The Impact of Audio Stories (Listening Skills) on Pronunciation of EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study attempted to investigate the effectiveness of the audio-stories (listening) on fostering students' pronunciation. A group of 40 students were randomly selected from Novin institute in Gorgan city, Golestan province, Iran (20 students were in the experimental group and 20 students were in the control group). Experimental and control groups in year 2012-2013 was conducted to test the effectiveness of utilizing audio-stories as strategy to improve the pronunciation. The students of the experimental group received training through the listening to the audio-stories for eight sessions; while the students in the control group didn't receive training. Pronunciation test was the effectiveness of the program in developing the experimental group students' pronunciation proficiency by listening to stories. T-test was used to determine the mean in the pre-test and post-test pronunciation performance of element three level students. The obtained results showed that there is significant difference between the means of the experimental group and the control group. Besides, an improvement was observed in the overall pronunciation proficiency. It has been concluded that the program designed according to audio-stories (listening) seems to be effective in improving students' overall pronunciation proficiency.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Listening skill, Communication, Speaking, Confidence, Audio-Stories.

Introduction

English has same goal for human communication. The language itself has important task as a tool of communication (Brown, 2006). Communication can be in the form of spoken or written. Yuzawa (2007) stated that understanding English pronunciation is a fundamental and vital skill needed for those who want to use English language as means of communication. The mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority for many second or foreign language students. student often measures his/her success in the process of language learning as well as the effectiveness of his/her English course on the foundation of how well he/she feels his/her spoken language skill is developed (Richards, 2008). Anyone who speaks another language will know it can be so hard to create certain sounds that she/he does not use in her/his native language. Many foreign language learners are concerned about speaking and believe that their pronunciation of the sounds of English is an obstacle to communicate with the others. Pronunciation is essential for speaking.

Yates (2001) noted that pronunciation relates to the generation of sounds that we use to form meaning. It includes notice to the specific sounds of a language. Aspects of speech beyond the level of the individual sound, such as intonation, stress, timing rhythm, and how the voice is designed. Pronunciation is a teaching and learning procedure. It is also an unit and integral section of language learning. It is a central significance because it is a section of successful oral production or communicative competence (Hismanoglu, 2006). Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the main skills we need to communicate in any languages. Each skill relates to other skills. Listening can effect on speaking, reading, writing, and grammar. Before the learners can speak they need to be able to listen. Pronunciation and listening comprehension are connected together by an unified system within which individual sounds are regularly related. Pronunciation teaching and language learning strategy may develop students' competence (Varasarain, 2007). Bennett (2007) mentioned the key to develop students' pronunciation is listening, but listening in a context that is both
comprehensible to the learners and relates to their lives beyond the classroom. Learners should be exposed to various voices and through different style of delivery. Using techniques from the audio-lingual method such as listen and repeat will be an efficient way to improve learners’ pronunciation (Brawn, 2010). Hismanoglu (2006) noted that pronunciation teaching is so significant for overcoming oral communication to accomplish since it is a vital part of the communicative competence.

Although the role of pronunciation is so significant in speaking, many teachers do not focus on this important part. The problem of teaching pronunciation is reflected in the works of some researchers. Morley (1991) stated that it is essential to teach English pronunciation in ESL, EFL classroom, nevertheless, this important part of English language is ignored at many English classroom and universities around the world. According to Gilbert (2008), teaching pronunciation includes different challenges. Some teachers consider that they do not have enough time in their classes to focus on this section of language. As many studies concluded that there is little relationship between teaching pronunciation in the classroom and achieving proficiency in pronunciation. According to Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012), pronunciation can be one of the most difficult area of language for EFL learners to master and one of the least favorite subjects for teachers to do in EFL classroom. Despite the fact the achieving pronunciation is so hard in many ESL/EFL classrooms. Teaching pronunciation is less focused. Morley (1991) noted that intelligible pronunciation is a vital section of communication competence. When teachers teach pronunciation in their classroom and expect students to do well in them. Without perfect pronunciation skills the learner’s ability to communicate is so limited. Pourhosein Gilakjani (2012) claimed that pronunciation instruction is an important element in foreign language teaching. Since sounds play a significant role in communication, foreign language teachers must pay attention to teaching pronunciation in their classes. Most foreign language teachers try to teach the necessary grammar, vocabulary, culture, and four skills practice into their classes without noticing integrating pronunciation teaching as well (Hismanoglu, 2011). Gilbert (2008) believes the skills of listening comprehension and pronunciations are linked together. 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 other speakers. Everybody knows that good pronunciation helps our speaking. But do you know that listening such as audio-stories, music, news, movies, etc. also helps our pronunciation? So that, teaching pronunciation is necessary for all English learners. But, English pronunciation is ignored in many classrooms, especially in Iran. It has no position in our country. Iranian teachers should attempt to plan the strategies to improve the learners’ pronunciation.

The teachers should plan some activities that should be interesting and should get students' attention. Especially, in the young students' classroom, these activities are generally included poem, drama, stories, and etc. These interesting activities can be useful ways to learn for young learners (Khameis, 2006), Scarcella and Oxford (1992) argue that interesting and relevant tasks produce motivation and positive attitudes. Interest can be granted through the subject if the task should be imaginative and familiar to the learners. Storytelling in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is often used by teachers to share cultural and personal knowledge. Storytelling has been developed as a useful strategy to teach the English language to non-native speakers. Story is an effective way to comprehend input that facilitates language acquisition (Hendickson,1992). Pedersen (1995) explains that stories can provide an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication for EFL/ESL learners. He also stated that students have chance to develop their oral expression and cultivate creativity through storytelling. Thus, story allows learners to build confidence. It allows teachers to create a learner-centered classroom, the learners are more activity. They share feelings in a comfortable atmosphere through shared folktales and legends. To sum up, using stories in the classroom can result in better language comprehension and higher interest. This technique can promote learning of cultural aspects and develop learners’ motivation. There is little research on this topic. I research on this topic for realizing the effect of the audio-stories on fostering learners’ pronunciation. The purpose of this study was to investigate the status of the teaching of pronunciation in EFL learners by using audio-stories. The purpose of this study was to investigate the following questions:

1. Do audio-stories (listening skills) help improve Iranian students’ pronunciation?
2. Do audio-stories enhance learners’ motivation to learn pronunciation?

**Literature Review**

Language teaching methods have a deep root in the history. For almost two hundred years, one method has replaced another by introducing new approaches. Sometimes the focus was on grammar and translation, and sometimes on oral based skills. Language teaching has been a subject of debate for decades. These debates also relate to new ways of pronunciation teaching as well as teaching of other skills. However, the debates on teaching pronunciation of second language are still continued. The changes in language teaching methodology also effect on pronunciation teaching methods. For example, Hismanoglu (2006) stated that in the grammar translation approach the role of pronunciation was unnecessary. In direct method, pronunciation has played significant role. In the audio-lingual method, the role of pronunciation is so important. This method focus on the traditional notions of pronunciation, minimal pairs, drill, and short conversations (Celce Murcia & Goodwin,1991). With the advent of communicative approach pronunciation has been considered within the frame of natural communication. This approach suggests that oral communication is the elementary use of language and therefore should be central to the style of instruction (Hismanoglu, 2006).
Some researchers agree with listening effects on pronunciation. For example, Morely (1991) stated that a focus on the linkage between listening and pronunciation and a need to develop the nature and the range of pronunciation oriented listening activities. Attention to pronunciation-oriented listening instruction was an important section of tradition pronunciation teaching with a primary focus on sound difference. The students will profit by listening activities both inside and outside the classroom. They will find out listening activities easier to understand the speech of native speakers. At the same time, their progress awareness of English pronunciation may help them in their own output (Burns, 1992). The efficient way of learning pronunciation is to listen carefully and to imitate; some learners understand that listening activities are effective tool to be able to analyze how a sound is made, or to see how it may be distinct from a similar sound in their own language (Yates, 2001). Listening to stories can be effected on other sections of English language. The learners begin to build confidence in their speaking skills as result of the storytelling. In fact, storytelling helps learners to create oral language complication and may be an effective technique to help English language learners (Coskje et al., 2010). Stories may support English language learners to develop their language skills. Listen to stories usually apply spoken narrative and students understand how the sounds are pronounced. They are able to record and listen to it as many times as they wish (Miller, 2009).

Storytelling is a teaching method in the language class to improve communicative teaching. In developing writing skills, not only does storytelling make the writing procedure motivational, educative, challenging, and creative but it also supports students to know their strength and weaknesses, which in turn aids the teacher to give proper helping students to attain their potential as learners of English language (Karlsson, 2012). Stories transfer cultural heritage. They also relate the present time and the past time. Students become aware of dreams, sufferings, joys, and the life of their predecessors when they hear stories. Stories are the bridge that take today's learners to past and describe as a type of historical teaching through tales and an image of the past is opened to the listeners (Daemi & Ali Farnia, 2013). Stories can be so helpful way to illustrate and express complex, multi-dimensional ideas, emotion, and information. Telling stories can transfer the competencies and commitments of oneself to others (Sole & Wilson, 2009). Bouache (2010) stated that stories hold interests alive in the classroom and motivate students, they build a comfortable atmosphere and enjoyment environment. In order to decide whether or not the hypotheses formulated could be rejected, the following steps were taken for the selection of subject, materials and procedures used in the study.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

In this study a total number of 40 students participated in the research project. All of the participants were female. They were in elementary levels. They were at Novin institution in Gorgan, the capital city of Golestan province in the north of Iran. Students' native language was Persian. They were on average 11 years old. The random assignment was possible and the students were equal. The numbers of participants were 40. I determined two groups. Both groups were measured before and after treatment. One group received the treatment. It was experimental group. But, another group did not receive any treatment. It was control group.

**Material**

The present study included a pronunciation test designed and administered by the researcher to measure pronunciation skills among students. This test was used as a pre and post-test. The pretest involved students from two groups listen to story. Then I choose some words from the story that each student to pronounce them. I used digital recorder for recording students' voices. The correct pronunciation was determined for pre-test and post-test. After that I started my treatment to improve the learners' pronunciation. Each session contained of several activities. The subjects in the experimental group were given phonetic instruction along with listening training. I used CD player that students watch the symbols phonetics and to show how to pronounce each of the sounds. Students should bring their dictionary. Then learners listened to the stories for 8 sessions. Eight stories from Steps to understanding were selected. At the end of treatment, post-test was administered. I used this story as kind of instrument in this study for pretest and posttest: Fred was a young soldier in a big camp. During the week they always worked very hard, but it was Saturday, and all the young soldiers were free, so their officer said to them, “you can go in the town this afternoon, but first I’m going to inspect you”. Fred came to the officer, and the officer said to him, “your hair's very long. Go to the barber and then come back to me again.” Fred ran to the barber's shop, but it was closed because it was Saturday. Fred was very sad for a few minutes, but then he smiled and went back to the officer. 'Are my boots clean now, sir?”. He asked.

The officer did not look at Fred's hair. He looked at this boots and said, “yes. They're much better now. You can go out. And next week, first clean your boots, and then come to me!”

**Pretest, posttest:**
- How does this word pronounce?
- E.g.
- How does the soldier pronounce?

This question will be repeated for each word. I would show the flash card for some words, or I would point to other words (Silent way). I did not convey the words.
**Procedure**

In this study, the participants were randomly selected from Novin institute. They were equal. Pre-test was administered to each group after listening on the first day. All participants listened to the story, then the researcher pointed to the selected word by either writing on the board, or showing by flashcards. The participants are asked to pronounce each of the word. At first, both groups (experimental and control groups) took pretest and then only experimental subjects received treatment. After that both groups took posttest. The participants of experimental group received treatment for 8 sessions. After treatment, post-test was conducted to examine the progress that participants had made during sessions.

**Treatment**

The training sessions were held for 8 sessions. Each session was 60 minutes. It took for twice a week. I had two groups that I mentioned above. The participants in experimental group received half an hour of instruction on pronunciation activities, such as phonetic symbols, sound, and spelling exercises. Then the students of experimental group listened to audio stories for the next half an hour. The students were assigned to have a pocket dictionary each session. The phonetic symbols were tough within each session by CD player. I explained each phonetic symbol to the students, after that I brought some example for each of them. I asked them to repeat after me. The students needed to look up certain words that I picked up from the story and checked their pronunciation in their dictionary in the following sessions. After teaching all phonetic symbols, students listened to the audio stories again in order to improve their pronunciation. I asked the students to pronounce each word to realize that they pronounce the words correct. On the other hand, control group was not taught phonetic symbols and listens to audio stories (treatment), because I wanted to see the role of listening audio stories on student's pronunciation. Listening to stories and received the phonetics symbols used as a treatment for experimental group.

**Results**

Based on the result presented in the table, this study claims that certain development has taken place with regard to the experimental group students' pronunciation skills. This was reflected in the difference in the mean score of the whole group in the pre-test and the post-test. SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows was used to calculate descriptive statistics and perform reliability analyses. In order to assign whether the audio-stories significantly affected on the students' pronunciation, T-test was used to investigate the data. Results of the study showed that treatment had a significant effect on students' pronunciation. The data was collected in the light of students' performance in the post and pre test.

The result of a t-test used to compare the differences between the two groups indicates that the mean score of the experimental group 2 (5.95) is significantly higher than the mean score of the control group 5.4000. In the posttest, the students of experimental group improve their pronunciation through listening to audio-stories. It is important to note that there still were areas in which experimental group students improved significantly more than students in the control group. The results showed that audio-stories help students learn a great deal about English pronunciation learn to speak, and feel that people can understand their speech more easily.

| Table 1. One-Sample statistics. |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| N        | Mean | SD | Std. Error Mean |
| Pre-test | 40 | 2.2250 | 1.60907 | 0.25442 |

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| Table 3. One-Sample statistics. |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| N        | Mean | SD | Std. Error Mean |
| Post-test | 40 | 5.4000 | 4.60100 | 0.72748 |
Discussion and Conclusion

With respect to the first question, “Do audio-stories (listening skills) help improve Iranian students’ pronunciation?”. The result of the study proved that using audio-stories as tool was effective in fostering the experimental group students’ pronunciation. There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group on the pronunciation pre-test and post-test in pronunciation proficiency in favor of the post-test scores. The students who engaged in their learning recognize that their pronunciation will be improved after treatment. In fact, the learners did not know the most of the pronunciation of words, by listening to stories they compare what they pronounce the words to what they listened the pronunciation of words. They understand that their pronunciations are wrong. As Burns (1992) stated by practicing listening activities improve student pronunciation inside and outside the classroom. According to Hismanoglu (2006), pronunciation is needed to merge with communicative activities. The students have opportunities to improve their pronunciation through listening and speaking skills. With respect to the second question, “

Do audio-stories enhance learners’ motivation to learn pronunciation?” The learners enjoy from the stories during the treatment. I had an interview with the experimental group, and then the result showed that their motivations are enhanced. Because the stories provide a relax atmosphere for the learners. The output of learning is increased. As Bouache (2010) pointed out by using stories as a technique of teaching the learners feel more relax in their learning environment. It affects on their learning. Also, they comprehend from the culture of the language they are learning. Audio-stories can generate sound, characters, pictures, and even music which exit in the stories. The learners can learn the cultural knowledge of the English language through listening to story. Students can experience events of the cultures through video clips, culture production or personal statements represented by listening to stories (Tsou et al., 2006). The benefits that Pedersen (1995) found in telling ESL children stories are that listening skills are improved, listening to stories produce language input. The importance of story structure in second language comprehension also helps the use of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy.

This paper suggests an effective technique for teaching pronunciation to improve English learners. The study's benefits to knowledge are that teachers will learn from the study about importance of pronunciation and language learning strategies that support students learning. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of using audio-stories as pedagogical tool at university levels. This technique is useful for improving speaking skill. If students’ pronunciations are weak, they cannot speak very perfect. The findings suggest that audio-stories can be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool. This study can change the teachers' view of teaching. In the broader area, there is a change in the Iranian school curriculum in teaching English and the skills of English teachers. While the present study provided support to the effectiveness of this program in developing students' pronunciation proficiency, further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of similar programs in developing students' speaking, reading, writing skills. This research study raised awareness of the importance of pronunciation training in improvement and confidence. Confidence in pronunciation leads to confidence in speaks. It is hoped that the result of this small-scale enquiry will serve as a template for further research into pronunciation training in Iran and encourages the Iranian teachers work on their students' pronunciation to improve their speaking.

The results of the analysis from the post-test administration indicated that the experimental group who received treatment had a better performance than the control group who did not receive it. The knowledge of using the dictionary as a reference to check correctness led them to self directed learning. Students felt their pronunciation had improved. Using audio-stories can help learners improve their pronunciation and speaking skill. Students had more confidence to pronounce the words. This technique can also be useful for teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. In classes where this technique is employed, they help to reduce the stress that accompanies oral production in a foreign language. Probably the greatest benefit to using audio-stories in the classroom is that they are enjoyable. They understand culture of English language by listening to stories. Listening to stories can provide a relax atmosphere for learning. The learners enjoy their lessons. The learners also enhance their listening skill by using this technique. Using audio-stories as tasks might be one way of helping transfer words from stories into use, and maximize the potential of stories as teaching and learning tools. Thus, this gives the teachers more opportunity to use audio-stories in their teaching context. They can encourage them to practice their speaking skill as much as possible in and outside the class.

Table 4. One-Sample test.

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