Integrating Listening and Speaking Skills to Promote Speech Production and Language Development[1]

Çağrı Tuğrul Mart[2], Ishik University, Erbil, Iraq

Abstract

The practice of integrating listening and speaking in the classroom emanates from a belief that the attainment of proficiency in oral production is associated with listening since learners are plunged into the rich exposure of language input by means of listening tasks. Engaging in meaningful communication puts great demands on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary range. In this regard, listening provides an avenue for coming to good terms with knowledge of language structures, lexical units, phonological awareness and metacognition development. In addition, listening demonstrates overall positive effect on the development of oral production for it allows learners to experience good language models to communicate effectively. The study was designed to explore the influence of listening with a focus on top-down and bottom-up processes on the development of oral production. The present study adopted a quantitative approach and the participants were 45 English as a foreign language (EFL) first-year students. It was found that listening and speaking integrated language activities helped learners arrive at understanding of messages; thus, created the basis for production practice.

Resumen

Integrar la comprensión auditiva y el habla en el aula es una práctica que emana de la creencia de que el logro de la competencia en la producción oral está asociado con la escucha, ya que los alumnos se ven inmersos en una rica exposición de lenguaje a través de tareas de comprensión auditiva. Involucrarse en una comunicación significativa impone grandes exigencias a la precisión gramatical y al rango de vocabulario. En este sentido, escuchar proporciona una vía para lograr el conocimiento de las estructuras del lenguaje, las unidades léxicas, la conciencia fonológica y el desarrollo de la metacognición. Además, la escucha demuestra un efecto positivo general en el desarrollo de la producción oral, ya que permite a los alumnos experimentar buenos modelos de lenguaje para comunicarse de manera efectiva. El presente estudio fue diseñado para explorar la influencia de la comprensión auditiva con un enfoque en los procesos de arriba hacia abajo y de abajo hacia arriba en el desarrollo de la producción oral. Adoptó un enfoque cuantitativo y los participantes fueron 45 estudiantes de primer año de inglés como idioma extranjero (EFL). Se descubrió que integrar actividades de comprensión auditiva y práctica oral ayudó a los alumnos a comprender los mensajes; así, se creó una base para la práctica productiva.

Introduction

With the onset of communicative teaching in the 70s, speaking has become a core component in language proficiency development. Like speaking, listening earned its rightful place in the same era despite being relegated to a secondary position for a long time in the language classroom. Later on, a prominent role has been proposed for listening in language education as it provides learners much of the input for language learning. Hinkel (2006) argues that the Communicative Approach places a high value on integrated instruction; thus, the integration of listening and speaking skills can enhance learning and increase learners' opportunities for production practice. Listening practice provides learners with an opportunity to achieve communicative competence because listening "establishes the good basis for successful communicative exchange" (McLaren et al., 2006, p. 344).

Canale and Swain (1980) state that integrated instruction in communicative context considerably impacts the development of grammatical competence. In addition, they highlight that exposure to communicative interaction with a focus on practicing the skills enables learners to attain fluency and comprehensibility. Mart (2018) makes it clear that language learning involves the successful use of language skills for communication. The creation of meaningful communication places a greater emphasis on the use of language skills in tandem. It should be noted that learners must simultaneously attend to listening and speaking in a conversation; therefore, this raises their proficiency, as the teaching of these two skills cannot be conducted in isolation. Engaging in a communication entails receiving, comprehending, and speaking at the same time. Speaking does not take place if the speaker fails to decode the message delivered by his/her interlocutor. By extension, the development of oral production requires the integration of listening and

1 This is a refereed article. Received: 26 November, 2019. Accepted: 5 February, 2020.
2 cagri.mart@tiu.edu.iq

speaking skills. The goal of this study is to reveal whether listening and speaking integrated language activities help learners with the attainment of proficiency in spoken language.

Literature Review

The development of listening skills has long been neglected in language acquisition as listening was considered as "an ability that would develop without assistance" (Osada, 2004, p.53). Since the role of language input has come into focus in language learning, more attention has been given to listening skills (Vandergrift, 1999). It is now generally recognized that language development without listening leaves little room for speech production. Hubbard, et al. (1983) emphasized the role of listening in speech improvement by stating that "without actually having been taught to listen, a student may be able to express himself orally, but he will never be able to communicate with speakers of English if he is unable to understand what is said to him" (p. 30). The attainment of proficiency in oral production hinges upon four fundamental processes: Conceptualization, Formulation, Articulation, and Self-monitoring (Levelt, 1989). While conceptualization refers to background knowledge, formulation deals with language skills which are considered a requisite to speaking effectively. Articulation draws on pronunciation, whereas self-monitoring focuses on self-repair in speech production. Within this framework, listening is essential for learners to enhance their background knowledge, vocabulary and grammar repertoire, and accurate pronunciation for advanced language learning. Furthermore, the use of bottom-up and top-down processing for promoting listening skills provides additional opportunities for learners to focus on linguistic form.

Listening provides a fruitful venue for learners to experience good language models. The models they are exposed to enable them to "adjust to the speakers' tempo and active vocabulary" (Vandergrift, 1999, p. 169). Through noticing and conscious awareness, learners can monitor their listening, enhance comprehension, retain listening content, and create meaning. This attention to language opens up a less frustrating route to incorporate what they receive from listening into the development of communicative competence. Moreover, language learners become aware of social and cultural aspects of language for effective communication. The use of language in socioculturally appropriate ways is a great motivating force in language learning for meaningful interaction among individuals (Eun & Lim, 2009).

The incorporation of listening and speaking can facilitate metacognition development of learners. Metacognitive knowledge involves thinking about the language learning process; hence, learners can regulate and direct their own learning. Findings indicate that metacognitive awareness can potentially improve learners' listening skills because it helps them become more motivated as well as influences their listening performance (Goh, 2008; Goh & Hu, 2014; Siegel, 2014; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Wang, 2016). Research also has shown further evidence that indicates the effects of metacognitive awareness on the outcome of listening comprehension in communication (Cross, 2011; Cross, 2015; Goh, 2008; Nakatani, 2005; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Zhang & Goh, 2006).

In addition, the integration of listening and speaking can be used for the advancement of listening content. In the pre-listening phase, for instance, learners stand a better chance of improving comprehension when they are asked to discuss the content for the purpose of perceiving the material. According to schema theory, learners construct meaning by activating their prior knowledge and connect the existing knowledge to activate new learning (Mansouri & Mantero, 2019; Nassaji, 2002). Also, the use of listening content in the post-listening stage can serve as a springboard for learners for further language practice and leads to deeper learning.

Listening provides input in second language acquisition for coming to good terms with grammatical structures, lexical units, and phonological awareness. Assigning students to do a speaking activity after listening is a useful way to push them to put their knowledge of the target language in practical situations. Exposing learners to the target language can encourage them to use it more independently. Moreover, immersing them in a realistic setting to allow them to practice speaking boosts their confidence (Mart, 2019). The aim of the present study was to explore the extent to which listening and speaking contribute to the expansion of a learner's language repertoire and its use for communicative purposes. Therefore, the following research questions guided the current study:

1. *To what extent do listening and speaking integrated activities benefit the development of oral skills?*
2. *How does the integration of listening and speaking create an advantage for learners to advance language development?*

The Research Context

The present study investigates the benefits of integrating listening and speaking to promote speech and language development. A total of 45 English as a foreign language (EFL) learners served as participants in the study. All participants were first-year students in an English language teaching (ELT) department at a university in Iraq. They were randomly assigned to three experimental groups and were exposed to different treatment conditions as shown in Table 1. After enrollment, the participants were placed in the intermediate level based on the proficiency test they took, which was designed to give the researcher an approximate indication of their mastery of English. The test included reading, writing, speaking, and listening components to measure language proficiency of the students. The textbooks of the first two years in the English language bachelor's degree program of the university focus on teaching the four language skills; with this in mind, the questions in the test were prepared considering the content of the textbooks.

	Number of participants	Gender	Age range	Average on the proficiency test
Group 1	15	F=9 M=6	19-23	71
Group 2	15	F=8 M=7	19-23	72
Group 3	15	F=8 M=7	19-23	75

The average score is out of 100 points

Table 1: Group Profiles

The participants met three hours a week in their regular listening classes for one month to perform listening and speaking activities. Listening tasks were about campus life and they were selected from internet sources *College Life* (https://www.esl-lab.com/easy/college-life). The researcher thought that life at university would be an interesting topic that appeals to university students; furthermore, the inclusion of lifelike activities can make the learning setting as realistic as possible to encourage the participants to engage in substantive talk. In all these activities, speaking was used in a way to support the learning of language forms encountered by the participants in the listening tasks, thus, enhancing listening comprehension and extending learning. Additionally, it was aimed at optimizing language learning through the incorporation of listening and speaking to enable the participants to use the language for functional proficiency and make them truly able to communicate. In all groups, the researcher focused entirely on asking questions to promote engagement and improve oral production. The questions included setting analysis, theme analysis, character analysis, and real-life examples.

Study Procedures

The treatment of the first group included integrated listening and speaking activities. The learners in this group listened weekly to three tasks which ranged in duration from 10 to 15 minutes. They listened to each task twice and they were directed to take notes while listening. After listening, they had to answer some comprehension questions raised by their instructor. The participants in all groups were given the topic of the listening tasks earlier to help them predict possible words and types of information.

As in the first group, the participants in the second group listened to the same tasks every week but they listened to each task only once. Pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities were employed, and the participants concentrated on deciphering meanings and engaged in the activities that required answering comprehension questions and acting out conversations. Participants received both top-down and bottom-listening tasks. Top-down listening activities relied on participants' background knowledge to discuss the topic for the overall meaning of the listening task. Bottom-up listening activities, on the other hand, involved tasks that focused on particular details. Both strategies were implemented to process and understand the listening tasks. A simple preview of the listening task in the pre-listening stage was used to introduce the students to what they were going to listen to and to engage them with the theme. Short discussions were initiated in this stage to activate their world and personal knowledge. Assigning tasks in the while-listening-stage were employed to create a space for the learners to develop important strategies for language learning. Listening for specific information, listening for gist and summarizing were some of the activities implemented in this stage. And finally, a post-listening stage offered an opportunity for further language practice encouraged them to become engaged in real communication. Extended discussions were used to allow the participants to develop critical comments. After the listening activities, the participants answered the comprehension questions about the tasks.

The learners in the third group were not exposed to any listening, only the topics of the tasks. Unknown words and structures were provided along with explanations. In other words, speaking-focused lessons were created for the third group without listening tasks. The learners just listened to explanations and instructions provided by their instructor and answered the comprehension questions. While listening to the lecturer, they took notes on the content of the tasks and noted their predictions about vocabulary and content to answer the comprehension questions.

All classes were recorded and analyzed immediately after recording. Since this study investigated the quantity and accuracy of the utterances produced by the learners, the quantity of accurate utterances was counted. Multiple reviewers were employed to promote validity. The researcher asked two of his colleagues in the same department to work closely with him to analyze, synthesize and categorize the collected data. Furthermore, member checks were done throughout the study for verification to ensure increased reliability.

Results and Discussion

It is evident that linking listening tasks to speaking tasks improves learners' spoken language proficiency. Peterson (2001) states that "through listening, learners can build an awareness of the interworkings of language systems at various levels and thus establish a base for more fluent productive skills" (p. 87). Although the activities all three groups undertook were designed to engage the participants in meaningful communication with the help of listening, participation in the activities and attainment of oral production differed considerably (see Table 2).

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 3
Group 1	51%	53%	57%	61%
Group 2	72%	75%	79%	84%
Group 3	38%	40%	41%	44%

For all groups, n=15

Table 2: Percentages of Participation in the Activities over Four Weeks

Table 2 shows the participation percentage of the three groups over the study duration. The participation rate was calculated by dividing the number of the participants actively participating in the activities by the number of participants in the group. The data revealed that the learners in Group 2 had the highest participation rate. The Table shows that the participation rate of Group 1 was higher than that of Group 3 in the activities.

	Week 1		Week 2		Week 3		Week 4		Total	
	Total Achievement	Accurate	Total Achievement	Accurate	Total Achievement	Accurate	Total Achievement	Accurate	Total Achievement	Accurate
I	149 /93	.62	152 / 101	.66	158 / 112	.70	164 / 120	.73	623 / 426	.68
II	171 /126	.73	196 / 154	.78	207 / 173	.83	229 / 203	.88	803 / 657	.81
III	107 / 54	.50	111 / 59	.53	117 / 65	.55	123 / 71	.71	458 / 249	.54

Table 3: Number of responses by groups in the activities over 4 weeks

After examining the number of accurate responses in Table 3, it is noteworthy that the highest number of accurate responses in all weeks was produced by the learners in Group 2. The participants in Group 2 produced 803 responses over 4 weeks and 657 of them were accurate. Also, it is worthy of mention that the highest number of responses and the highest accuracy (81 %) was obtained by the participants in Group 2. When the number of accurate responses in Group 1 and Group 3 was examined, it was evident that Group 1 outperformed Group 3. In addition, accuracy for Group 1 was higher than Group 3. A paired sample t-test in Table 4 revealed a statistically significant difference between the number of accurate responses in all weeks in all groups.

		Group 1			Group 2			Group 3		
		t	df	P-value	t	df	P-value	t	df	P-value
Pair 1	Week 1 Week 2	-15.647	14	.002*	-14.584	14	.000*	-12.465	14	.004*
Pair 2	Week 2 Week 3	-19.763	14	.001*	-17.470	14	.000*	-15.682	14	.002*
Pair 3	Week 3 Week 4	-8.638	14	.001*	-7.692	14	.000*	-5.726	14	.001*

Significant at p<.05

Table 4: Comparison of Accurate Responses

The evidence in this study supports the integration of listening and speaking for the development of oral proficiency. The goal of the instruction implemented for Group 2 was to engage the participants in making sense of what they listened to and how they communicated afterward. This idea was based on a view echoed by Rost (2002), who claimed that "listening is an intention to complete a communication process" (p. 40). More particularly, the use of both bottom-up and top-down strategies enabled them to build background knowledge, expand vocabulary range, improve grammatical accuracy, and participate in more conversational exchanges. The role of vocabulary knowledge on listening comprehension has been firmly established in previous studies (Buck, 1994; Mecartty, 2000; Wang & Treffers-Daller, 2017). Based on these results it is possible to conclude that pre-listening activities increased learners' readiness and evoked interest and while-listening activities engaged them in building meaning. Post-listening activities helped them to process and elaborate newly acquired information. It would seem that the pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities facilitated the listening process and allowed them to connect old and new knowledge, stimulated dialogic talk, and gave room to learner voices.

While the primary focus of the first group was on listening comprehension, listening comprehension and acquisition was the main focus of the participants in Group 2. Put differently, top-down processing alone was not a very efficient way to create a basis for production practice. In real life listening, both top-down and bottom-up processes operate simultaneously and a combination of these two processes provides additional opportunities for effective oral production. A conversational exchange was created for Group 2 with the comprehension of the received data and the process of decoding it. With this in mind, it is apparent that listening facilitates understanding of spoken discourse (Richards, 2008). The implementation of top-down and bottom-up processing in listening created a sufficient basis for comprehension in the process of listening. The learners made use of pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities to link top-down and bottom-up processes. These activities employed during listening enabled the learners to analyze the linguistic input and arrive at an understanding of messages. Learners can easily utter their ideas when they extract meaning from messages by connecting it to the stored knowledge in their minds. That participants in the second group were involved in preliminary discussions in the pre-listening stage to make predictions about what they are going to hear, which enabled them to activate their prior knowledge that helped them make sense of the listening text. In doing so, they gained encouragement and confidence that extended their conversation skills. The creation of meaning and application of the newly-required knowledge to practice speaking were some of the important roles the learners in Group 2 undertook in the while-listening stage. In the post-listening activities, discussion was encouraged with the help of creating dialogues based on the listening tasks. It can be asserted that all these activities the participants in the second group experienced provided the favorable conditions for speech production.

It should be noted that noticing has a crucial role in language learning. Schmidt (1990) argued that without noticing features of input, learners fail to learn from the input. Schmidt (1990) further stated that a feature which is noticed in the input by learners will appear in their speech later. Simply put, Schmidt found a strong link between the noticing of input features and their later emergence in oral production. With this in mind, the implemented listening activities served as triggers to attract the participants' attention in the second group to a sufficient degree to new linguistic items in the listening tasks. Simultaneously, they enabled the students to incorporate these new mental representations into their language competence which is needed for oral production. Listening therefore triggers language acquisition and paves the way for noticing the new

aspects of the target language input. This noticing of new features helps learners to use the input to talk, thus maximizing their learning opportunities.

Exposure to communicative interaction with a focus on listening activities resulted in production quality for Group 2 as the learners reaped the benefits of the listening tasks in terms of fluency, accuracy, and linguistic knowledge which let meaningful communication to take place. Empirical support for this idea comes from Krashen (1985) who argues that “speaking is a result of acquisition” (p.2). Listening activities created opportunities for the learners in Group 2 to promote their language use in which they combined content and formulation to increase the number of spoken utterances. An advantage of Group 2 was to learn where conversational routines or fixed expressions used by native speakers occur from listening tasks and use them in appropriate situations in their daily communication.

Language development takes place when learners notice features of input and incorporate them into their language repertoire (Schmidt, 1990). The instructional disadvantage of Groups 1 and 3 was the lack of activities they experienced. The participants in these two groups did not take part in activities which allowed them to notice new linguistic items and experiment in using them to promote their language competence. Exposure to comprehensible input supports the development of verbal language skills. Advocating this idea, Long (1987) brings our attention to the apparent importance of comprehensible input for improving oral skills and asserts that “speaking ability is fine-tuned by exposure to additional comprehensible input” (p. 922). The fact that the learners in these groups were not prepared to verbalize their ideas when they were required to talk for interpretation impeded their oral performance. It is worth emphasizing that, discussing a wide range of topics without listening to model dialogues did not lead to the improvement of speaking skills for the participants in Groups 1 and 3.

Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate the influence of listening and speaking integrated language activities on the development of communicative language use. The communicative approach is based on the principle that language learners develop their oral production through receiving and decoding the messages delivered by their interlocutors. The findings indicate that the integration of listening and speaking skills can lead to a notable development in speech production. Exposure to language input by virtue of listening is an essential ingredient not only for conversation skills but also language development. Needless to say, the findings of the study highlight the significance of integrating listening and speaking with a focus on listening activities enables learners to become cognizant of linguistic features and offer them an avenue to practice language.

Limitations of the Study

A large sample size would be more appropriate to produce more accurate information. The present study was conducted with a limited number of participants. The short duration of the study was another limitation. The researcher had a dual role; instructor and researcher but in order to avoid any personal biases in the study he played a neutral role to reflect the reality as closely as possible. Additionally, the study ensured the anonymity of the participants who took part in and refrained from presenting the findings in a biased way. Aside from the limitation, the findings provide insights for future research as well.

Recommendations for Further Research

Some of the participants in the study were more reflective, thus they were able to perform more adequately in response to listening tasks and articulate their ideas; however, a small number of participants needed opportunities to verbalize their thoughts. For that reason, this study indicates a need for further research in which participants are encouraged to use the target language more efficiently. It would truly be beneficial to see future research with an increased number of participants from wider contexts and longer periods of time to gain better insights into the effectiveness of listening and speaking integrated language activities in oral language development.

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