

Developing Listening Skills through Input, Interaction and Output: Iranian EFL learners in Focus

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Abstract

The focus of the present study was to examine the extent to which input, interaction and output would influence Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skills. To this end, 80 students at the intermediate level of language proficiency, determined via the Oxford Placement Test, and within an age range between 17 and 23 years old were selected through convenience sampling method. They were then randomly divided into three experimental and one control groups with 20 in each. The experimental groups practiced their listening skills under three different conditions, namely, input, output, and interaction while the control group was simply taught using traditional techniques. After the instructional period, the participants' listening skills were measured via a posttest. The results indicated that all three variables of input, interaction and output influenced Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill and interaction turned out to have the most significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill. Findings have implications for learners and teachers as well as materials developers.

Keywords: input, output, interaction, EFL learners, listening skill

INTRODUCTION

According to Steinberg (2007), listening skills can be defined as "the ability of one individual perceiving another via sense, (specifically aural) organs, assigning a meaning to the message and comprehending it" (p. 8). However, listening is more complicated than merely hearing. "This process consists of four stages: sensing and attending, understanding and interpreting, remembering, and responding. The stages occur in sequence but we are generally unaware of them" (Steinberg, 2007). Thus, it is possible to affirm that listening is a complicated skill that needs to be enhanced from various aspects to have a successful performance in the practice of EFL, which indicates a student's engagement into this process.

On the other hand, the listening ability has a significant role in enhancing foreign language competence. Nunan (1998) believed that listening is the main skill in language learning. Without the listening ability, students will never learn to communicate effectively. In fact, over 50% of the time that learners spend functioning in a foreign language should be devoted to listening (Nunan, 1998). That is the reason why different authors have studied the enhancement of listening abilities in EFL learners. Some of them have focused their attention on learning strategies and listening abilities (Barani, 2011). Some others have centered their research on inquiring the factors influencing listening abilities (Seferolu & Uzakgöre, 2004). Although there is extensive research into the factors affecting listening skills, little is known about how these factors actually affect listening skills and the communicative competence in EFL learners. Thus, this study aimed at analyzing how providing input, interaction and output could be useful in developing listening comprehension in language classes. Specifically, the following questions were addressed.

- 1) To what extent do input, interaction and output influence Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill?
- 2) From the three variables of input, interaction and output, which one has the most significant impact on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Input

In language learning, input is the language information which the learner is presented with. It is usually recognized that for second language acquisition to happen there must be two essentials: L2 input accessible to the learners and an arrangement of inner component to represent how L2 information is handled (Ellis, 1985). Regarding input, there are in general three perspectives: behaviorist, mentalist and interactionist perspectives, each holding an alternate accentuation in clarifying SLA. A behaviorist view regards language learning as naturally decided, controlled from outside by the jolts learners are presented to and the support they get. Conversely, mentalist hypotheses underline the significance of the learner's 'black box'. They keep up that learners' brains are particularly prepared to learn language and all that is required is insignificant presentation to enter so as to trigger obtaining (Ellis, 1997). Interactionist speculations recognize the significance of both input and internal language preparing, underlining the joint commitment of semantic condition and the learners' internal component in connection exercises (Zhang, 2009).

Interaction

The essential meaning of the term association is "interpersonal activity that arises during face-to-face communication" (Ellis, 1999, p. 3). In this way, learners ought to collaborate with each other in the classroom while they are accepting input or creating output. A notable theory concerning communication is Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis

expressing that understandable information that is adjusted through collaboration advances language acquisition.

The discoveries of observational reviews on communication overwhelmingly affirm the advantages of collaboration to second language advancement. These reviews concentrate on particular parts of communication, for example, adequacy of arrangement (De la Fuente, 2002; Hashemi & Kassaian 2011) and interactional input (Mackey & Oliver, 2002). Then again, Ellis (1995) contends that the evident advantages of acquisition within the interactional altered input group are because of the quicker rate of obtaining for the pre-modified input group. Loschky (1994) additionally observed that his three groups (pre-modified, interactional modified and unmodified input with no collaboration) did not fundamentally vary in learning vocabulary or syntactic structures. Likewise, Ellis and He (1999) thought about three groups (in particular, pre-modified input, interactional modified input, and modified output group) and the outcomes uncovered no contrast between the understanding scores of the pre-modified group and those of the interactional modified input group. Or maybe, the modified output group outflanked the other two groups. Ellis and He, notwithstanding, presumed that all the three conditions created sensible levels of cognizance and acquisition.

Given the above, there are some blended outcomes with respect to the sort of association and its connection to SLA. In particular, the part of interactive output tasks in the advancement of language information appears to require more experimental proof (Soleimani & Mahmoudabadi, 2014).

Output

Output refers to a language which is produced by a student. Swain (1995), as the most influential figure for Output Hypothesis, has noted that to learn a second language, comprehensible output plays a significant role. In early 1985, she expressed that providing only input is not enough for students; therefore, they are "obliged" to produce comprehensible output to learn the target language. She maintained that the best way to examine the extent of one's knowledge (linguistic or otherwise) is to encourage them to utilize it in some productive way. These productive activities could be clarifying a concept to someone (i.e. teaching) or writing a program, or in the case of language learning, getting even a simple thought across, and in doing so, he might modify a previous utterance or he might attempt out a form that he had not applied before. Referring to her previous article in 1985, output was traditionally considered as a way of producing what had previously been learned and the opinion that output could be part of the learning mechanism itself was not seriously contemplated (Gass & Selinker, 2001). After that in 1995, she suggested that by output learners might move from the semantic, open-ended, non-deterministic, strategic processing prevalent in understanding to the complete grammatical processing required for accurate production. Therefore, it can be claimed that output has an important role in the enhancement of syntax and morphology.

According to Gass and Selinker (2001), four functions of output in learning the target language can be classified based on Swain's opinion. They test hypotheses about the

structures and meanings of the target language, receive crucial reaction for the verification of these hypotheses, make a shift from more meaning-based processing of the target language to a more syntactic mode and increasing fluency and automaticity in interlanguage production (Zhang, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The broad aim of the present research was to examine the effects of input, interaction and output on listening performances of Iranian EFL learners. Participants of the study were 80 students at the intermediate level of language proficiency from 17 to 23 years old. They were selected based on the convenience sampling method. The participants were divided into two groups, experimental and control. In the first group, the relationship between providing input, interaction and output, on the one hand, and learners' listening comprehension, on the other hand, were examined. In the second group, the learners were taught based on all other normal listening classes. All participants studied at the same language institute, representing Persian as their first language. Upon recruitment, participants were given a general description of the study.

Instruments and Materials

The main instruments and materials of the present research were as follow:

1) Oxford Placement Test (OPT): It was used to determine the language proficiency level of the participants. The English Proficiency Test consisted of 60 multiple choice vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension items. The test was selected to assess the participant's level of proficiency in English.

2) Listening comprehension test: A teacher-made listening comprehension test was used to test the participants' listening comprehension before and after the treatment. It included 30 multiple-choice and blank items appropriate for learners at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The test was subjected to piloting and calculating the Cronbach alpha index of reliability. In addition to this, expert opinion was sought for the content and face validity of the test.

3) The main teaching materials of the research included some lessons of *American English File 2*.

Procedure

After administering the proficiency test, the researcher selected 80 students at the intermediate level of language proficiency by considering one standard deviation above and below the mean. Those who scored 50 or higher were considered as advanced; those whose scores were 40 or lower were in the low group, and the students whose scores were between 50 and 60 were put in the mid group. Then, 80 learners at the intermediate level of language proficiency were divided into one control and three experimental groups randomly with 20 in each.

First, the researcher gave a listening comprehension test as the pretest. After that, the treatment was introduced. The instructional period took ten sessions. The control group was taught based on the traditional method of listening instruction (teacher just played the recorder and students listened to recording, then they had to answer the questions) and for each experimental group, one of the three relevant teaching conditions, namely input, interaction and output were provided in order to examine their effectiveness on learners' listening comprehension.

Learners in the first experimental group were exposed to a wide variety of listening activities. They were exposed to listening materials on different topics. Their comprehension was then checked. Learners in the second experimental group had interactions with their fellow classmates. After listening, learners in small groups discussed the topic and content of what they had listened to as they shared their ideas. Finally, the participants in the third experimental group were obliged to produce comprehensible output. In fact, to examine the extent of learners' knowledge (linguistic or otherwise), the students listened to recording and answered the teachers' questions in oral and written productive way. In addition to this, the learners wrote some reports on the topic.

RESULTS

Effects of input, output and interaction on listening skills

To examine the extent to which input, interaction and output influence Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill, the listening scores of pre and posttests of participants in each group were compared by applying paired sample *t*-tests. As for the Input group, the mean score of the pretest was found to be 24.35 (SD=3.20) while for the posttest it was 25.7 (SD=3.14). In order to find out whether the difference was statistically significant, a paired sample *t*-test was run. Table 1 indicates the results of the test.

Table 1. Learners' performances in the input group

	Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Input - posttest	-1.350	1.182	.264	-1.903	-.797	-5.107	19	.000

As Table 1 indicates, the significant level is smaller than .05 ($t(19) = -5.107, p = .000$), so it can be concluded that the listening improvement measurement in the first experimental group, who received input, has shown a significant increase.

Regarding the Interaction group, again the mean scores obtained for the pretest ($M=25$, $SD= 2.57$) and posttest ($M=27.65$, $SD=1.49$) turned out to be different. The paired sample t -test was run again.

Table 2. Learners' performances in the interaction group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Interaction-posttest	-2.650	2.254	.504	-3.705	-1.595	-5.257	19	.000

As Table 2 shows, the significant level is smaller than .05 ($t(19) = -5.257$, $p = .000$), so it can be concluded that the listening improvement measurement in the second experimental group, who had interaction, has shown a significant increase.

Finally, for the third experimental group, namely, the Output group, the mean score for the pretest and the posttest were 24 ($SD=2.79$) and 25.70 ($SD= 2.63$), respectively. Table 3 demonstrates the results of the paired sample t -test, run to check the statistical significance of the difference.

Table 3. Learners' performances in the output group

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
output - posttest	-1.700	2.250	.503	-2.753	-.647	-3.379	19	.003

As shown in Table 3, the significant level is smaller than .05 ($t(19) = -3.379$, $p = .003$), hence there was a significant increase in their listening skills.

Most significant impact

The second research question was concerned with which variable (input, interaction or output) had the most significant impact on the participants' listening skill. To answer this question, first the posttest scores of the participants in the three experimental groups were compared. To do so, the ANOVA test was run, whose results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparing performances of the three experimental groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	53.433	2	26.717	4.357	.017
Within Groups	349.550	57	6.132		
Total	402.983	59			

As Table 4 illustrates, the significant level is smaller than 0.05 ($t(2) = 4.357, p = .017$), so it can be concluded that the listening improvement measurements in the three experimental groups, namely input, interaction and output, showed significant differences. Then, the Tukey HSD test was used to locate the source of variation. Table 7 presents the results.

Table 5. Results of Tukey test to locate the source of variation

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Input	Interaction	-2.050*	.783	.030	-3.93	-.17
	output	-.100	.783	.991	-1.98	1.78
Interaction	Input	2.050*	.783	.030	.17	3.93
	output	1.950*	.783	.041	.07	3.83
Output	Input	.100	.783	.991	-1.78	1.98
	Interaction	-1.950*	.783	.041	-3.83	-.07

According to Table 5, the cases which are marked with this sign *, the mean difference was significant at their $p < .05$ level. As can be seen, the Interaction group outperformed the other two.

It is worth mentioning that while the control group showed significant improvement on the posttest, the results did not reveal such improvement when compared with those of the three treatment groups, namely, input, output and interaction groups.

DISCUSSION

In this part, results are discussed and compared to the results of the previous studies. The results of the first research question indicated that providing input influenced Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension achievement.

The results of the present research are in line with the Sivertzen's (2013) study. He examined the influences of discontinued systematic extra English (EE) input in a Norwegian 4th grade group compared to a group of age peers who had not received such extra English input (normal English – NE). 44 monolingual Norwegian children with a mean age of 9.8 in two socioeconomically similar schools were tested applying the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-4). The results of the present study showed that the mean raw score in 4th grade was higher for the EE exposure group (102.00) than for the NE exposure group (93.42). However, the factorial ANOVA indicated that this difference was not statistically important.

The results of the first research question also indicated that learners who had interaction indicated a significant development in their listening comprehension test.

In contrast to the previous studies, one of the earliest researches to find out the issue of conversational interaction and second language production and development was run by

Sato (1988). She found out the connection between interaction and SLA in a longitudinal research in a naturalistic environment. She focused on past-time reference, examining the early stages of ESL acquisition by two Vietnamese brothers. She explored no connection between naturalistic interaction and the grammatical encoding of past-time reference. She reported, however, that the past-time reference was largely recoverable from situational knowledge and discourse context. Thus, on the basis of these detailed case studies, Sato's conclusion was that interaction might be selectively facilitative of linguistic enhancement.

The results of the first research question also indicated that the learners who produced output indicated an achievement in their listening comprehension test.

In contrast to the previous studies, Swain and Lapkin (2001) engaged immersion learners in two output tasks i.e. a jigsaw task and a dictogloss task. They asked their learners to reconstruct a content which was the same for the two output tasks. The results showed that dictogloss learners were more accurate than jigsaw learners. In addition, dictogloss learners attended to discourse structure but jigsaw learners did not focus on logical and temporal sequencing. Furthermore, dictogloss learners produced more complicated linguistic structures and vocabulary.

The results of the present study are in line with the Colina and Mayo's (2007) study. They investigated the effectiveness of three types of output tasks: a text reconstruction task, a jigsaw task and a dictogloss task. The study indicated the efficiency of all these output tasks in the language learning process. However, findings of the study showed that output task type controls the nature of attention.

The results of the second research question indicated that interaction had the most significant impact, from the three variables of input, interaction and output, on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill.

As the results of this study revealed, comprehensible input, interaction and output all created changes in listening comprehension of participants. Determining which one was more rigorous, influential, and significant in creating such a change and development in listening comprehension was the matter that was considered when evaluating the second hypothesis of the study. However, the created change in listening comprehension of input and output group members was significant, but the learners in the interaction group indicated more achievement on their listening comprehension posttest.

The review of the literature revealed that the number of studies which directly investigated the effect of comprehensible input, interaction and output on the development of listening skills is very limited and fewer than those investigating the impact of these factors on other abilities. The results of the present research are not in line with the studies which confirm a more influential role for comprehensible input and output in developing language skills and a less influential role for interaction in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The focus of the study was to examine the extent to which input, interaction and output influenced Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening skill. As results indicate, all three variables of input, interaction and output can play a significant role. Moreover, from the three conditions, interaction appears to have the most significant effect. In other words, comprehensible input, interaction and output are all influential variables in improving the listening comprehension of L2 learners.

Thus, input, interaction and output play significant roles in the enhancement of listening skills, which implies that learners need to have enough exposure to a wide variety of English both oral and written, a real need to apply English on a daily basis and interaction with more knowledgeable ones. Further, English is not to be treated as a matter to be learned, but as a means of interaction, where the focus is on the meaning first, then on the form of the language (Zhang, 2009).

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