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THE IMPACT OF TEACHING PHONETIC SYMBOLS ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNER'S LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

Of the factors involved in listening comprehension are believed to have some positive effects on the understanding of the listening texts. The aims of this study were to explore that phonetics instruction increased learners listening or not. Also, the second purpose was to understand that listening of experimental group progressed more than control group from pre-test to the post test. To examine the effect of this technique, 50 EFL learners were assigned into experimental and control groups. To get assurance as to homogeneity of the participants in terms of their English proficiency, the objective placement test was administered to the learners; their scores were at the intermediate level. The pre-test and post tests were taken from them. The participants in the experimental group received phonetic instruction for twelve successive sessions in different listening passages, but the control group didn't receive any treatment during 12 sessions. The data was analyzed by descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), T-test (paired sample statistics), and ANCOVA (testing the mutual effect). The result indicated that teaching phonetics increased learner's ability, and the experimental group progressed more than control group from pre-test to the post test by treatment.

Key Words: Listening, Teaching Pronunciation, Phonetics, Phonetics Instruction

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates two variables in language learning, phonetics teaching as a technique and listening skill of Iranian EFL learners. Although, listening is now well recognized as a critical dimension in language learning. It still remains one of the least understood processes. Listening comprehension attracted little attention in terms of both theory and practice, while the other three skills (reading, writing and speaking) received direct instruction attention, teachers often expect students to develop their listening skill by osmosis and without help (Mendelsohn, 1984; Oxford, 1993). In the osmosis approach, it is believed that if students listen to the target language all day, they will improve their listening comprehension skill through the experience. The fact that listening has been neglected or poorly thought may have stemmed from the belief that it is a passive skill and that merely exposing student's adequate instruction in listening comprehension (Call, 1985).

But now listening is considered as an active skill that needs many strategies and instructions to improve it. One of them is phonetics instruction, which is used in pronouncing words correctly. So, the aim of this research is to mention the effect of phonetics training on listening comprehension.

Statement of the Problem

Listening is now considered as an active skill that involves many processes. Byrnes (1984) characterizes listening comprehension as a "highly complex problem-solving activity" that can be broken down into a set of distinct sub-skill (p.318) as Richards (1985) points out, "current understanding of the nature of listening comprehension draws on research in psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and cognitive science"(p.189) and Lynch (1998) highlighted the fundamental intricacy of the processes involved in listening. So in order to comprehend spoken messages, listener may need to integrate information from a range of sources: phonetic, phonological, prosodic, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. The fact that we achieve all this in real time as the message unfolds makes listening complex, dynamic, and fragile (Celce-Murcia, 1995). Also, Rivers (1966) had enough foresight to say that," speaking doesn't of itself constitute communication unless

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what is being said is comprehended by another person"(p.196), and that "teaching the comprehension of spoken speeches is therefore of primary importance if the communication aims is to be reached"(p.204). Wipf (1984) points out that listening is an invisible mental process, making it difficult to describe. Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures interpret stress and intonation, retain and interpret this within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of the utterance. As pointed out a unique characteristic of listening comprehension is that "it exists in time, rather than space – it is ephemeral in nature" and "the sound system of the second language poses a significant problem"(Lund, 1991).

Therefore, a major difficulty facing almost any foreign language learner is the achievement of acceptable pronunciation which marks his success in mastering the language. Many EFL learners master such aspects of language as syntax, semantics, morphology, and even pragmatics to the point of native-like competence, but fail to master phonology, this is partly because of the physiological constraints that make the pronunciation of a foreign or second language sound different from that of the native language of the speakers and partly due to the lack of the appropriate training in phonology courses. So, phonetics instruction is as way to support EFL learners in achieving native-like pronunciation.

Literature Review

1. Perspectives of Listening Comprehension

Listening is used in language teaching to refer to a complex process that allows us to understand spoken language. Listening, the most widely used language skill, is often used in conjunction with other skills of speaking, reading and writing. Listening is not only a skill area in language performance, but is also a critical means of acquiring a second language. Listening is the channel in which we process language in real time, employing pacing, units of encoding and pausing that are unique to spoken language. Listening in language teaching has undergone several important influences as the result of developments in anthropology, education, linguistics, sociology and even global politics. From the time foreign languages were formally taught until the late nineteenth century, language learning was presented primarily in a written mode, with the role of descriptive grammars, bilingual dictionaries and problem sentences for correct translation occupying the central role. Listening began to assume an important role in language teaching during the late nineteenth century reform movement, when linguistics sought to elaborate a psychological theory of child language acquisition and apply it to the teaching of foreign languages. Resulting from this movement, the spoken language became the definitive source for and means of foreign language learning. Accuracy of perception and clarity of auditory memory became focal language learning skill.

This focus on speech was given a boost in the 1930s and 1940s when anthropologist began to study and describe the world's spoken languages. Influenced by this anthropological movement, Bloomfield declared that "one learns to understand and speak a language primarily by hearing and imitating native speakers (Bloomfield, 1942). In the 1940s American applied linguistics formalized this oral approach into the audio lingual method with an emphasis on intensive oral-aural drills and extensive use of the language laboratory. The underlying assumption of the method was that learners could be trained through intensive, structured and graded input to change their hearing habits. In contrast to this behaviorist approach, there was a growing interest in the United Kingdom in situational approaches, Firth and his contemporaries (see, e.g., Firth, 1957; Chomsky, 1957) believed that the "context of situation" rather than linguistic units themselves determined the meaning of utterances. This implied that meaning is a function of the situational and cultural context in which it occurs, and that language understanding involved an integration of linguistic comprehension and non-linguistic interpretation. Other key background influences are associated with the work of Chomsky and Hymes. A gradual acceptance of Chomsky's innatist views (Chomsky, 1965) led to the notion of the meaning-seeking mind and the concept of a natural approach to language learning. In a natural approach, the learner works from an internal syllabus and requires input data (not necessarily in a graded order) to construct the target language system. In response to Chomsky's notion of language competence, Hymes (1971, 1972, 1979) proposed

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the notion of communicative competence, stating that what is crucial is not so much a better understanding of how language is structured internally, but a better understanding of how language is used.

This sociological approach eventually formalized as the discipline of conversation analysis (CA) - had an eventual influence on language teaching syllabus design. The council of Europe proposed defining a common core of communicative language which all learners would be expected to acquire at the early stages of language learning (Council of Europe 1971), the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement, which had its roots in the threshold syllabus of Van Ek (1973), began to view listening as an integral part of communicative competence.

Listening for meaning became the primary focus and finding relevant input for the learner assumed greater importance. In the late 1960s and early 1970s applied linguists recognized that listening was the primary channel by which the learner gains access to l2 data and that it therefore serves as the trigger for acquisition. Subsequent work in applied linguistics (especially Long, 1985b; Chaudron, 1988; Pica, 1994) has help to define the role of listening input and interaction in second language acquisition. Since 1980, listening has been viewed as a primary vehicle for language learning (Richard, 1985; Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Rost, 1990).

2. The Listening is Active not Passive

Listening, along with reading has been labeled a ″passive″ skill, nothing could be further from the truth. Anderson and Lynch (1988) reject a conceptualization of listening as a passive act, calling it a ″listener-as- tape-recorder″ explanation. They argue that such a perspective fails to account for the interpretations listeners make as they hear the spoken text according to their own purposes for listening and their own store of background knowledge.

2.1. Listening in three modes: Bidirectional, Unidirectional, and Autodirectional

If we consider the roles we play in our listening interactions, we can identify three specific communicative listening modes: bidirectional, unidirectional, autodirectional.

2.1.1. Bidirectional Listening Mode

The obvious mode is two-way or bidirectional communicative listening. Here the reciprocal speech chain of speaker/listener is easily observed (Denes and Pinson, 1963). Two (or more) participants take turns exchanging speaker role and listener role as they engage in face to face or telephone verbal interaction.

2.1.2. Unidirectional Listening Mode

A second mode is one-way or unidirectional communicative listening. Auditory input surrounds us as we move through the day. The input comes from a variety of sources: overheard conversations, public address announcements, recorded messages (including those on telephone answering machines), the media (e.g., radio, television, and films), instructional situation of all kinds, and public performances (e.g., lectures, religious, services, plays, operas, musicals, concerts), as we hear speakers but are unable to interact, we often talk to ourselves in a reactive or self-dialogue manner as we analyze what we hear. We may subvocalize or even vocalize these responses.

2.1.3. Autodirectional Listening Mode

The third communicative listening mode is autodirectional. We can think of this as self- dialogue communication in which we may not be aware of our internal roles as both speaker and listener/reactor in our own thought processes. Sometimes we re-create language internally and ″listen again″ as we retell and relive communicative interludes. Sometimes we simply attend to our own internal language which we produce as we think through alternatives, plan strategies, and make decisions – all by talking to ourselves and listening to ourselves.

2.2. Transactional Listening and Interactional Listening

Brown and Yule (1983a) suggest dividing language functions into two major divisions: language for transactional and language for interactional purposes. They note that transactional language corresponds to Halliday's notion of ideational, while interactional language corresponds to his term interpersonal (Halliday, 1970).

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2.2.1. Transactional Language Function
Transactional language is message oriented and can be viewed as ″business-type″ talk with the focus on content and conveying factual or propositional information. Transactional language is used for giving instructions, explaining, describing, giving directions, ordering, inquiring, requesting, relating, checking, on the correctness of details, and verifying understanding. The premium is on message clarity and precision. Speakers often use confirmation checks to make sure what they are saying is clear; they may even contradict the listener if he or she appears to have misunderstood.

2.2.2. Interactional Language Function
The most important difference between the two types of language use is that interactional language is ″social-type″ talk; it is person oriented more than message oriented. Its objective is the establishment and maintenance of cordial social relationships. Brown and Yule comment that a great deal of casual conversation contains phrases which appear to be intended more as contributions to a conversation than as instances of information giving. Important features of interactional language are those of identifying with the other person's concerns, being nice to the other person, and maintaining and respecting ″face″.

2.3. Bottom-up and top-down Listening Schemata
In accounting for the complex nature of listening to understand spoken language, it is hypothesized that two different modes work together in a cooperative process. One is the externally based bottom-up mode while the other is the internally based top-down mode.

2.3.1. Bottom-up Processing
The bottom-up mode of language processing involves the listener playing close attention to every detail of the language input. Bottom-up refers to that part of the actual comprehension process in which the understanding of the ″heard″ language is worked out proceeding from sounds to works to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings. That is, the meaning of the message is arrived at, bottom to top, and based on the incoming language data.

2.3.2. Top-down Processing
On the other hand, the top-down facet of listening involves the listener's ability to bring prior information to bear on the task of understanding the ″heard″ language. This internal resource includes a bank of prior knowledge and global expectations about language and the world. It is used by the listener to make predictions about what the incoming message is expected to be at any point, and how the pieces fit into the whole. 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″ (pp. 114-115).

2.4. Affect and Attitudes
In developing activities and materials for listening instruction, it is essential to consider the affective domain, which includes attitudes, emotions, and feelings. Here the focus is on (1) The ways attitudinal and emotional information may be conveyed, both linguistically and nonlinguistically, and (2) some of the attitudinal language functions that second language learners need to experience via instructional listening materials. In bidirectional interactive communication, messages are conveyed in at least three ways: linguistic (i.e., the words and their meanings), paralinguistic (i.e., vocally transmitted meaning) and extralinguistic (i.e. the meaning transmitted through various aspects of body language). In unidirectional communication, the visual cues of extralinguistic information may be missing, and the listener must then rely on only the linguistic and paralinguistic information.

2.4.1. Linguistic Messages
Meanings begin in people. But sometimes meanings don't come across clearly, and we hear speakers protest, "but that's not what I meant." In an attempt to convey an intended meaning, speakers choose words and arrange them into sentences or partial sentences, groups of sentences, and larger pieces of monologue or dialogue discourse.

Both the words chosen, and their intrasentential and intersentential arrangements, map affect (i.e., feelings) onto the linguistic information. As speakers do this, they may or may not be conscious of either

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the nature or the strength of the affective coloring; on the other hand, they may use it deliberately, with careful design.

2.4.2. Paralinguistic Messages

The very way the voice is used in speaking transmits meaning. That is, the way words, sentences, and groups of sentences in spoken language are programmed vocally enables them to carry information about how they are to be interpreted. Although the speaker may not be aware of it, the speaker's attitude toward what he or she is saying is transmitted by vocal features. In the important realm of intonation, the work by Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns (1980) and Brown, Currie, and Kenworthy (1980) has explored a variety of aspects of intonational meaning in oral discourse. The vocal elements that map affective information onto the linguistic message are those beyond the neutral patterns of basic stress, rhythm, and intonation. Nuances of meaning can be transmitted by subtle changes in tone quality, rate, rhythm, stress and many other features.

2.4.3. Extralinguistic Messages

Speakers also convey meaning through body language. That is, simultaneous physical messages are being transmitted with the words and vocal information and must be interpreted by the listener. Once again, the speaker may or may not be fully aware of this aspect of his or her communication. Elements involved include body postures, body movements, body and hand gestures, facial expressions, facial gestures, eye contact, and use of space by the communicators. It is important to help students learn the meanings of specific features of body language in the second language; they also need to recognize that body language differs greatly between languages and between cultures.

2.5. Intellectual, Emotional, and moral Attitudes

An important part of communication is the expression and comprehension of attitudes. Van Ek (1976) lists six basic language functions, including three which are attitudinal: intellectual, emotional, and moral attitudes.

2.5.1. Intellectual Attitudes

These include expression and comprehension of agreement / disagreement; confirming / denying; accepting / declining; forgetting / remembering; possibility / impossibility; capability / incapability; uncertainty; obligation, permission; and more (pp.45-47).

2.5.2. Emotional Attitudes

Included in this area are expressing pleasure / displeasure; interest / lack of interest; surprise; hope; fear; worry; satisfaction / dissatisfaction; disappointment; preference; gratitude; sympathy; intention; wants and desires; and more (pp.47-48).

2.5.3. Moral Attitudes

Moral attitudes are expressed in the language of apologizing; expressing approval / disapproval; appreciation; indifference; regret; and more (p.48) (for additional information see Munby 1978; Wilkins 1976).

2.6. Developing Listening Comprehension Activities

This section focuses on instructional considerations, while keeping in mind the following three important points about listening as a language act.

2.6.1. Information Processing

Listening comprehension is an act of information processing in which the listener is involved in bidirectional communication, or unidirectional communication, and / or autodirectional communication.

2.6.2. Linguistic Functions

Broadly speaking, real world spoken communication can be viewed as serving two linguistic functions: interactional and transactional.

2.6.3. Dimensions of Cognitive Processing

The cognitive processing of spoken language appears to involve simultaneous activation of both top-down and bottom-up engagement in order for listener to construct what they believe to be the intended meaning of the spoken message.

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3. Why is listening difficult?

Brown (2006) suggests that, listeners must hear words (bottom-up processing), hold them in their short term memory to link them to each other, and then interpret what has been heard before hearing a new input. Meanwhile, they need to use their background knowledge (top-down processing) to make sense of the input: derive meaning concerning prior knowledge and schemata. Also, the difficulty of listening may stem from phonological differentiation deficiency (Brown, 1985; Rixon, 1986; Ur, 1984). If listeners cannot differentiate between sounds, they may not be able to convert meaning. Another reason why listening is a difficult skill to acquire may be related to various features of spoken language like the use of intonation, tone of voice, rhythm, etc (Brown, 1995; Gilbert, 1987; Rixon, 1986). Most of the time, the questions are uttered in incomplete sentences; for instance, ″coming″. When listener is not aware of intonation patterns, the conversation may result in failure. In a study by Graham (2006), the findings indicate that the learners perceive listening as one of the skills that they are least successful at. The participants believe that their failure stems from the problems of perception mostly, especially about speed of delivery of texts. Also, they determine difficulties stemming from missing or mis-hearing vital words as another factor affecting their failure. In addition, focusing on individual words and missing the following information is reported as another reason for failure. Further, the participant's list problems related to identifying words due to accent, which is interpreted by the researcher as the lack of exposure to authentic listening texts or pronunciation instruction, as another factor affecting their failure. The findings of Goh's (2000) study indicate that the primary difficulty faced by the learners is quickly forgetting the input which may arise from the high speed of the input.

4. Importance of Listening in ELT

First method followed in ELT was Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which was first introduced in the nineteenth century but has preserved its place (to some extend) until today in most language classrooms. The main goal of language learning in GTM environment was to understand the literary works in order to develop intellectually. As the name suggests, in GTM the classes focused on abstract grammatical rules together with the translation of sentences; mostly literary ones. Listening did not have even slight recognition within these classes following GTM (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

In the mid-nineteenth century, scholars (e.g., Francois Gouin (1831-1896), Claude Marcel (1793-1896), and Thomas Prendergast (1806-1886)) became uncomfortable with GTM and started to criticize the method (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Following these critiques, ELT world experienced a reform movement. The reformists (e.g., Paul Passy, Henry Sweet, and Wilhem Vietor) believed that no explicit grammar instruction should be provided and translation should be avoided (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Pronunciation and phonetics were to be given credit. The advocates of the movement considered the best way to follow in language learning and teaching was as to emphasize the spoken language. Before any written input, hearing the language was primary. Therefore listening emerged as an inevitable outcome of this movement.

What reformists suggested as the best way of second or foreign language learning was as the ″natural″ development of first language acquisition. This belief turned out to be called what is known as the Direct Method. The widely acceptance of Direct Method was not difficult after the works of reformists. The classes were conducted in ″oral-based″ approach in the target language. Speech and listening were taught while grammar was presented inductively. Listening was one of the most important skills focused in this method since it provided ″natural″ input for orally conducted language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

After these two basic methods in the early period of ELT, many different methods have been followed. The ″methods era″ was experienced; designer methods such as Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response were developed, critiques of any methods appreciated and various debates were hold as to whether follow any method in class or not (e.g., Brown, 2001; Carter and Nunan, 2002; Larsen-

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Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Within all these transitions in history of ELT, teaching listening waxed and waned. Today, everyone acknowledges the importance of listening within classes.

5. Importance of Teaching Pronunciation

The ability to hear words correctly and what is even more difficult, to say them correctly accounts for our communicative competence. In order to say what we want to say and to be understood by other speakers we need the knowledge and use of the speech sounds of the language. This is generally known as pronunciation. The terms pronunciation and phonetics are often used interchangeably. Phonology is also a study of sounds but it mostly analyses their function in communication. Though the pronunciation of English like that of any other foreign language is a difficult skill to master, it is of vital importance for language users. The fact however that is it is often neglected in school syllabi. Both teachers and learners seem to notice no benefit to it, all the more because there is simply no time for such things and overcrowded classes make the situation even less favorable.

The teaching of pronunciation has experienced various methodological changes. Apparently, some methods put it at the forefront of instruction while for other the teaching of the skill was of little importance or even completely irrelevant. Finally, we have come to the current tendency of communicative language teaching, which places a high value on skills like oral production and speech perception. This section deals with the reasons for which learners of the target language require the knowledge of phonetics. As Brown (1992) says, 'Language is a system by which people can communicate with each other. Very often this communication takes the form of the speaker transferring information, ideas and attitudes to the listener, although it has other social function's. Formerly however, a foreign language was usually encountered in literature, magazines and correspondence. On most occasions it took the written form. Direct Verbal contacts with other speakers were a rare phenomenon. Only considerable developments in the fields of transport and communication made these contacts possible. As a result the need for communicative competence has gained crucial importance in the teaching of foreign languages. This however, depends on the learner's needs and goals. If one limits the use of language to studying literature or trade correspondence the knowledge of the sound system is of little importance. In case of verbal contacts, it is essential to be able to imitate foreign speech and understand it in the living word.

Kenworthy (1987) suggests the following questions which we may ask our students when considering the place of pronunciation in the language curriculum in order to stress the importance of 'good pronunciation'.

 Imagine you are speaking in your language to a foreigner. The person does not know your language very well and it is difficult to understand him or her. What do you do?

 What do you say when a foreign speaker apologizes for his poor accent?

 How do you feel when a foreigner pronounces your name wrong?

 How do you feel when you meet a foreigner who speaks your language with a very good accent?

The fact is that while making errors in a foreign language pronunciation, we not only risk being misunderstood but even making a bad impression by simply disrespecting their native language. Furthermore, deviant pronunciation affects both oral communication and other areas such as listening comprehension, spelling, grammar and reading.

In the view of Celce-Maurica's (1996) concept there is a close link between pronunciation and listening comprehension since the ability to perceive and produce speech requires the knowledge of sounds, intonation, stress pattern and how speech is organized. The author lists four processes that are crucial for decoding speech by native speakers:

 Discerning intonation units

 Recognizing stressed elements

 Interpreting unstressed elements

 Determining the full forms underlying reduced speech.

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A similar view is presented by Wong (1994) ″As listeners expect spoken English to follow certain patterns of rhythm and intonation; speakers need to employ these patterns to communicate effectively″ (117). As suggested by Celce-Mauricia, 'Lack of internalized knowledge about English stress and intonation, English vowels, and English consonants can all contribute to an inability to perceive, interpret, and evaluate spoken English – not to mention an ability to speak it comprehensibly' (244).

Learning pronunciation helps learners to find correspondences between sounds and their spelling, especially in case of English, which lacks the correspondence between sounds and symbols. Kenworthy (1987) discusses the spelling system with regards to readers and writers. She points out the common non-native speaker's problem of pronouncing an unknown word in the written text. What the readers must do is decode the written patterns and the lack of awareness of the sound-spelling correspondence makes for the obstacle in predicting the pronunciation of a given word. Writers are faced with a completely different situation as they often have to write a word they have never seen before. In this case the sound-spelling correspondence will help to arrive at the correct spelling of a word when given its pronunciation. Celce-Mauricia (1996) adds that learners whose native language is closer to English in terms of orthography find it easier to comprehend English spelling. In cases when the first language shows clear sound-spelling correspondence difficulties may appear.

The way we articulate sounds is also closely interrelated with grammar and the lack of the knowledge may affect the proficiency of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Ur (1996) and Celce-Mauricia (1996) give examples of the articulation of sounds, which is influenced by sounds that are next to them. One of the examples is the pronunciation of the regular past tense ending; the ed suffix. Though the inflection seems to be very simple, it causes quite serious problems. The realizations are as follows: it appears as /Id/ if the final segment is an alveolar consonant; otherwise it appears as /d/ if the final segment is voiced and as /t/ if it isn't. Learners not being aware of these realizations may confuse present and past tense utterances not only in speech but in listening and writing as well. There is a similar situation with plurals formed by addition of s or es suffixes. Thus it is useful to be aware of the way sounds and grammars interact.

Kenworthy (1987) enhances the importance of pronunciation teaching in terms of intelligibility. She indicates that foreign speakers need to be intelligible, so that they can communicate. The author defines the term as something 'close enough' to native-like pronunciation. In practical terms, 'If a foreign speaker substitutes one sound or feature of pronunciation for another, and the result is that the listener hears a different word or phrase from the one the speaker was aiming to say, we say that the foreigner's speech is unintelligible'(13). A similar view is presented by Harmer (1991) who states that they need to be able to say what they want to say. This means that their pronunciation should be at least adequate for the purpose (21). This in a row involves the sounds of language, stress, rhythm and intonation. Wahba (1998) highlights learner's need to understand the functions of these components. The first requires special attention as many problems related to pronunciation can be attributed to the differences between the sounds of their native language and English. However, this does not de-emphasize the importance of other components in phonetics teaching. Thus, 'work on pronunciation, whether in the form of feedback or in the form of explicit lessons, can help to further other instructional goals in the language curriculum' (Pennington, 222). Work on pronunciation of individual sounds can help students to distinguish individual words from the passage in listening comprehension. In conversation it can heighten the intelligibility of individual words. Work on rhythm or intonation will be very useful for a learner in understanding longer utterances and deciding on the most essential information. And since all aspects of language are interrelated, along with speaking fluency, fluency in reading increases as well.

All in all, we do need the knowledge of foreign language sound patterns not only for the sake of our intelligibility but also for the impression we make while communicating with native speakers of the language. Although it depends on individual people's needs and goals, it is essential in the beginning stages of second language development where there is a great need for communicative competence as

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well as in the later stages where the advancement in other skills implies the need for more accuracy in pronunciation.

6. Usefulness of Phonetic Symbols in Language Teaching and Learning

The use of phonetic symbols in foreign language teaching and learning is potentially very advantageous. Provided that the values of phonetic symbols are known and that the foreign language learner can produce and discriminate the sounds symbols stand for, these advantages include, among other things, increased awareness of L2 sound features, "visualization" of such intangible entities as sounds, increased learner autonomy when checking pronunciation in dictionaries, etc. (see Mompean 2005 for a full account of the potential advantages of phonetic notation).

Despite the convenience of phonetic notation in foreign language teaching and learning, any potential benefit depends crucially on how the notation is taught and learned. Good teaching practices may increase learner's motivation to use phonetic symbols. In contrast, a negative learning experience may cause phonetic notation to be perceived as something unattractive and even irrelevant to learning the foreign language. It is therefore essential to analyze the issue of how best to take advantage of phonetic symbols in the foreign language classroom.

The knowledge of the phonetic symbols and letter-sound combinations should also support the growth of student's English vocabulary.

Achieving good pronunciation and reducing the interference of the student's native language can be a lengthy task but it is worth the effort as a way to improve the quality of EFL teaching and learning and to solve a long existing pronunciation problem that requires urgent attention.

Research Question

1. Does phonetics instruction affect Iranian EFL learner's listening comprehension ability?

And the following hypotheses are drawn:

RH1: phonetic instruction doesn't affect Iranian EFL learner's listening comprehension ability.

RH2: the experimental group of the study doesn't show progress from the pre-test to the post-test of the study.

RH3: the control group of the study doesn't show progress from the pre-test to the post- test of the study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Participants

The participants were 50 female learners of English from Shokuh Enghelab Institute in Babol, which is located in north part of Iran. These students were all studying English as a foreign language. Their first language was Persian. They were selected from among students who participated in the objective placement test. Their proficiency level was at the intermediate level based on the results of the placement test. Their ages ranged between 20 to 22 years. They were in two groups; experimental and control. The intermediate level students were useful in this study, because the goal of study was improving learners listening comprehension.

2. Materials

The Objective placement test was used of the TOEFL Test Preparation Kit which contains placement tests designed to help teachers determine the level of their English proficiency. There were 20 listening questions in the proficiency level exam: all questions of the exam were multiple- choice items which are the most widely used typed of items. They are applicable to a wide variety of skills.

In experimental and control group there were 25 students. Their English proficiency was at the intermediate level; their scores were useful for learner's homogeneous level.

In addition to OPT (Oxford Placement Test) which was administered as a test to establish the proficiency level of the two groups of the students, the material or rather the text that was used for phonetics training for both groups was "Sounds English by O'Connor, Fletcher" that is a pronunciation practice book. Pre-test and post-test were the multiple-choice exams which were taken from the Sounds English book.

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There were 20 questions in the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was used to determine the level of listening skill of two groups, and the post-test was used to determine the result of the phonetics instruction and special treatment for experimental group, so post-test was used at the end of teaching period that lasted for 12 weeks that regarding the effect of a phonetics teaching in listening comprehension.

3. Procedures

The students took a pre-test exam. There were two groups in this study, experimental and control, the groups listened to CD of the book "Sounds English", the lessons of the book were divided into two parts. Experimental group before listening to the CD, were taught by the teacher, the teacher in the first part of the book distinguished and explained the difference between the words and then asked the students to listen to the CD, and the students in the second part of the book listened again to the CD and write the words they hear. So the experimental group received special treatment.

The control group in the first part of the book just listens to the CD and the teacher didn't teach any difference between words, and the teacher in the second part of the book asked again the student to listen to the CD and write the words they hear. So this group didn't receive any treatment.

3.1. Experimental Group

Part 1: the teacher explained the difference between e.g., /see, she/ /sell, shell/ /said, shed/; so the teacher distinguished difference between /s/ and /sh/ , then the students listened to the CD.

Part 2: the teacher asked again the students to listen to the CD and write the words they hear.

3.2. Control Group

Part 1: the teacher asked the student just listen to the CD.

Part 2: the teacher asked again the students to listen to the CD and write the words they hear.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the research data for studying the hypotheses is based on descriptive statistics (mean & standard deviation), inferential statistics of t-test, and univariate covariance analyses (ANCOVA).
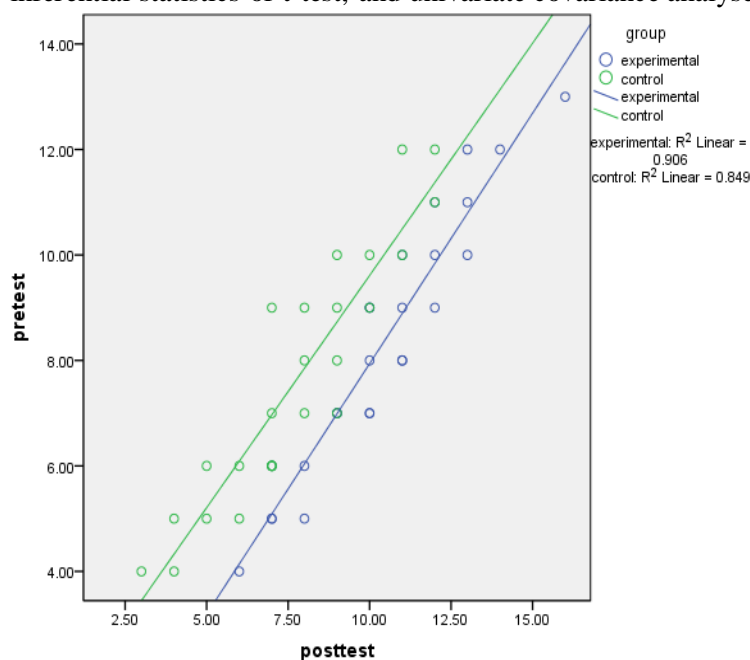

Figure 1: The amount of listening comprehension skill by phonetic training in experimental and control group

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Therefore, its hypotheses are considered before conducting the covariance analysis (ANCOVA):

☐ To check the linear relationship (straight line) between pretest and posttest variables by considering the scatter plot between each pair of variables.

☐ Homogeneity of variance

☐ Homogeneous of lines (linear regression)

We consider the following diagram to checking the linear relationship between dependent variables (post-test) and random variables (pre-test).

As it is observing in the diagram there is linear relationship between random variable (pre-test) and dependent variable (post-test) of the listening comprehension skill because the regression lines are identical, so the relationship between two variables in two groups is similar.

Table 1: the level of correlation between dependent variables

	Pretest	Posttest
Listening skill	.000	.882**

Correlation coefficient between random variable (pre-test) and dependent variable (post- test) of the listening comprehension skill.

$p*<./05$ and $p**<./01$

The result of correlation shows that there is significant correlation between random variable (pretest) of the listening skill and dependent variable (posttest) of the listening skill; therefore, using of ANCOVA is possible.

Table 2: Summary of the result of paired t-test for comparing the difference between pre-test and post-test means in experimental and control group (N=50)

	group		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Dm	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
experimental	Pair 1	posttest	10.4000	2.44949	.48990	2.08000	13.695	.000
		pretest	8.3200	2.44472	.48894			
Control	Pair 2	posttest	7.7600	2.48797	.49759	2.08000	13.695	.000
		pretest	7.6400	2.37837	.47567			

The numbers of table 2 shows that there is significant difference between experimental mean in dependent variable (post-test), in other hand because the control group didn't receive any treatment, there is no significant difference between pretest and posttest in the control group, but the experimental group received treatment, so there is significant difference between pretest and posttest. The data of table 1, is related to hypothesis about the homogeneous of lines (linear regression), this table is examined before the analysis of covariance to estimate the mutual effect between random variable (pretest) and variable of the group (phonetic teaching) in anticipating the dependent variable (posttest).

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Table 3: Summary of information of covariance of listening skill in experimental and control group for mutual effect test

Source of change	sum of squares	Mean square	df	F	sig.
Group (a)	4.310	4.310	1	5.508	0.23
Pretest (b)	256.438	256.438	1	327.323	.000
Mutual effect a*b	.007	.007	1	.009	.925
Error	35.994	.782	46		
Total	379.680		49		

In the above table, the mutual effect between pretest and group is not significant, so data support the hypothesis about homogeneous of lines, and covariance analysis is merely for testing the effects of major variable of posttest and group, it means that whether the social means in two group (experimental and control group) are equal or not. The result of this analysis and t-test in experimental and control group is presented in table 2 and 3.

Table 4: Mean and modified mean of the dependent variable

Modified mean		posttest			
SE	M	SD	M	source	variable
.176	10.074[a]	2.44949	10.4000	experimental	Listening skill
.176	8.086[a]	2.48797	7.7600	control	

In this table it is considered the modified mean of the dependent variable of listening skill. In other words the effect of random variable is eliminated statistically, so the mean of experimental group is in higher place than control group.

Table 5: Summary the result of covariance analysis of listening skill in experimental and control group with eliminating mutual effect

Eta	p	F	Mean Square	Sum of Squares	df	source	variable
.573	.000	63.196	48.407	48.407	1	Contrast	Listening skill
			.766	36.001	47	Error	

It is noticing in the above table the ratio of F in two groups is significant statistically and there is significant difference between two groups (experimental and control) in listening skill, so can say that the first hypothesis "phonetic instruction on listening skill is effective".
. ($F (1, 47) = 63/196$, p=. /…, Eta=. /573)
The diagram 4.2 is shown for clarifying the above points (the concerned information of this part). If put two level of experimental and control group in horizontal axis and dependent variable (posttest) of listening comprehension in vertical axis, the lines of means will show the following figure.
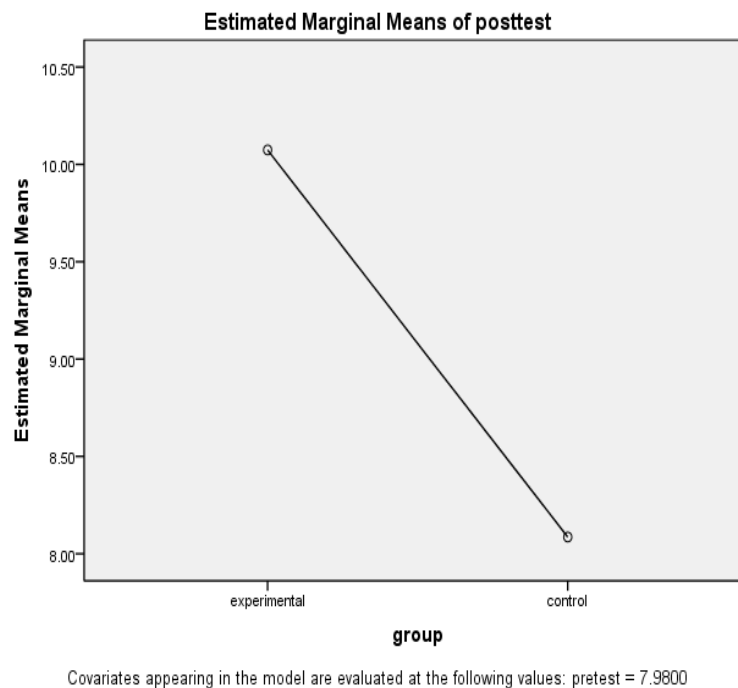
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Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: pretest = 7.9800

Figure 2: Means of posttest in experimental and control

This diagram shows clearly that there is fundamental difference between the amount of listening skill in experimental and control group, so the experimental group that received phonetic teaching they progressed more than the control group.

Implication

As discussed above, both the experimental and the control groups demonstrated statistically significant development at the end of the 12-week period. When the development that both groups achieved was compared, the experimental group's development was found to be higher than the control group's a difference which was statistically significant. This finding is parallel to the literature on teaching listening which suggests that the integration of phonetics training into the teaching of listening is more effective in developing listening comprehension skills than solely employing traditional methods such as using technology or adapting listening strategies (e.g., Brown, 1977; Çekiç, 2007; Gilbert, 1995; Morley, 1991; Nunan and Miller, 1995; Rixon, 1986). According to Morley (1991:488), "Intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communication competence". For this reason, teachers should incorporate pronunciation into their courses and expect students to do well in them. Teachers should pay attention to reassessing learner needs and learner's goals, instructional objectives, and learning / teaching methodologies, (Celce- Murcia and Goodwin, 1991). Gilbert (1984) states that the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciation are interdependent: "If they cannot hear English well, they are cut off from the language. If they cannot be understood easily; they are cut off from conversation with native speakers." Nooteboom (1983) also has suggested that speech production is affected by speech perception; the hearer has become an important factor in communication discourse. This shows the need to integrate pronunciation with communicative activities; to give the student situations to develop their pronunciation by listening and speaking.

Learning pronunciation helps learners to find correspondences between sounds and their spelling, especially in case of English, which lacks the correspondence between sounds and symbols**.** Kenworthy (1987) discusses the spelling system with regards to readers and writers. She points out the common non-native speaker's problem of pronouncing an unknown word in the written text. What the readers must do

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is decode the written patterns and the lack of awareness of the sound-spelling correspondence makes for the obstacle in predicting the pronunciation of a given word. Writers are faced with a completely different situation as they often have to write a word they have never seen before. In this case the sound-spelling correspondence will help to arrive at the correct spelling of a word when given its pronunciation. Celce-Mauricia (1996) adds that learners whose native language is closer to English in terms of orthography find it easier to comprehend English spelling. In cases when the first language shows clear sound-spelling correspondence difficulties may appear. The way we articulate sounds is also closely interrelated with grammar and the lack of the knowledge may affect the proficiency of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Kenworthy (1987) enhances the importance of pronunciation teaching in terms of intelligibility. She indicates that foreign speakers need to be intelligible, so that they can communicate. The author defines the term as something 'close enough' to native-like pronunciation. In practical terms, 'If a foreign speaker substitutes one sound or feature of pronunciation for another, and the result is that the listener hears a different word or phrase from the one the speaker was aiming to say, we say that the foreigner's speech is unintelligible' .A similar view is presented by Harmer (1991) who states that 'They need to be able to say what they want to say. This means that their pronunciation should be at least adequate for the purpose' (Chomsky, 1957). This in a row involves the sounds of language, stress, rhythm and intonation. Essam Hanna Wahba (1998) highlights learner's need to understand the functions of these components. The first requires special attention as many problems related to pronunciation can be attributed to the differences between the sounds of their native language and English. However, this does not de-emphasise the importance of other components in phonetics teaching. Thus, 'work on pronunciation, whether in the form of feedback or in the form of explicit lessons, can help to further other instructional goals in the language curriculum' (Pennington, 222) Work on pronunciation of individual sounds can help students to distinguish individual words from the passage in listening comprehension. In conversation it can heighten the intelligibility of individual words. In light of the findings of the study, it can be concluded that this study confirms the relationship between listening and pronunciation. In order to develop listening skills, it is important to adapt listening strategies, additionally, utilizing technology and opportunities for authentic input are strongly recommended. Integrating different language skills are encouraged in order to promote unity and meaningful instruction. Particularly, making learners familiar with the pronunciation of the target language by showing how real speech in an authentic environment occurs is what the literature suggests. This study draws closer to prove this suggestion by indicating that although regular classes aid the development of listening skills, phonetics training helps more. All in all, we do need the knowledge of foreign language sound patterns not only for the sake of our intelligibility but also for the impression we make while communicating with native speakers of the language. Although it depends on individual people's needs and goals, it is essential in the beginning stages of second language development where there is a great need for communicative competence as well as in the later stages where the advancement in other skills implies the need for more accuracy in pronunciation. The results presented in this paper show that phonetic training does have some significant short-term effects on the learner's pronunciation, i.e. in the form of improved discrimination of English vowel contrasts and more English-like production of oral stops in word-initial position. One possible explanation for mixed results, the fact that training effects were not so obvious in other cases, is that learners probably need to be exposed to longer training sessions to enhance their identification of oral stops –which probably is less susceptible to change and their production of English vowel contrasts (on the basis of spectral difference). On the other hand, the type of assessment may have influenced the findings. Since learners showed improvement in some cases, we think that the implementation of the methodology previously described within the FL classroom would probably raise learner's awareness of some tools and tips available to improve pronunciation and, therefore, help them attain a more accurate L2 pronunciation. Today it is by all means necessary to include a powerful training component within the FL classroom, based on L1-L2 similarities/differences, and including high quality and quantity of L2 input, which encourages learners to

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use the FL as much as possible, since it has been widely documented L2 pronunciation is not simply picked up by beginning to study the FL from a very early age onwards. However, for an appropriate application of training methods, further research is needed to investigate the extent to which phonetic training may affect L2 learner's lower-level articulatory and perceptual dimensions of speech production as well as representations of phonetic categories.

So, phonetic teaching is effective in developing listening comprehension skills of EFL students. Even though both groups have made progress in their listening skills at the end of the research period, the experimental group's development is statistically much higher than the control group which indicates the aforementioned finding: the effect of phonetic training on listening comprehension skills.

This finding is in accordance with the literature which highlights the relationship between pronunciation and listening.

Although there were limitations to the study, this research might provide practitioners with a new approach in English language teaching. The neglect of pronunciation in classes and the pursuit of ways to develop listening skills are well known facts in this field. Therefore, this study may call and if catch the attention of practitioners, it can assist language learners to overcome the problems they face regarding this particular skill while learning the target language.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations 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, so the training lasted only twelve weeks.

Although some development has been observed in both groups, a 12-week period is not enough for a language skill to develop, especially for listening, which is one of the most difficult skills.

Another limitation was that the classes participants were studying in this article were not determined by the researcher right before the research; they were already set by the institution at the beginning of the first semester. Therefore, individual differences among the classes were not controlled by the researcher, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Also, the present study was conducted only with Intermediate level students; it may not be possible to generalize the findings since the results might change with different proficiency levels.

Suggestions for Further Research

As discussed above in the limitations of the study, a 12 week period is not enough for a language skill to develop. Therefore, for future research studies, the period can be extended and the training can be applied for a longer time period.

In addition, the present study was conducted with only intermediate level participants, for further studies a wider scope of samples can be employed and different proficiency levels might be examined. Similarly, the sample size can also be expanded, there were 50 participants in the present study, in order to reach more generalizable findings a larger sample size can be assigned.

This research investigated the phonetics teaching for two groups female, for future study male group can be assigned to show the effect of phonetics teaching in four groups that is different in gender.

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