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The effects of previewing questions, repetition of input, and topic preparation on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners

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ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt was made to examine the effects of previewing questions, repetition of input, and topic preparation on listening comprehension of Iranian learners of English. The study was conducted with 104 high school students in 3 experimental and one control groups. The participants in the previewing questions group read the comprehension questions before hearing the text and answering the questions. The topic preparation group took advantage of topic-related texts in Persian followed by previewing questions; then they listened to the texts and answered the questions. The repetition of input group had two hearings with previewing before each hearing that preceded answering the comprehension questions. The control group, however, only had one hearing before answering the questions. The results obtained from data analysis showed that the topic preparation group performed better than the other participating groups. The repetition group, in turn, did better than the previewing group. There was, however, no statistically significant difference between the previewing and repetition groups. Based on the results obtained, it can be argued that providing and/or activating background knowledge and repeating a listening task might facilitate listening comprehension in EFL classroom settings. The findings and pedagogical implications of the study are discussed in detail.

Keywords: listening comprehension; previewing questions; repetition of input; topic preparation

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Introduction

Second language (L2) listening comprehension is argued to be a difficult task. It turns out to be a double trouble when L2 learners are merely exposed to formal instruction in classroom and have little, or in some cases, no exposure to real or active English outside classroom. More recently, L2 researchers have investigated different and under-researched aspects of L2 listening comprehension, in particular the causal relationship between foreign language listening anxiety and listening performance (Zhang, 2013), the interaction between learning style, learning strategies and L2 listening comprehension (Ma & Oxford, in press), a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of captioned video for L2 listening comprehension and vocabulary learning (Perez, Noortgate, & Desmet, 2013), incidental vocabulary learning through L2 listening (Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013), the effect of strategy instruction on enhancing L2 listening comprehension (Lotfi, Maftoon, & Birjandi, in press), and the effect of text characteristics of task input on L2 listening comprehension (Revesz & Brunfaut, 2013).

In performing listening tasks L2 learners might resort to a variety of linguistic knowledge and skills to make sense of the incoming message (Andringa, Olsthoorn, Beuningen, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012; Siegel, 2014). L2 learners have often been facing problems in L2 listening comprehension tasks due to text factors, processing factors, listener factors, task factors, or an amalgamation of some of them (Li & Renandya, 2012). More specifically, text genre and length, complexity of syntactic structure, phonological problems, fast speech rate, unfamiliar accents, limited L2 vocabulary, insufficient memory, lack of necessary background knowledge are among the factors which influence learners' performance in carrying out listening tasks (Jafari & Hashim, 2012; Kobeleva, 2012). As Stæhr (2009) rightly points out, L2 listening comprehension is an inferential process in which L2 learners have to construct meaning through the employment of two linguistic (e.g., phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic) and nonlinguistic (e.g., background knowledge or topic familiarity) knowledge.

There are other factors which are argued to have an effect on listening comprehension. In the face of a new listening task, lack of knowledge about the content and follow-up questions seems to make L2 learners agitated (Chang, 2007). Hence, to help L2 learners improve their listening performance, teachers might employ pre-task activities. Pre-task activities are argued to enhance L2 learning and to make the task more productive and reduce cognitive load of the tasks (Chang, 2007). Some pre-listening activities like pre-teaching key lexical items are assumed to reduce L2 listening problems (Stæhr, 2009; Yanagawa & Green, 2008). L2 learners need to be provided with pre-task activities, namely giving key lexical items of the task in advance, previewing questions, pre-listening to relevant topics, and providing background knowledge rather than going straight to a listening task without any orientation. These pre-task activities might enhance L2 learners' confidence and make them find the task less demanding (Chen, 2005). Similarly, it is claimed that L2 learners, in particular the learners in L2 low level proficiency, need to be provided with some strategies to cope with the demanding task of listening comprehension tasks (Chang & Read, 2013).

Previewing questions are likely to make L2 learners listen to the input purposefully and activate the relevant schemata as well (Buck, 1991). Likewise, repetition of input might allow L2 learners to have more processing time for comprehension and thus compensate for their limited knowledge of L2. Besides, exact repetition is considered as input enhancement which may render the input salient drawing L2 learners' attention to the targeted items (Jensen & Vinther, 2003). In addition, repetition of input is supported by Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis.

Pre-listening activities

Although pre-listening activities are argued to have positive effects on prompting L2 listening comprehension, there is a gap in SLA research examining their effect on L2 listening comprehension in EFL context and there is no conclusive finding with respect to the effect of different pre-listening activities. Pre-listening activities are assumed to activate learners' existing knowledge of the topic and facilitate making connections between the background and what they encounter in listening task. More specifically, pre-listening activities might ease the burden imposed on language teachers and learners performing listening tasks. Language teachers, in EFL contexts in particular, might introduce pre-task activities to set the stage for learners to engage in the task and perform it successfully. Pre-listening activities might result in lowering learners' anxiety and ambiguity regarding the task.

In the following section the findings of SLA research examining the effect of previewing questions, repetition of input, and topic preparation on prompting listening comprehension are elaborated on.

Previewing questions

SLA researchers (e.g., Buck, 1991) assert that previewing questions might channel listeners' attention in the right direction. Having previewed the questions, L2 learners might be able to focus on the aim of the task, recognize clearly what they are supposed to focus on, and pay more attention to the targeted input. It can be argued that previewing questions might trigger L2 learners to listen purposefully to the text. However, some other researchers (e.g., Ur, 1984) claim that previewing questions might distract L2 learners' attention from the real input. The controversies about the effectiveness of previewing questions in performing listening tasks remain to be settled down.

According to Buck (1991), L2 learners understand better and obtain useful clues about the content of listening task when they preview questions. Similarly, Chang and Read (2006) claim that by previewing questions, L2 learners might be able to focus on key words and phrases from the test questions. However, they claim that low-level proficiency learners might not benefit from this support due to the inadequate L2 linguistic knowledge. In the same vein, Sherman (1997) points out that providing previewing questions for L2 learners might lead to reducing the anxiety of L2 learners during task performance. Conversely, Yanagawa and Green (2008) could not provide support for the effect of previewing questions on improving L2 learners' performance in listening tasks. They observed that previewing questions distracted L2 learners' attention in some cases.

Repetition of input

Another listening support is repetition of input which is usually used by language teachers in EFL contexts. Repetition has the potentiality to increase processing time which enhances the clarity between syntactic forms (Chang & Read, 2006). Provided with this type of support, L2 learners might benefit from listening to the input more than twice; furthermore, repeating input is likely to allow L2 learners to check their comprehension.

Chaudron (1983) judges repetition to be more effective than other listening supports, given the simplicity of repetition with least redundancy, in which a listener easily integrates the new information into the memory structure by linking it to the antecedent found in the previous piece of information. He notes that what is syntactically simple for one level of L2 learners might not be so for another.

Krashen (1996) investigated the effect of narrow listening on enhancing L2 learners' performance in listening tasks. The participants listened to a series of related topic texts in which their linguistic knowledge together with their background knowledge were activated. He observed that repeated listening along with topic familiarity in narrow listening increased self-confidence and comprehension. However, Chiang and Dunkel (1992) argue that modification to the input which consists of paraphrasing and repetition benefits the high level proficiency learners.

Cervantes and Gainer (1992) examined the effect of listening to an authentic text, listening to a simplified version of that text, and repetition of the authentic text on enhancing listening comprehension. They found that straight repetition was as effective as the simplified version. In brief, the repetition of input, as an input enhancement technique, makes the targeted input salient, supporting the noticing hypothesis, and might enhance listening comprehension of L2 learners in EFL contexts.

Topic preparation

Providing and/or activating prior or background knowledge is another kind of listening support which has been used alone or along with other supports or strategies in listening tasks. Chang and Read (2006) suggest that topic preparation might have positive effects on L2 learners' listening performance. L2 learners have positive attitudes toward this kind of support as they do not have to wait to discover the topic of the input, and thus they can channel their attention to searching the answers to the questions. Facilitating effects of background knowledge on listening comprehension are not only applicable to familiar topics from their studies and their life experiences but also to the topics they have studied just prior to taking a listening test. Sometimes reading a short passage on a similar topic seems necessary (McDonough & Shaw, 2005).

Buck (2001) states that if the topic of a text is in accordance with the listener's world knowledge, it will therefore be much easier to understand than a text with a topic that the listener knows nothing about. Furthermore, he argues that L2 learners are in demand of background knowledge to compensate for the deficiency resulting from the lack of sufficient linguistic knowledge.

In their study, Chang and Read (2006) provided the topic relevant text in L2 learners' first language and then let the participants read them and then preview the questions before hearing once. The results provided support for the positive effect of topic preparation on fostering listening comprehension.

In conclusion, as Bakhtiarvand and Adinevand (2011) rightly pointed out, taking advantage of background knowledge is of primary importance for prompting listening comprehension. Background knowledge, brought by an L2 learner to the task, interacts with text information to foster comprehension; a text that is consistent with L2 learners' background knowledge might be easier than an unfamiliar text (Burgoyne, Whiteley, & Hutchinson, 2011). As Pulido (2007) asserts "in sum, the construction of a coherent mental representation of a text involves the interaction between explicitly stated textual information and background knowledge" (p. 185).

The Study

Listening comprehension is not considered a passive skill any more. It is judged to be a demanding task posing a great deal of challenge to L2 learners. As Siegel (2014) rightly argued, L2 listening needs yet to be investigated systematically. Building upon the L2 research conducted on L2 listening comprehension to date, the present study set out to examine the differing effects of previewing

questions, repetition of input, and topic preparation on L2 learners' listening comprehension improvement in EFL classroom setting.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The following research question was addressed in the present study:

Would previewing questions prior to listening, repetition of input, and topic preparation have differing degrees of effects on L2 learners' listening comprehension?

Based on the findings of the previous L2 studies (e.g., Buck, 1991; Chang & Read, 2006; Sherman, 1997; Yanagawa & Green, 2008), it is hypothesized that having L2 listeners preview the questions before taking tests would give them content clues to activate their relevant schemata and will urge them to purposefully search for answers to the questions. Regarding repetition, our assumption is that it will enhance L2 learners' performance by giving them more time to process. Topic preparation, in turn, is predicted to have positive effects on the learners' performance as it is likely to provide the background knowledge and activate their relevant schemata. However, there is no conclusive evidence with regard to which kinds of these treatments might be more effective in the context of EFL.

Method

Participants

In total, 104 Iranian learners of English (76 female and 28 male) participated in this study. The age range of the participants was between 14 and 17. They were high school students who had received 4 to 6 years of formal English instruction. Additionally, they had enrolled in English-language classes. Out of 104 students who took the pre-test, two were absent in the posttest. Participants in this study were randomly assigned to four groups, including a previewing question group ($N = 25$), a repetition of input group ($n = 26$), a topic preparation group ($n = 25$), and a control group ($n = 26$). To make sure that all the groups involved were approximately equal in terms of the dependent variable, the listening section of the Preliminary English Tests (PET), was administered to them. The results of the ANOVA run indicated no statistically significant difference ($F = 2.47, p = .066$) across the four participating groups.

Instruments

The listening comprehension test

This test consisted of three listening texts which were selected from different listening sections of PET. The first text was a monologue which was about a tour guide's explanations to the tourists as to their travel to Brampton City. This text had six multiple-choice questions. Another eight multiple-choice items were added to them to come up with 14 items. The second text was also a monologue in which a woman teaching carpentry was explaining some points to some girls in an evening class. This text also had six multiple-choice items to which another seven items of the same type were added to come up with 13 items. The third text also had six questions which were

of correct/ incorrect types. They were turned into multiple-choice items to which another seven multiple-choice items were added to have 13 items. The questions from the three texts reached 40 items.

As these texts on the audio-CD were to be played twice, they were first burned on another CD and then were reduced into playing once, while explanations before and after each hearing were deleted. Multiple-choice format was adopted because the original items were of the same format (except for the third text). The question items relevant to the selected texts were focused both on the main ideas and specific details.

Background information for the test

The topic preparation group needed some pieces of background information. Therefore, for each listening text a very short text was prepared in Persian. The texts of background information were provided in Persian to assure that learners would not experience any problem in understanding them. They were not directly relevant to the listening texts; they only explained some points about the locations of the texts in general.

Modified CD

In the original audio-CD of PET each text was played twice. However, the three groups involved in the current study were supposed to hear the texts just once. Even the repetition group required two hearings with an interval longer than the interval in the original texts. So the texts were burned on the computer and then they were reduced into playing once. Finally, the modified texts were burned on a CD. In this way the texts could be applied for each group according to the relevant treatment condition.

Procedure

Pilot study

Before participants' taking the proficiency test as well as the main test, 24 English-language learners from another institute participated in a pilot study. These participants were divided into four groups whose level of proficiency appeared to be approximately the same as the groups involved in the main study. The pilot test was administered to see how the listeners would feel while taking the main listening test according to the experimental conditions. This pilot study revealed that the participants needed to get familiar with the listening tests' procedure and thus the participants in the main test were given a practice test in the same format a few days before administration of the main test.

Main study

The groups involved in this study received the main test following the proficiency test. On the first day, the repetition group was given the test. While listening they took some notes and answered some items. After the first hearing, they had their second hearing and could change the answers already provided. At the end, they had another five minutes to complete their answers to the questions of Text One. The same procedures were maintained for Text Two and Text Three as well.

The topic preparation group read the relevant topic text in Persian and listened to one of the researchers' explanations of some points which were not directly relevant to the listening texts, but

were assumed to activate background knowledge. This continued for five minutes. Then they previewed the questions for five minutes and listened to the text once. They were given five minutes to complete the answers to the questions of Text One. This procedure was repeated for the other texts.

The previewing question group, however, previewed the questions first, then they had their listening once and were allowed to complete their answers within five minutes. This procedure was also maintained for the other two texts. And, the control group was administered the main test. They took the test without having any support. They only listened to the texts without any question preview or any other support and after hearing they had eight minutes to answer the questions.

Results

All the participants completed three listening texts which had 40 multiple choice items. The scores obtained from the main test were put into SPSS and a one-way ANOVA was run to check the effects of the experimental conditions on listening comprehension. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the listening comprehension scores of the participating groups. As shown in Table 1, the topic preparation group ($M = 20.56$, $SD = 3.72$) performed better than the other participating groups. Moreover, the participants in the repetition of input group ($M = 19.77$, $SD = 4.59$) did better than their counterparts in the previewing questions group ($M = 15.44$, $SD = 2.67$).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Listening Comprehension Test

Groups	N	Mean	SD
Previewing questions	25	15.44	2.67
Topic preparation	25	20.56	3.72
Repetition of input	26	19.77	4.59
Control group	26	14.54	3.48

Table 2 represents the results of one-way ANOVA for the main listening test.

Table 2

ANOVA Results for the Main Listening Comprehension Test

Source	SS	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	701.62	3	233.87	17.13	.000 ***
Within Groups	1337.397	98	13.64		
Total	2039.020	101			

As it is clear in Table 2, the results obtained from the ANOVA indicated that the difference among the four participating groups was statistically significant ($F = 17.13, p < .01$). Furthermore, each text's results were also examined. Three one-way ANOVAs run on the data obtained from Text One, Text Two, and Text Three revealed that there were statistically significant differences among the participating groups in the three texts given to the participants ($F = 8.84, p < .01, F = 4.29, p < .01, F = 15.03, p < .01$, respectively).

To find out the precise location of differences among the participating groups, a post-hoc (Student-Newman-Keuls) analysis was run. Further data analysis revealed that the topic preparation group outperformed the other participating groups. However, the difference between topic preparation and repetition of input was not statistically significant. The previewing questions group also outperformed the control group, though no significant difference was found between the previewing question and the control group.

In sum, outperformance of the topic preparation and repetition of input group was obvious in the main test. Table 3 represents the effects of treatment conditions and compares the differences observed between the participating groups in the main test. The results indicated a significant difference between the repetition of input and other groups.

Table 3

The Effects of the Three Listening Supports

Test \ Group	Control	Topic Preparation	Repetition	Preview	<i>p</i> value
Text 1 (14 scores)	6.58±0.54	9.28±0.57*	7.96±0.45*	6.00±0.39	.000***
Text 2 (13 scores)	4.04±0.34	5.76±0.35*	5.05±0.35	5.20±0.34	.007**
Text 3 (13 scores)	3.92±0.27	5.52±0.38*	6.77±0.34*#	4.24±0.35	.000**
Main test (Total- final) (40 scores)	14.54±0.68	20.56±0.74*	19.77±0.90*	15.44±0.55	.000***

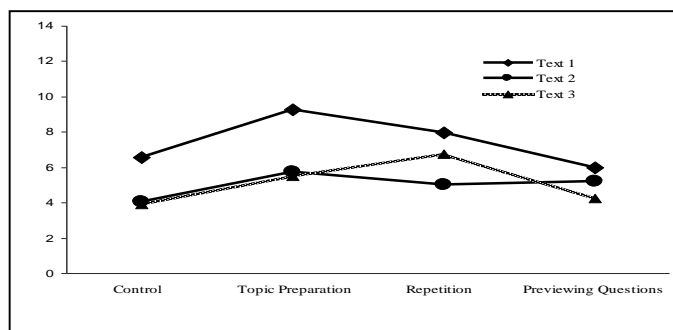
Data are expressed as mean ± SEM.

*Different from the control group

#different from the topic preparation group, $p < .05$

As revealed in Table 3, the repetition of input and topic preparation groups got higher mean scores while the previewing questions and the control group gained lower scores. Figure 1 displays the performance of the four groups involved in Text One, Text Two, and Text Three.

Figure 1. The effects of the four listening treatments in the three listening texts



Discussion

The present study compared the effect of previewing questions, repetition of input, and topic preparation on enhancing listening comprehension of EFL learners in classroom setting. The data analysis revealed that the topic preparation and repetition of input groups outperformed the other participating groups. Our finding, in particular the positive effect of topic preparation on L2 learners' listening comprehension development is in line with Li and Renandya (2012). They investigated the Chinese language teachers' attitudes towards the most effective approaches to teaching listening in EFL context. Their participants judged topic preparation as one of the most effective strategies they employed in listening instruction. Furthermore, this finding is in line with Chang and Read (2006). In their study, topic preparation gained the highest mean scores both in the high level proficiency and the low level proficiency groups.

Topic preparation, as the participants stated in Chang and Read's (2006) study, made them listen purposefully to the texts. If the listeners are equipped with prior knowledge of a text, it would be easier for them to comprehend the text (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992). As Pulido (2004) rightly argued, greater levels of background knowledge contribute to more effective input processing. Activating background knowledge helps L2 learners make connections to their former knowledge and build a mental framework to link the new information and this, in turn, might lead them to achieve better comprehension of the input (Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994).

Like the topic preparation group, the repetition of input group gained higher mean score in the listening test. The results of studies conducted to date investigating the effect of repetition of input on listening comprehension (Cervantes & Gainer, 1992; Chang & Read, 2006; Chaudron, 1983; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Sherman, 1997) lend support to its effectiveness. Buck (2001) states that repeated input can be employed by test designers in case the nature or condition of a listening test necessitates it. Chang and Read (2006) found that high level proficiency listeners in the repetition group outperformed even the high level proficiency learners in the topic preparation treatment. This was consistent with Sherman's (1997) findings which asserted that previewing questions was not as effectiveness as expected. The repetition of input might decrease the anxiety of L2 learners and reduce the affective barrier during performing listening tasks (Chang & Read, 2006).

Buck (1991) stated that previewing questions, in particular supplying information for orienting L2 learners' attention in the right direction, might have some effects on listening comprehension though other L2 researchers such as Ur (1984) argued that it might have reverse effects by distracting their attention. In his study, Buck (1991) found that listeners having previewing questions had useful clues which seemed to guide them through the listening input.

In the present study, the previewing questions group was not able to perform better than the topic preparation and repetition of input groups. The previewing questions groups' high scores in Sherman's (1997) study might be due to the participants having two hearings with a short break in between, whereas the participants in the current study only had listening once which might have resulted in their lower scores. Moreover, previewing questions might lead to enhancing listening task performance when learners have enough L2 knowledge, in particular linguistic knowledge and lexical repertoire to take advantage of this kind of prompt.

In brief, the topic preparation and repetition of input groups outperformed the previewing questions and control groups in listening comprehension tasks. Their high performance might be due to the effects that providing background knowledge and repetition have on L2 learners. As stated above, providing background knowledge helps L2 learners make connections to their former knowledge and build a mental framework to link the new information and this in turn might lead them to achieve better comprehension of the input (Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994). Furthermore, having more prior knowledge about the topic of a text would make it easier for L2 learners to comprehend the text and retain the general points of the information perceived from the text (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992). The repetition of listening task is likely to make learners get ready for dealing the following questions, and the questions in turn are likely to make the following text more comprehensible (Sherman, 1997). Approaching listening tasks this way might result in lowering the cognitive load imposed on L2 learners.

In summary, it was indicated that when prepared in terms of the topic of the listening task, learners can perform better. In light of this finding, L2 teachers may choose to activate learners' schematic knowledge relevant to the topic of the listening task which is to be worked on. In the present study, topic preparation was rendered through materials which were delivered in Persian. Any research to be conducted in the future can examine the role of materials presented in English and also compare their effect with that of materials presented in the mother tongue of learners with respect to learners' listening comprehension.

Input repetition also appeared to play a significant role in listening comprehension of learners who received this treatment. As it seems to be the case, L2 learners benefit from being exposed to listening input more than once. This pedagogical mediation which can be carried out with convenience in classroom setting is suggested to be practiced to bring about *better* listening, so to speak. Studies to be conducted in the future can compare the effect of input repetition for once, twice, and/or more on learners' listening comprehension of pedagogical tasks.

Previewing questions, however, did not appear to influence learners' performance in listening comprehension. Further studies may examine the effect of this activity when associated with some other activities or may choose to explore the effect of different types of questions on listening comprehension.

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