

Teaching TOEFL Listening through Films and Simplified Listening Passages

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of watching films and listening to simplified passages on the listening skills required for the TOEFL test. Three groups of TOEFL students were taught listening classes through different methods. In one group Hollywood films were watched with subtitles on. In another simplified listening passages from Voice of America were given. The last group continued studying through TOEFL software. All data are analyzed by SPSS/PC program. The randomized pretest and post test control group design was used. This study was carried out in a private language course with 18 university students. Students listening to simplified passages had higher scores on posttest than those in control group and those watching films.

Keywords: listening skills, TOEFL, listening practice

1. Introduction

The listening component of the TOEFL test is overlooked to a large extent in institutions that prepare for the test [1]. Indeed, in TOEFL preparatory courses, much attention is paid to other areas like reading, structure, vocabulary and writing both because these skills are thought 'easier' to be taught in class and because sources of listening input are considered to be more amenable to exploiting outside the classroom. Still, this is strange because in recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the role of abundant comprehensible input (CI), and language classrooms, including those for the TOEFL test, can be excellent settings for providing ample amounts of CI. Leloup and Ponterio [2] recommend that the language learning environment be structured to include CI. Krashen [3] is

one of the proponents to suggest that CI is an important factor in second language acquisition, and that a comprehension-before-production approach can facilitate language acquisition. Besides providing a relatively stress-free environment, processing space and models for later speaking activities for students, Nunan [4] cites Rost who provides three other important reasons for emphasizing listening. According to Ross, spoken language provides a means of interaction for the learner. In addition, authentic spoken language presents a challenge for the learner to attempt to understand language as native speakers actually use it. Moreover, listening exercises provide teachers with the means for drawing learners' attention to new forms (vocabulary, grammar, new interaction patterns) in the language. In order to make use of this untapped source, it is quite necessary for TOEFL teachers to find ways of incorporating a listening component to be covered along any TOEFL preparation curriculum.

All English-medium universities in Turkey accept Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) by the Educational Testing Service students' admission into their programs. Some of these universities administer the institutional TOEFL, which is basically the old paper-based test that measures students listening, reading, and writing skills. The institutional TOEFL test comprises 50 listening questions, 50 reading questions, 40 structure and written expression questions and one essay question. Some other universities prefer the new generation Internet-based TOEFL (IBT) test which includes 36-70 reading questions 34-51 listening questions, 6 speaking tasks, and 2 writing tasks. All the sections other than the reading section have a listening component in them. For example, students are expected to listen to conversations or lectures and answer the prompts in the speaking, or

they have to listen to a lecture and read a related passage to perform the writing task. In other words, listening skill has become ever more important in the TOEFL test.

Students who plan to take the TOEFL test can surely study by themselves, but many get help from professionals, who mostly work for private institutions. The courses private institutions offer generally last 40-140 hours and 5-15 weeks, during which a main TOEFL preparation book is followed and accompanying software is studied. Since the period of the course is seldom enough for the students to acquire a general language proficiency, students are mostly introduced the test format and shown test taking strategies. Reading and vocabulary study become the main focus, and unless they already have good ears, students tend to compensate the lack with other skills. Students are supposed to develop their listening skills outside the classroom because improving students' performance on the listening section of the TOEFL test proves notoriously difficult.

2. Literature Review

There is now general agreement among foreign language instructors that authentic materials, that is, "materials not designed solely for classroom use but rather for native speakers" [5], are an essential part of the second language classroom. Teachers may disagree as to the appropriate level of instruction for introducing such materials into the curriculum, their relative importance in relation to more traditional grammar and vocabulary study, and the amount, nature, and necessity of introductory or preparatory activities, but almost all believe that a foreign language curriculum is inadequate if it does not develop in students the ability to read, understand, and respond to authentic language in all its forms [6].

Learning materials that added a moving visual element to sound could make language more alive and meaningful and could help to bring the real world into the classroom [7, 8]. To enable this films are introduced into the classroom. Studies suggested that visual support can enhance listening comprehension. Rubin [9] found that the listening comprehension of high-beginning Spanish students who watched dramas on video improved significantly over students who received no video support for their listening training. Visual aids, such as graphic organizers, films and videos, and hypermedia technology, help to enhance comprehension. They help to make these materials more accessible to the

lower level ESL student. Film, through its clear, visual depiction of complex, often abstract content area concepts, offers an additional powerful aid to text comprehension, language development, and content learning [10].

On the other hand, there is limited research into the effects of authentic outside listening. Gradman and Hanania [11] concluded that exposure to English speech via radio, television or film appears to have a negative relationship with TOEFL. Long found that listening material that was specifically adapted to non-native speakers was significantly more comprehensible to ESL students than unadapted material prepared for native speakers. Radio, video, and film material may therefore not be an effective source of comprehensible input. A survey given to successful language learners revealed that a broad range of language learning conceptions emerged among the successful students. An emergent theme from the survey was that those students listened to simplified passages from VOA, in which speed rate is decreased considerably [12]. Similar findings are reported by Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown [13].

Rubin [9] cites conflicting evidence from Griffiths, Kelch and Brau about how speech rate affects comprehension for L2 listeners of English. Using a text that assumed little background knowledge, Griffiths found potential evidence that speech faster than 200 w.p.m. is hard for lower-intermediate learners to understand. He found that this level of student performed best at 127 w.p.m. Kelch found significant comprehension effects of slow speech (124 w.p.m.). On the other hand, Blau found that speech ranging from 145 to 185 w.p.m. did not significantly affect comprehension of intermediate and advanced level L2 students.

Text type has been noted as a factor affecting listening comprehension. It is assumed that since most written texts are more syntactically complex, less redundant, denser, and use fewer pauses than spoken texts, they are potentially more difficult to understand. Conversely, because conversational texts are less complex syntactically, more redundant, and have more pauses, they are potentially easier to understand [9]. Shohamy and Ofra [14] considered the relative comprehensibility of three text types: a news broadcast using prewritten, edited monologue, a lecturette consisting of a monologue based on written notes, and a consultative dialogue involving constant interaction. News was the most difficult, followed by the lecturette, with the dialogue being the least difficult type text.

Thus, the use of visual aids as supplied by graphic organizers, film, and hypermedia technology transforms complex content-based material into comprehensible input and leads to a deeper level of information processing and hence greater understanding of the material presented [9]. Imagery, such as that provided by film, might offer a useful visual resource for helping ESL students develop the linguistic skills and broaden the base of knowledge they need to succeed in academic reading and writing tasks. Film imagery may be used to clarify information presented in content-based texts by filling gaps in comprehension that may result from missing or inappropriate information in the schematic knowledge base [15].

As can be seen from the literature about research into the possible ways of developing the listening comprehension, a great body of research suggests the use of authentic listening materials in the language classroom. Film is an excellent source of authentic language input that aids student comprehension by providing visual and contextual support. On the other hand, research also shows that the normal pace of native language can obstruct students' understanding of the listening material because students are unable to decipher the meaning. This leads to the conclusion that simplified listening material can help students develop their overall listening competence. However, there is little research into the use of simplified listening materials or authentic movies in the TOEFL classroom neither in Turkey nor in the world, which induced us to carry out this study. We wanted to compare the effects of watching films and listening to simplified listening passages on students' scores in the TOEFL listening section. The following research question was addressed in this study:

Will there be a significant difference in TOEFL listening skills between students watching authentic films and those listening to simplified listening passages?

3. Participants and Setting

We conducted our study for one month in April and May 2008 in a private language course that followed popular test preparation books in TOEFL classes. There were three TOEFL classes that had all started their four-month preparation course eight hours a week. Two of the groups had been studying for two months and the other for two and a half. One of the first two groups had been studying for the paper-based TOEFL test, while the other for the Internet-based version. All the groups had

finished studying the listening sections in their preparation books, which had been covered in the first month. Each class had six students aged between 17-21 who needed to pass the TOEFL test soon, either to be able start their undergraduate courses or to be admitted to a master's program. Their immediate need to pass the test was an obvious factor that increased students' motivation to study.

4. Design of the study

Of true experimental designs, we used randomized pretest-posttest control group design. We gave a pretest and a posttest to all groups. The pretest and the posttest included the same questions, but the students were not informed that both tests were identical. The questions on the test were actual questions that had been asked on the TOEFL test before, so we did not change the order of the questions but only the place of the answer choices. The test included 30 short-conversation questions. The pretest and the posttest measured the students' achievement in listening comprehension. According to the pretest, there was no significant difference among groups in their listening skills. We randomly assigned these groups as the film group (FG), the Voice of America group (VG) group and the control group (CG).

The control group (CG) followed the listening section in their preparation software, i.e. they worked on the listening section of the TOEFL test on computers. The FG, one of the experimental groups, watched a film with English subtitles on every week and briefly discussed the issues in the film before and after the watching session (for samples). The other experimental group, the VG, listened to special English passages downloaded from the internet, and did the activities we prepared.

One of the researchers taught the FG, the other the VG. A third teacher taught the CG. One of the researchers had full time classes with both experimental groups, i.e. he was the class teacher of both groups. During the four-week period a total of four films were watched in the FG, and 24 simplified listening passages in the VG. The researchers tried to interfere as little as possible with the listening activity to decrease the teacher effect. The students were told not to study listening through other methods and were encouraged to study other skills.

5. Results

The pretest and posttest results of the experimental groups and the control group were compared. Analyses were performed by the SPSS/PC. Kruskal Wallis T test was used to assess the equivalence of the groups before and after the training. Mann Whitney U test was used to determine the source of the difference that emerged in posttest among the groups.

Table 1. Means of pretest and posttest

	Pretest	Posttest	Increase in Percentage
Control Group	17.33	23.16	25.17
Voa Group	17.33	24.66	29.72
Film Group	16.66	22.66	26.47

The means of the pretest and posttest results revealed that the greatest increase occurred in the VOA group: the mean in the pretest (17.33) increased by 29.75% in the posttest. The increase was 25.17 in the control group and 26.47% in the film group.

Table 2. Kruskal Wallis results of the students' pretest listening skills

Pretest	N	Mean rank ¹	Sd	X ²	P
Control Group	6	10.50	2	1.62	0.445
Voa Group	6	10.67			
Film Group	6	7.33			

To determine whether the students had significant differences in their listening skills, Kruskal Wallis test was applied before the study. According to the analysis, there wasn't any significant difference in their listening skill levels (X²= 1.62; p>0.05).

Table 3. Kruskal Wallis results of the students' posttest listening skills

Posttest	N	Mean rank ²	Sd	X ²	P
Control Group	6	6.50	2	6.081	0.048

¹ In cases where dispersion is not normal (n<30), nonparametric tests are used. These tests are a nonparametric alternative to One Way Anova [16].

² Here, mean ranks are found by starting from the highest score. Sum of ranks are found by multiplying them by n [16].

VOA Group	6	13.67			
Film Group	6	8.33			

To determine whether the students have significant differences in their listening skills after the study, Kruskal Wallis test was applied after the study. A significant difference was found among the students who took listening course by different methods (X²= 6.08; p<0.05). Mann Whitney U test was used to determine the origin of the difference between the groups.

Table 4. Mann Whitney test results for film and VOA groups

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of ranks	U	P
Film	6	4.25	25.50	4.500	0.026
VOA	6	8.75	52.50		

According to the Mann Whitney test results, a significant difference was found between the film group and the VOA group. (U= 4.5; p<0.05). As it can be understood from the rankings of the average, the difference took place in favor of VOA group.

Table 5. Mann Whitney U test results for film and control groups

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	p
Film	6	5.75	34.50	13.50	0.454
Control	6	7.25	43.50		

According to Mann Whitney Test results, no significant difference was found between the groups. (U= 13.5; p>0.05).

Table 6. Mann Whitney U test results for VOA group and control group

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
VOA	6	8.42	50.50	6.50	0.060
Control	6	4.58	27.50		

According to Mann Whitney Test results, no significant difference was found between the VOA group and the Control group. (U= 6.5; p>0.05).

6. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to determine whether watching films and listening to simplified listening passages could help students studying the TOEFL test develop their overall listening skills and thus their scores.

We had presupposed that watching films would improve students listening skill more than both simplified listening passages and working for the test. However, the result revealed that the group that watched films did worse than both other groups. The result we found most surprising was the fact that simplified passages had a greater effect on students listening skills. Still, this result confirms previous studies that stress the importance of comprehensible input in that students who listened to simplified passages could understand what they were listening. In other words, the passages provided them with input slightly above their listening levels [3]. The increase in listening scores can be attributed to the fact that Turkish students who study for the TOEFL test lag behind in their listening skills due to an input deprivation during their previous years. Thus, we can assume that simplified listening passages were more suitable for their levels.

An obvious limitation of the study was the few number of students involved in the study. A greater number could have yielded more reliable results. Moreover, it was hard to control what students did outside the classroom with regard to listening. Despite our request for not using other listening methods outside other than the method used in class, some students from all groups told us in private that they could not help doing practice on preparatory listening exercises for the TOEFL test. Also, one of the students in the control group admitted that she listened to VOA passages several times during the study. Therefore, it was difficult to what degree such interferences affected the results of the study. Furthermore, the duration of the study was too short to make a difference. We still hold that longer implementation of films in class could improve students listening skills. Moreover, although we informed the students that films could enhance their scores, some looked unmotivated at the beginning, thinking that we were not studying but having fun. But later they all enjoyed the activity. In general all the students were highly motivated. The screen proved to be a powerful motivator [17].

During the study students had trouble following the films because of the unknown vocabulary. Any further study into the effects of watching films on listening comprehension should consider teaching vocabulary beforehand. Despite the fact that we paused the films to explain the core vocabulary, students wanted to know them all, which led some students to disappointed. Still, two of the students admitted that they encountered some of the words they learned from the films in the reading passages. Therefore, further research into if effective teaching vocabulary through films is feasible. Moreover,

in a discussion about the study, students all said they had a heightened awareness of how to develop their listening skills because they learned how much they could learn from the film. In other words, the study developed the students' potential [18]. Lee [19] says that the next age for language teaching will involve computers. We believe films whether on computers or not are likely to be an integral part of all language teaching programs

The most interesting result was that simplified passages could help upper-intermediate learners of English develop more than the authentic input provided by the films and the preparation software. We already started putting VOA passages in TOEFL students' preparation program. Definitely, more research should be conducted to have more reliable data.

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