THE EFFECTS OF TYPES OF ORAL TEXTS’ GENRES ON THE IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS’ LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the effects of types of oral texts’ genres on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The participants of the study were 65 male and female EFL students which all of them from Issar institute in Nikshahr and Chabahar. In order to have homogeneous groups and real-intermediate level students, the first part of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) containing 40 questions was performed. After the sampling procedure, the pretest was performed and then students were randomly assigned to two groups of control and experimental. The experimental group received a course encompassing the instruction of generic features including news with two genres, political and economic, for twenty sessions of instruction. The subjects in the control group listened to some pieces of news (without any specific generic features, mostly reports with ordinary people about routines). The results showed the experimental group had a better performance on the listening comprehension posttest.

KEY TERMS: GENRES, LISTENING COMPREHENSION, NEWS

Introduction

Numerous studies have measured the effect of different variables on listening comprehension. Among these variables are rate of speech (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988), discourse features, grammar (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Derwing & Munro, 2001), students’ attitudes (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Shearman, 2002; Plakans, 1997), topic familiarity (Gass & Varonis, 1984), and most obviously, genre (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Derwing & Munro, 1997; Derwing, Rossiter, & Munro, 2002). Although genre is generally believed to be one of the main features that have an impact on one’s ability to understand spoken language, very little research has rigorously measured the effects. Several studies support the widespread view that unfamiliar genre cause difficulty in comprehension (Anderson-Hsieh & Koehler, 1988; Bilbow, 1989; Brown, 1968; Ekong, 1982). In contrast, there is a good deal of evidence that familiarity with genre aids comprehension. Bilbow (1989) also found that familiarity with the foreign genre was a factor in comprehension (in addition to the effects of listener familiarity with the speaker himself/herself, familiarity with nonnative speech in general and prior knowledge of a given topic). This suggestion is supported by Wilcox (1978), who concluded that Singaporean learners of English found speakers of their own genre background easiest to understand.
many English as foreign language (EFL) settings, much work on listening comprehension is done through practice of audio and visual resources like films, news reports, documentaries and the like. The nature of a film and its genre might significantly affect the degree of learners’ listening comprehension. Moreover, movies, in general, incorporate setting, body language, and facial expressions (video input) which can enhance comprehension (audio input) as well as activate learners’ prior knowledge of the social and cultural aspects of language. Movies are regarded as a good source of authentic English, full of natural dialogs, idioms, and slang, far from being a kind of drill-and-kill site (Johnson, 2006; Meskill, 1996). As teachers of English as a foreign language, we teach listening skills through songs at times both as a part of our method and due to demands of students to spice up the course content. Medina suggests that “the literature abounds with the positive statements regarding the efficacy of music as a vehicle for first and second language acquisition. It has been reported to help second language learners acquire vocabulary and grammar, improve spelling and develop the linguistic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening” (Medina, 2002, 1). A genre-based approach has been seen as of great practicability and value to language teaching and learning. The present study aims at investigating the effect of types of genres of oral texts on EFL learners’ listening comprehension.

Review of the related literature

Genre Analysis

In the history of linguistics the analysis of language has experienced two dramatic changes. The first change which related to the form of language is register analysis and the second change which is in contrast with formal approach and concentrates on the analysis of language usage is discourse analysis. Because with the area of register analysis, the researchers have limited themselves to quantitative selections of lexical and syntactic characteristics at sentence level, Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) mention its inadequacies and report a new method for language analysis, i.e. ‘genre’. Genre analysis which also improves from perceived weaknesses of earlier discourse research, especially through their lack of a socio-rhetorical aspect defined in terms of the use of language in conventionalized communicative situations. Within the last two decades genre has been regarded in ESP as a tool for improving L1 and L2 instruction by a number of studies such as Swales (1985, 1995, 1990), Hammond (1987), Cheng, A. (2006 and 2008), and Bhatia (1993). In studies of ESL translating development, Hewings and Henderson (1987) and Hyon (1996) mention the effect of genre instruction on students’ comprehension and state that it has positive impact on the comprehending of text structure and translating capability. Holmes (1997) reports the application of genre analysis for teaching and offers that “content material is significant in that it changes the students’ approach to what they read, causing the students to connect new idea to existing schema, i.e. students use ideas in the reading to formal situation” (p.324). Hyons (1996) states that “Genre-based pedagogy, in all its form, includes some sort of classroom consideration of genres and the contexts in which they are found” (p.697). Hammond (1987) found that “genre-based instruction includes classroom interpretation of text of how to initiate and end a text, what to put in the middle and of how to organize information” (p.173). Therefore it seems the nature of the concept of genre, using nowadays in applied linguistics, ESP and rhetoric, is an especial attention on the primacy of communicative purposes and the method in which communicative needs form or influence both surface form and deeper rhetorical structures.
In the analysis of texts, many researchers have paid especial attention to elaborating the formal features of genre, while concentrating less on the specialized functions of texts. A number of scholars, for instance, have utilized structural move analysis to explain global organizational patterns in genre such as experimental research articles (Swales, 1985, 1990), master of science dissertation (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988), business letters (Bhatia, 1993), and university lectures (Tompson, 1993). Other scholars such as Hanania and Akhtar 1985; Swales 1990; Salager-Meyer 1994, have looked at sentence level structural characteristics, such as verb tense, hedges and passive voice, in these text types.

It seems, the main purpose of the scholars in the application of genre, is to help students get familiar with the communicative purposes and linguistic characteristics of texts that they read and translate in their professions. For example, Swales (1990) points to classroom tasks used in his article in order to improve the ability of EFL students in writing of the genre of request letters to academics.

**Genre and Classroom Discourse**

Even though genre studies have done much in uncovering the formal patterns of various academic and professional genres and the ways in which members of particular discourse communities acquire and use genres for various communicative purposes, most of the work has been on specialized varieties of written texts (i.e., school, academic, and professional genres). Although there have been some genre analyses of casual conversations (Eggins & Slade, 1997), service encounters (e.g., Ventola, 1987), conference presentations (e.g., Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Shalom, 1993), and academic lectures (e.g., Thompson, 1994; Young, 1994), comparatively speaking, there are fewer studies of spoken genres in general (Hyland, 2002), and classroom discourse in particular. This, perhaps, is due to the perceived rhetorical messiness of classroom discourse. As Crookes (2003) notes, much of classroom teaching involves improvisation, as L2 classrooms and other classroom contexts are somewhat unpredictable settings. Teachers often have to assess the classroom situation (including student attitudes),”reflect-in-action” (Sehön, 1983), and make on the spot decisions that respond accordingly to the situation at hand.

**Listening Comprehension**

Listening comprehension and the role it plays in language learning was mentioned by many researchers. Vandergift (1999) defined L2 listening competence as a complex, a passive activity, and invisible mental process. In his journal, four advantages of listening comprehension are stated. The first advantage which is related to the nature of learning language was named cognitive advantage. The second one is efficiency by which learners can concentrate on what they produce. Utility or the usefulness of the receptive skill is the third advantage. The last advantage as psychological advantage removes the pressure of oral production. Rost (1994) explained listening as “vital in the language classroom because it provides input for learners. Without understanding input at the right level, any learning simply cannot begin. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking” (cited in Nunan, 1997, 1)

Similarly to Vandergift (1999), Serri, Boroujeni and Hesabi (2012) claimed that listening comprehension is an active process. Learners must use knowledge and effective strategies in order to understand the meaning of language input. Mendelsohn (1994) defines listening comprehension as “the ability to understand the spoken language of native speakers” (19).
The Essence of Listening

According to Al Amri (2008), the teaching of listening comprehension depends on how we appreciate the nature of the listening comprehension process itself. Teaching of listening skills has long been an accepted classroom activity in the classroom and it is required for students to cope with listening input in language classroom (McErlain, 1999).

What Richards (1983, 238) stated about the nature of listening is “the teaching of listening comprehension, or of any language skill, involves considering the objectives we are teaching toward and the micro-skills our procedures cover”.

Method

Participants

The initial population for the study was 90 intermediate EFL students. To get more homogeneity, OPT (Oxford placement test) was administered. 65 students were recognized as being at the intermediate level of proficiency and were randomly assigned to two groups of control and experimental. They were male and female students. They were all from Bazargan institute in Tehran with the age range of 20-22.

Instrumentation

Homogeneity Test

In order to have homogeneous groups and real-intermediate level students, the first part of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) containing 40 questions was performed. The test helped the researcher to make sure if all of the participants were at the intermediate level of proficiency. The test has been developed by Oxford University Press in 2001, after consultation with many teachers to assess the subject's knowledge of the key language as well as their receptive and productive skills.

TOEFL

In the current study, the listening comprehension sections of TOEFL test including 60 questions were selected to measure listening comprehension performance in the form of a pretest and posttest.

Listening materials

For this study American and British news were selected as listening material. The News was selected from NPR (National Public Radio) and BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). Their rate was normal and included politics and economic genres.

Data collection
After the sampling procedure, the pretest was performed and then students were randomly assigned to two groups of control and experimental. The experimental group received a course encompassing the instruction of generic features including news with two genres, political and economic, for eighteen sessions of instruction. The first half of the treatment sessions was allotted to NPR news and the second to BBC news. The participants listened to short news, with a length of 3 minutes. In each session 10 minutes of the class was allotted to asking and answering about the words and expression of the previous listening text. Experimental participants listened to the news chunk by chunk and took notes during listening. In order to check their comprehension during the treatment sessions, the researcher asked students comprehension questions.

The subjects in the control group listened to some pieces of news (without any specific generic features, mostly reports with ordinary people about routines) which were selected and prepared by the researcher prior to the experiment. The control group completed various types of conventional activities including answering some general and detailed questions, recognizing the newly learned vocabulary while listening to the text, and paraphrasing some sentences while listening to the text and dealing with grammatical points in that text. In the end of the treatment, the second proficiency test or the posttest was given to the participants to compare the participants’ performance and to see the effect of generic features of listening texts on their comprehension.

Results

This study aims at answering the following research question:

Do different types of oral text genres have any effects on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners?

In order to answer the research question, first an independent samples t-test was implemented to make sure that there is not any significant difference between the two groups on the pretest. After that the effect size was calculated using the following formula:

\[
\text{Eta squared} = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + (N_1 + N_2 - 2)}
\]

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation and standard error mean for the experimental and control groups on the pretest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29.87</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>30.40</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.77</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: *Independent Samples Test for the pretest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared = \(-.486^2 / -.496^2 + (63)\) = 0.003

The results in tables 1 and 2 are interpreted as follows: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the listening comprehension pretest scores for the experimental and control groups. There was not any significant difference in scores for experimental group (M=30.40, SD=4.39) and control group (M=29.87, SD=4.39; t (63) =-.486, p=.62>0.05]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was very small (eta squared=.003). This confirms that the listening comprehension performance of the two groups before the treatment was at the same level. To evaluate the effect of treatment on the experimental group an independent-sample t-test was conducted. The results are presented in the following two tables.

Table 3: *Mean, standard deviation and standard error mean for the experimental and control groups on the posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30.30</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32.62</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: *Independent-samples test for the posttest*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eta squared = \(-2.256^2 / -2.256^2 + (63)\) = 0.07

The results in Tables 3 and 4 are interpreted as follows: An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the listening comprehension posttest scores for the experimental and control groups. There was a significant difference in scores for experimental group (M=32.62, SD=4.20) and control group (M=30.30, SD=4.09; t (63) =-.486, p=.02<0.05]. The magnitude of the differences in the means was moderate (eta squared=.07). This confirms the research hypothesis and types of oral texts genres have a positive effect on the listening comprehension of Iranian EFL students.
Discussion

Generic features of oral texts which are naturally rooted in social interactions and are considered as recognizable language patterns; propose bases for structuring of syllabuses and materials. A genre-based approach to listening comprehension, as the findings revealed here, is of great practicability and value to second language acquisition or learning a foreign language. The present study that attempted to investigate the effect of generic features of oral texts on EFL learners’ listening comprehension, confirms the significance of teaching genre-based (listening) materials as a powerful tool for striving toward what constitutes the base for communicative competence. Rehearsals which are out of the context of daily-routines or are isolated from authenticity, though helpful, might not suffice the needs of today’s learners.

The examination of the degree to which different genres influence listening comprehension proved to have both theoretical and pedagogical implications. Pedagogically speaking, if listening comprehension is influenced by different genres to which students are probably to be exposed, teachers have a duty to reflect on ways to make them understand a range of different genres. Empirically, such studies add to our understanding of the process of listening comprehension.

The results here are consistent with the results obtained in research studies by Ekong (1982); Anderson-Hsieh and Koehler (1988); Bilbow (1989); Meskill (1996); Derwing and Munro (1997); Derwing, Rossiter, and Munro (2002); Medina (2002); Ishihara and Chi (2004); Matsuzaki-Carreira (2005), Shen (2005), and (Johnson, 2006) who examined the effect of generic features on language skills and overall confirmed that these features can improve various language learning skills. The next chapter concludes the research study and provides some suggestions for future researchers.

Conclusion

As was evident from the results of the TOEFL test, it is concluded that genre teaching or familiarity with different genres can help learners better comprehend the oral texts. However the most salient part of the study, in spite of the confirmation of the prior research studies, occurred during the treatment sessions. The instructor, in each of the sessions from the beginning to the end, did not experience the need to benefit from motivational strategies or instigate learners for better or more concentration on the content. Exploiting informal types of genres including music, movie, etc. in listening classrooms can improve learners’ listening comprehension. The reason, as mentioned above, may lie in the fact that the barriers of learning, known as affective filters, are dropped off; and learners may better be equipped to grasp the sense of the oral texts.

It was also revealed that nearly none of learners needed motivation from the teacher as external motivation. The whole content of the classroom seemed to highly motivate the learners. On the other hand, what makes the present study different from prior research studies is a relatively good coverage of different genres as teaching materials. At first, this diversity was though to hinder the process of listening comprehension; but the results indicated the appropriateness of such diversity.
References


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