

Computer Software and the Improvement of the Elementary EFL Students' Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigated the effect of using computer software on the improvement of elementary EFL students' listening comprehension. Based on a listening pretest, 40 participants out of 64 were randomly selected to form the experimental and control groups of the study. The same instructor taught the listening skill to both groups using computer software for the experimental group and the traditional method for the control group. The two groups were posttested after the instruction. The results of the study indicated that there was a statistically significance difference at $p < 0.05$ between the two groups. Therefore, it was concluded that the use of computer software could improve the students' listening skill.

Keywords: Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), computer software, listening comprehension, elementary level.

In the past twenty years or so, language teachers have been called upon to adopt a whole range of technical devices: teachers who themselves have mastered a foreign language with the aid of nothing more technical than a book, blackboard, and chalk are now expected to be able to use slide projectors, cassette recorders, overhead projectors, language laboratories, video recorders, and now computers (Jones & Fortescue 1987). Advances in technology require teachers and administrators not only to review their curricula, approaches, and educational tools, but also lead them to consider the possibility of incorporating technology into their teaching (Timucin, 2006).

With the development of new technologies, there has been an attendant interest in applying these technologies in education, and in making predictions on how they would affect the educational future of our classrooms and students. Although most people associate the birth of educational technology with the 1970s and 1980s, the history of educational computing actually goes back to the 1940s (Celce-Murcia,

2001). Of course, in the 1940s, the physical technology tied these ideas to microfilm, phonographic recordings, and punch card-style computing machines. In the 1950s and 1960s, the most powerful computers occupied entire rooms, not corners of desktops or small briefcases. However, the development of the microchip and miniaturization of components enabled educational technology to move forward rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Technology may have first entered the language classroom in the form of the language laboratory. Institutions hastened to dedicate rooms to the installation of multiple tape-desk-equipped booths where students gathered to listen to native speakers modeling the drills of current day's lesson. According to (Levis & Pickering, 2004), the application of the speech visualization technology to language learning environment dates back to 1960s. In the 1990s the personal computer emerged as a significant tool for language teaching and learning. The widespread use of software, local area network, and the internet has created enormous opportunities for learners to enhance their communicative abilities, both by individualizing practice and by tapping into a global community of other learners.

Many multimedia experts believe that using multimedia technologies in language setting has great advantages (Timucin, 2006). That is why practitioners across the language curricula resort to CALL instruction for innovative language teaching, particularly with the advent of modern technologies over the last decade. Some of the advantages of CALL include the assessment of students' response, feedback, motivation and interaction (Ahmad et al., 1985). Displaying messages, taking the student through subsequent attempts at a question, and even taking the student to a different section of the package are the computer capabilities which depend on the nature of the response. Additionally, the other benefit of using computer is that students' responses receive appropriate visual feedback quickly in different forms such as comments, assessments, and guidance which takes at least one day for a teacher to do it.

Furthermore, according to Seidel, Anderson and Hunteret (1982), another idea that can be made explicit in education is learning to learn. The job of a student is learning, and learning to learn. The computer provides a high motivation and/or vehicle for specific instruction on learning and on learning to learn. Moreover, teacher educators are partly engaged in the task of constructing appropriate conditions for learning. Building such an atmosphere is especially important as the diversity of student groups widens. In many ESL/EFL teacher education programs in places like the UK, Australia, and the USA, for instance, there may well be a mixture of domestic and international students. In such heterogeneous settings, learning maybe enhanced by a classroom ecology that encourages dialogue and allows students to learn from each other. For a variety of reasons,

computer-mediated communication (CMC), through which students interact online as posed to (or rather in addition to) face to face, can contribute to such an ecology (Hirvela, 2006). Computer is a flexible classroom aid, which can be used by teachers and learners, in and out of class, in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes (Jones & Fortescue, 1987).

Despite the growing interest among scholars in CALL, it can be said that there is a gap between the available literature on the use of computers and technology for teaching purposes and the experience of the actual implementation process in EFL contexts (Timucin 2006). Although the cost of computer hardware has decreased considerably over the years, the development of effective software and the implementation of CALL remain both time consuming and expensive (Hope, Taylor, & Pusack, 1984). As Gündüz (2005) argues:

Recent years have shown a boom of interest in using computers for foreign language teaching and learning. A decade ago, the use of computers in the language classroom was of concern only to a small number of specialists in western countries. However, with the advent of multimedia computing and the Internet, the role of computers in language instruction has now become an important issue confronting large numbers of language teachers throughout the world. To be realistic, although most teachers throughout the world still use chalk and blackboard, CALL is used routinely in language instruction in highly developed countries, such as the USA, Japan, and Western European countries including Turkey to provide supplementary practice in the four skills writing, reading, speaking and listening, as well as grammar and problem solving. Personal computers enable users to interact with multimedia programs -- that is, users become active participants rather than passive observers. Many computer programs combine several types of media, such as text, graphics, animation, and sound. However, most programs do not offer television and film clips or digital stereo sound. Such high-quality video and audio distinguish multimedia from other programs. (p. 195)

There is always a propensity to explore more effective pedagogical methods in order to make language learning more efficient. There has been a tendency toward the utilization of technology in language pedagogy. In recent years, second or foreign language (L2) learning and teaching has begun to adopt many of the technological innovations that have developed not only in our everyday lives, but also, and more specifically, in the field of education. The evolution of the promising CALL over the recent years has intrigued many enthusiasts in the field of ELT to explore the ways in which the computer technology can be exploited to provide likely remedies for many of the problems students encounter during second language

learning such as anxiety and lack of motivation on listening skill. A number of studies have been done concerning how the use of CALL affects the development of language learners' four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Most report significant gains in reading and listening, and most CALL programs are geared toward receptive skills because of the current state of computer technology. However, most reading and listening software is based on drills. Smidt and Hegelheimer (2004) examined how web-based video can inform ESL online instruction and help enhance listening comprehension as well as vocabulary acquisition.

Similarly, a number of studies have been carried out in Iran on the way the use of CALL could affect the development of learners' language skills. For instance, Baradaran (1999) has verified the positive impact of speech analyses via CALL technology on improving intermediate EFL learner's pronunciation power. In addition, Shabani (2001) investigated the advantage of using CALL on vocabulary learning of Iranian EFL learners, and Hatam (2004) found the positive impact of internet-based tasks/activities on the development of interactional competence of Iranian EFL learner.

In the past years, listening was always neglected or taken for granted because it was thought that it will happen naturally or automatically with the development of the learners' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and reading. Unlike writing and speaking, listening is a receptive skill, with which students receive passively the information provided in the listening materials, and it seems that they are seldom required to use the language by themselves in listening classes. In this sense, listening is considered as a passive skill in the traditional teaching. However, recently, the importance of listening in communication has already raised the awareness of many researchers and teachers. Therefore, they take pains to explore the principles of teaching methods and design classroom activities and listening materials which will greatly improve the listening teaching.

In the traditional listening class, boring test-like teaching patterns would surely make students lose their interests in the listening class. The teacher singles out some difficult or new words to explain, and then s/he would give students the correct answer after s/he plays the recording materials from time to time (at least 3 times). Students listen to the materials mechanically. In this sense, the teacher is like a tape-recorder player who merely needs to push the play and rewind buttons. With this monotonous teaching method, students interests would soon fade and even be destroyed. Due to lack of interest, motivation, and variation in teaching and learning, students easily get bored and take a passive attitude which is a great obstacle for teaching and students' progress (Zhang & Wang, 2004). A high affective filter prevents language input from being used and processed. Since the success of language learning depends on learner's attitude,

teachers would rather take the listening lesson interesting enough to grip student's attention (Krashen, 1981).

Listening activities that use the computer are more complex than the other kinds of CALL materials since they involve equipment other than the computer itself. One of the simplest ways of giving practice in listening comprehension is to use a multiple-choice or fill-in program in conjunction with a tape-recorder or the latest multimedia containing a recorder. In addition to the normal feedback given after a wrong answer, the computer can let the learner hear the relevant part of the tape again. If a separate tape-recorder is used, the error message can give the learner appropriate counter numbers. Another simple technique is to use a tape with a test-reconstruction program which enables learners to reconstruct a summary of a recorded anecdote on screen by the help of the tape. Such activities not only help to integrate listening and writing skills but also evaluate learners' listening comprehension skills in a more active way than is generally possible in a non-CALL class (Jones & Fortescue, 1987). Nevertheless, according to Ahmad et al. (1985) the role of the computer in education is that of tool. In other words, it is not able to create educational materials for not only learning but also teaching unless there is human supervision. Furthermore, Richards and Renandya (2002) focus on the teacher's role not technology which is very crucial in a class.

Boyd and Jones (1977) view listening as an active, complex skill which requires careful study in detail. They believe that listening, observing and experiencing can affect people's daily life. People learn a new language to socialize and interact with other people in society and also to broaden their knowledge of the world around them. Due to the important role of the listener in the process of comprehension, Anderson and Lynch (1988) hold the view that understanding is not something that happens because of what a speaker says: the listener has a crucial part to play in the process by activating various types of knowledge, applying what he knows to what he hears, and trying to understand what the speaker means. While traditional approaches to language teaching tended to underemphasize the importance of teaching listening comprehension, more recent approaches emphasize the role of listening in building up language competence and suggest that more attention should be paid to teaching listening in the initial stages of second or foreign language learning (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1993).

The importance of listening cannot be underestimated since, as Celce-Murcia (1991) mentions, listening is used far more than any other single language skill in normal daily life. She further argues that on average we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write. "Of the time an individual is engaged in communication, approximately 9 percent is devoted to writing, 16 percent to reading, 30 percent to speaking, and 45 percent to listening"

(Hedge, 2000, p. 228). According to Richards and Renandya (2002), some applied linguists argue that listening comprehension is at the core of second language acquisition and therefore demands a much greater prominence in language teaching.

Given the importance of listening in language learning and the opportunities that CALL provides the present research addresses the following question:

Does teaching listening via software have any significant effect on the development of elementary EFL students' listening comprehension?

Method

Participants

The participants were 40 Persian-speaking, female learners aged between 14 and 16 who were studying English at the elementary level in a language school in Tehran. They were randomly chosen from among 60 learners whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean after the administration of a proficiency test and assigned to the experimental and control groups.

Instrumentation

The following instruments were employed in this study:

1. In order to measure the proficiency level of the participants, a re-standardized version of KET consisting of 3 sections was administered. The first section included 25 listening questions. The second section including 55 reading questions was followed by the writing section in which students were supposed to write a note to a friend about their house in 25-35 words. The time limit for answering the test was 100 minutes. In order to re-standardize the general proficiency test of KET, the researchers computed the item facility, item difficulty and item discrimination for each individual reading and listening item which resulted in the deletion of no items items. Then, the reliability index of the whole test was calculated to be 0.884 with 0.832 and 0.896 for listening and reading subsections respectively. For the writing section, the researchers asked two raters to score the students' writings based on the guidelines provided in the KET package. The subsequent inter-rater reliability turned out to be 0.75.

2. The listening comprehension test used in the pretest was a part of a proficiency test (KET) used at the beginning of this study for homogenizing the students. The 25-item listening section included 5 parts. The first, second, and third parts were in the multiple-choice format and the fourth and fifth were in the table-completion format. In order to check the content validity of the listening pretest, two experienced teachers were asked to evaluate whether its content was in conformity with the syllabus

which had been planned for elementary students. Relying on the table of specifications, they confirmed KET satisfactory level of content validity. They confirmed that the test had a satisfactory level of content validity.

3. For the posttest, the listening section of another version of KET was adopted. The researchers re-standardized this test by running a thorough item analysis process and calculating the KR-21 reliability with an index of .80. Subsequently, two experienced teachers were asked to check the content validity of the test according to the table of specifications of the course.

Materials

Rosetta Stone is a proprietary language-learning software produced by Rosetta Stone, Ltd. The Rosetta Stone software utilizes a combination of images, texts, and sounds at difficulty levels increasing as the student progresses, in order to teach various vocabulary terms, listening skills and grammatical functions intuitively without drills or translation. The method is called the Dynamic Immersion method. Instruction takes the form of a unit of lessons consisting of ten groups (more in some of the later units of Level I) of four images each, with an associated word or sentence both written and spoken aloud by a native speaker of the language, except for those languages that are no longer spoken natively, such as Latin. Lesson topics range from grammatical concepts such as verb tense to specific topics. Within each lesson there are sets of exercises testing listening, reading, and speaking (for which the computer must have a microphone). The user is offered either text, sound or image (and later, video), to match the four possibilities. With a mark and/or sound chosen by the reader from the preferences menu, the program indicates whether the right or wrong choice has been selected.

A score from 0 to 100 is kept; it is visible during the exercise in the practice mode but not in the test mode. There are no formal grammar guides or instructions included in the software. The only documentation is a manual with written versions of the phrases and a word index.

Procedure

The first step in conducting the present research was re-standardization of the KET which was then used to evaluate the general proficiency of the participants as well as their listening at the beginning of the study. After administering the KET and selecting 40 homogeneous participants which fell one SD above and below the mean, they were randomly assigned to two groups of control and experimental. The two groups were then compared statistically in terms of their general proficiency and listening skill which proved that they belonged to the same population and were eligible to serve as the participants of the study.

During the instruction, while the experimental group was taught listening with the help of the computer software, the control group was taught in the traditional way, which was limited to listening to the tape and answering some questions from their book. In the experimental group, each student used a computer to do the listening exercises related to the grammar and vocabulary that they were taught in each lesson. They were supposed to listen to a sentence and choose the correct picture. When their answer was correct, they received a pass score. Therefore, they were able to go to the next step, and were rewarded by getting a good mark. Otherwise, the same step was repeated for them until they could answer correctly.

The contents of listening lessons taught to the control group were similar to those of the experimental group. That is, the pictures were printed for the students, and they were supposed to listen to the tape and choose the correct picture. Each sentence was repeated twice; however, in the experimental group each sentence was repeated several times for the students until they could answer correctly. This study consisted of 19 sessions. Every session took 90 minutes; however, the teacher spent 25 minutes on the listening exercise.

Results

The initial 64 subjects of the study sat for a version of KET with the following descriptive statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Initial Subjects on KET

	Valid N	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Variance	Std.Dev.
KET	64	73.77	75.00	44.00	96.00	109.80	10.48

According to Table 1, the participants of the control and experimental groups were those who scored lower than 89.49 and higher than 58.05. To determine whether the groups were homogeneous, the researchers had to first test the homogeneity of variances through an F-test. Since the F observed (1.45) was smaller than F critical (1.69), it was concluded that the assumption of the homogeneity of variances was justified. The researcher then ran a *t*-test between the pretest means of the control and experimental groups to ensure the homogeneity of both groups before the treatment. Since the observed *t* value was 0.21 and the *t* critical value of 2.02 exceeded it at 0.05 level of significance at 38 degrees of freedom, it was concluded that both groups belonged to the same population at the beginning of the experiment. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Two Groups on KET

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	F critical	t observed	t critical	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	1.45	1.69	0.21	2.02	38	0.2

*P<0.05

Next, the listening performance of the two groups at the beginning of the study was examined. Table 3 summarizes the descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Two Groups on the Listening Pretest

	Valid N	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Variance	Std.Dev.
Exp.	20	11.15	11.50	7.00	17.00	11.40	3.38
Cont	20	10.95	10.50	7.00	17.00	7.84	2.80

The independent *t*-test conducted showed that, there was no significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of their listening comprehension. Table 4 manifests the results:

Table 4. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Two Groups on the Listening Pretest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F observed	F critical	t observed	t critical	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	1.45	1.69	0.21	2.02	40	0.2

*P<0.05

After the instruction, the next step was to determine if any significant change had appeared between the experimental and control groups regarding the subjects' listening skill. To do so, it was decided to compare the results of the performances of the experimental group with those of the control group on a listening posttest. The related descriptive statistics are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of the Two Groups on the Listening Posttest

	Valid N	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum	Variance	Std.Dev.
Exp.	20	17.35	16.50	13.00	24.00	12.45	3.53
Cont	20	14.55	14.50	9.00	22.00	11.63	3.41

The means of 17.35 and 14.55 for the experimental and the control groups respectively were subjected to another *t*-test the results of which are in Table 6. The *F* observed (0.06) at 0.05 level of significance with 38 degrees of freedom was smaller than *F* critical (4.10). Therefore, the homogeneity of variances was proved. In this study, the observed *t* value at 0.05 level of significance with 38 degree of freedom was 3.89 ($p < 0.05$), which exceeded the *t* critical value ($3.89 > 2.02$). Therefore, it was concluded that the students' achievement of listening in the experimental group was significantly greater than that of the control group.

Table 6. Comparison between Variances and Means of the Two Groups on the Listening Posttest

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> -Test for Equality of Means			
	<i>F</i> observed	<i>F</i> critical	<i>t</i> observed	<i>t</i> critical	df	Mean Difference
Equal variances assumed	0.06	4.10	*3.89	2.02	40	2.8

* $P < 0.05$

Discussion

The present study indicated that using computer software offered interesting advantages to the experimental group as compared with the control group. It can be suggested that the presence of higher levels of motivation and attention in multimedia environments affected students to have better performance in listening. In addition, using computer software helped students to be familiar with real language use. Since students had not had any classes in which computer software were used, they showed high enthusiasm towards this class. Furthermore, the Rosetta Stone seemed particularly interesting to them; its pictures, sounds, exercises were designed in a way that they could attract students' attention. At first glance, it looked like playing games rather than listening task. Therefore, the students did not have any stress for doing the listening activities. Moreover, while in control group the students were dependent on their teacher, students tried to solve their problems first by themselves, and then by asking each other in the experimental group. In broad terms, they felt

like being more independent in that group. Furthermore, interaction between students was the other advantage of multimedia environment which was completely absent in the control group. Despite these advantages, using computer software had a few problems such as being time consuming and malfunctioning which made a few students work on only one computer as a group.

Conclusion

The role of computers in language teaching has changed significantly in the last three decades. Previously, computers used in language teaching were limited to text. Simple simulations and exercises, primarily gap-filling and multiple-choice drills, abounded. Technological and pedagogical developments now allow us to integrate computer technology into the language learning process. Multimedia programs incorporating speech-recognition software can immerse students into rich environments for language practice. Concordance software with large language corpora provides students with the means to investigate language use in authentic contexts. And the Internet allows for a great number of opportunities to communicate in the target language, access textual and multimedia information, and publish for a global audience. It can be seen that there is a boom in the use of computers in the past thirty years from having students work on computer fed drills to students' long-distance communication and collaboration in authentic research and multimedia publication. Since the computer is capable of playing so many different roles in and out of class, it is believed to be the most exciting and potentially useful aid so far available to language teachers and learners.

The present research proves that using computer software has a significant impact on the improvement of the listening skill. Similarly, Deeds (2008) suggests that CALL is the best way to do TESOL with Asian students, so using educational technology is the best way to teach them other language skills in English. Therefore, it is recommended to all language teachers to use the computer technology for better teaching. Accordingly, attempts should be made to move towards computerized language skills instruction, as teaching through multimedia programs might make learning a more enjoyable and memorable experience for learners. Furthermore, such programs are more likely to extend the students' repertoire in those contexts where there is no widespread use of computer in language pedagogy. Indeed, in such situations, including Iran, the novelty of multimedia programs is assumed to have a greater impact on motivating the learners as compared with common methods of teaching listening. As a medium for learning language, multimedia represents a myriad of instructional possibilities. Careful consideration on the part of teachers and software developers of the range of possibilities for combining

input modalities and tools that empower student manipulation of them is essential.

Furthermore, as mentioned before, EFL learners in Iran are not frequently exposed to genuine input, since Rosetta Stone has proved to be influential in providing EFL learners with appropriate genuine input, this pitfall can be easily removed, i.e., EFL learners can listen to authentic language any time they wish. Time is also crucial in pedagogical settings; teachers are not always available, but computer software such as Rosetta Stone are always at hand; hence, students may use them whenever they wish.

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