pursue and continue their efforts appropriately. Bandura (1977) maintains that when some persons with similar characteristics can succeed, their "observers have a reasonable basis for increasing their own sense of self-efficacy" (p. 197). The purpose of the current study is to find out whether inserting task-based listening activities into conventional listening courses can improve learners' self-efficacy in listening comprehension skill.

2. Review of Literature

A. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

(1) Definition of Task

Generally the definition of 'task' goes to two different varieties. The first kind of task, as Nunan (2004) states, is related to real world and is labeled target task, and the second category is pedagogical task. Pedagogical tasks are done within the classroom while target tasks are employed for authentic users out of the classroom.

Richards et al.(1986) offered the following definition of a pedagogical task:

. . . an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks. ... (as cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 2)

Based on Richards' definition and Ellis'(2003) point of view, the narrow definitions of pedagogic tasks indicate that most tasks include and involve language and the focus is on 'eliciting language use', and meaning is the most important part of tasks.

Analogous efforts have been made by the proponents of TBLT to define and authenticate the nature and function of tasks in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Prabhu (1987) was one of the first advocates of TBLT. He put task-based approach into practice in Bangalore in India. He believed that in task-based syllabus, learning is facilitated since students pay more attention to meaning and task, not the language itself. In other words, the promoters of TBLT believe that the engagement of learners in classroom in 'real language use' is an essential and crucial factor in teaching a language (Willis & Willis, 2007; Prabhu, 1987).

(2) Task-based activities and interaction

As Nunan (1991) asserts, emphasizing interaction and communication in the target language is the main characteristic of a task-based approach. He believes that the focus of TBLT is on meaning and it engages learners in "comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language" (as cited in Oura, 2001, p. 71). The use of language is the principal way of promoting language and it is the main reason for applying more communicative tasks (Long, 1989; Prabhu, 1987, as cited in Brandl, 2007).

In fact, it seems that the primary goal of L2 learners is to be able to interact easily with the target language speakers. Actually, the significant part of interaction is that it presents and makes receiving feedbacks available "from the listener to the interlocutor in order to classify meaning, social understanding, or advanced conversation" (Vandergift, 1997, p. 494). Contrary to the traditional and conventional activities which are designed based on a pedagogical point of view and mostly overlook authenticity and real life situations (Izadpanah, 2010), a task-based approach, by providing classroom experiences that are similar to the demands of authentic language use, copes with the real and on-line communication more directly (Newton, 2001). Indeed, task-based activities via facilitating using language in meaningful contexts can have profound influence on promoting learning process.

B. Self-efficacy

(1) Self-efficacy Beliefs

According to the social learning theorist, Bandura (1997), self-efficacy, defined as "beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required managing prospective situations", influences human functioning (p. 2, as cited in Pajares, 1997). Pajares (1997) believes that what people believe about their capabilities is the best predictor of how they can be rather than their 'actual capability of accomplishments'. Meanwhile, Graham (2011) asserts that there is a significant link between individuals' self-efficacy beliefs in task success and how persistent they are in following their choices. This perception has a great role in increasing individuals' 'motivation and resilience' (Irizarry, 2002). Hence, it seems that self-efficacy beliefs contribute to individuals' capabilities: if they think or believe that they are not able to reach their desired goals, this sense of inefficiency can cause at least the lack of effort.

(2) Sources of self-efficacy

According to Bandura (1977, 1997), self-efficacy can be improved through four main sources: enactive mastery expectations, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological and affective states (emotional arousal). Palmer (2006, as cited in Dinther, Dochy & Segers, 2010) and Bandura (1977, 1997) suggested mastery experience as the most influential source since an individual's mastery and success at a task could raise their sense of efficacy. Thus, mastery experience can be considered as a critical and important predictor of self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996; as cited in Inman, 2001).

Vicarious experience, the second source of self-efficacy, is weaker than mastery experience, but efficacy appraisals are improved partly by this source through modeling or observing highly self-efficacious individuals (Bandura 1997). Seeing others performing tasks, activities and their attainments can intrigue observers to generate expectations that can be improved by persistence in effort (Pajares, 1997).

According to Bandura (1977, 1986, 1994, 1997), the third way of creating a sense of self-efficacy is through verbal persuasion (what others say; verbal judgments regarding one's capabilities). When a problem arises, as he emphasizes, those who are persuaded positively of their capabilities in overcoming and mastering their tasks are more likely to keep and continue their efforts than those who remain in their self-doubts.

Bandura comments that emotional arousal, is one of the main sources of self-efficacy in dealing with stressful and threatening circumstances. Therefore, the forth major way of altering efficacy beliefs is to "enhance physical status, reduce stress level and negative emotional proclivities" (Bandura, 1997, p.106).

Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to determine the effect of task-based listening activities on the learners' listening self-efficacy. To achieve the goal of this quasi-experimental study, the following research question was posed:

Q. Does employing task-based listening activities affect Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension self-efficacy beliefs?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research question, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

H0. Employing task-based listening activities does not significantly affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension self-efficacy beliefs.

3. Method

A. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 70 male and female EFL language learners at the intermediate level studying at Kish Air Language Institute in Mashhad, Iran. The results of test of homogeneity reduced the number of the participants to 50. The experimental group included 26 participants (18 females and 8 males) and the control group included 24 ones (24 males). The participants' age varied between 17 and 26 and their level of education ranged

from high school to bachelor degree. Gender impact was not controlled in this study.

B. Instrumentation

The following instruments were utilized in order to gather the data.

(1) Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test (IPOPT). This is a multiple choice evaluation package, developed by Lesly et al (2005), consisting of 70 items: listening (20 items), reading (20 items) and language use (30 items). The subjects' scores were placed according to the proficiency guidelines. Based on guidelines, those who scored between 37 and 49 were categorized as intermediate level learners.

(2) Listening Self-Efficacy Questionnaire. This questionnaire, constructed by Rahimi and Abedini (2009), includes 20 items, assessing listening self-efficacy of the participants. Every item is measured on a five point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. According to Rahimi and Abedini (2009), the reliability of this questionnaire was 0.69. The purpose of employing such a questionnaire was to compare the participants' levels of listening comprehension self-efficacy before and after the treatment.

C. Procedure

To determine the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study, IPOPT (version C) was administered. Based on the results of the test, the researchers reduced the number of participants to 50 (32 males and 18 females). In other words, those scored between 37 and 49 out of 70 were included in the study. The course lasted for 19 sessions, three days per week. All participants received self-efficacy questionnaire before the study began. During 19 sessions (in a time limitation of 20-25 minutes), the experimental group was treated through task-based listening activities, including different kinds of listening tasks such as ordering, filling the gaps, multiple choice, interactive activities, etc. They were allowed to check their answers by listening again to the tape; in contrast, the participants in the control group 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. In the end, students could ask all their questions and problems regarding vocabulary, grammar, etc. After the treatment was over, the listening self-efficacy questionnaire was again administered to the both groups.

4. Results and Discussions

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of task-based listening activities on listening comprehension self-efficacy of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. To fulfill the purpose of the study, descriptive statistics (concentration, dispersion and distribution indexes) and inferential statistics (independent t-test) were applied.

To homogenize the participants, IPOPT was conducted and those whose level of proficiency was at the intermediate level were selected for the study. To test the learners' listening self-efficacy, listening self-efficacy questionnaire was applied before and after the treatment.

To determine the participants' levels of self-efficacy, the results of the questionnaires were

analyzed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the self-efficacy scores in the control and experimental groups at pretest.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the self-efficacy scores for the control and experimental groups at pretest

	Control group	Experimental Group
	Pretest	Pretest
N	24	26
Mean	56.13	57.85
Std. Deviation	7.491	7.703

As Table 1 illustrates, there is no significant difference between the participants' mean scores for self-efficacy in the control and experimental groups at the pretest ($M_{\text{Cont}} = 56.13$; $M_{\text{Exp}} = 57.85$). The results indicate that the participants were rather homogeneous on the part of their listening self-efficacy at the outset of the study.

H0: Employing task-based listening exercises in English classrooms does not affect Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension self-efficacy beliefs.

To compare the listening self-efficacy mean scores of the control and experimental groups at pretest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 2 displays, there is no significant difference between the control and experimental groups regarding their self-efficacy in listening [$t(48) = -.800$, $p = .428 > .05$] at pretest.

Table 2. Results of t-test analysis for comparing the listening self-efficacy mean scores (pretest)

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Cont.	24	56.13	7.491	-.800	48	.428
Exp.	26	57.85	7.703			

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups at the posttest. As the this table indicates, there is a considerable difference between the participants' listening self-efficacy mean scores in the control and experimental groups at the posttest ($M_{\text{Cont}} = 59.79$; $M_{\text{Exp}} = 64.46$).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the self-efficacy scores for the control and experimental groups at posttest

	Control group	Experimental Group
	Posttest	Posttest
N	24	26
Mean	59.79	64.46
Std. Deviation	6.413	7.067

To compare the listening self-efficacy mean scores of the control and experimental groups at posttest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 3 indicates, a significant difference emerged between the control and experimental groups [$t(48) = -2.440$, $p = .018 < .05$] at the posttest. It means that teaching listening via task-based method has significantly ameliorated the learners' listening self-efficacy in the experimental group (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of t-test analysis for comparing the listening self-efficacy mean scores (posttest)

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Cont.	24	59.79	6.413	-2.440	48	.018
Exp.	26	64.46	7.067			

Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is supported, that is, employing task-based listening activities in English classroom has a significant effect on the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' self-efficacy in listening comprehension.

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of task-based listening activities on the improvement of listening self-efficacy among EFL intermediate learners. The results showed that the experimental group, in which task-based activities were applied, benefited significantly from the treatment.

The performance of learners in each group at the post-test was compared through the t-test formula. The comparison between the mean values of the two groups demonstrated a significant change in the improvement of listening self-efficacy.

Therefore, it can be concluded that through using task-based listening activities, the development of learners' listening self-efficacy will be facilitated and this method is preferable to the traditional method of teaching listening which is based on merely asking and

answering questions.

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