The Effect of Pre-reading Activity on the Listening Comprehension of Intermediate EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed to investigate the effect of pre-reading activities on the listening comprehension of intermediate EFL learners. Participants of this study – 13 males and 21 females – who were chosen from two intact classes after taking the *Nelson English Language Test* as an English language proficiency test were accidently divided into two groups of control and experimental. Students in both experimental and control groups participated in a listening pre-test (PET) and then during twelve sessions listened to audiotapes of *Expanding Tactics for Listening*. Students in the control group only listened to the passages and answered the predetermined questions. Students in the experimental group listened to the same passages but the difference was that they were given a general written summary of the forthcoming listening passage one session prior to the listening to the passages. At the end of the treatment period, both groups took part in a listening post-test. An ANCOVA was done, in order to compare the performance of two groups (experimental and control groups) after the treatment period, and to reveal whether post-test differences were because of the treatment effect or their differences in pre-test. The results of the ANCOVA revealed that pre-reading activity on the listening has a significant effect on the listening comprehension skill of intermediate EFL learners. It was also found that there was not any significant difference between post-test scores of male and female learners in both control and experimental groups. The results of the present study could help course book designers, educational planners, material developers, foreign language institutes, teachers, and learners to provide a better context for foreign language learning and improving different language skills.
Keywords: pre reading activity, listening, listening comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

Listening skill is known as an important factor in first language acquisition and is regarded to be essential in English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learning. This skill has been overlooked in foreign language learning, research, teaching, and assessment for a long time. Although, recently due to its crucially importance in language learning and acquisition, an increased attention has been devoted on L2 listening skill, but still received inadequate consideration in ESL/EFL teaching. Listening is fundamental in language classroom because it has an essential role to provide an input to the learner. If the learner does not get this necessary input, any learning will not happen. Nunan (1998) also points to the major role of listening skill in language learning. He believes that without listening skill, learners will never reach to the efficient communication skills. In fact more than half of the time that learners put on functioning in a foreign language will be given to listening. Nation and Newton (2009) pointed out that listening skill gives the learner information to construct the knowledge needed for using the language; and when this knowledge is made, the learner can start speaking.

Listening comprehension is also seen as a guideline of second language acquisition theory building, research, and pedagogy (Dunkel, 1991).So, listening can be regarded as one of the most important macro-skills in the area of second and foreign language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, it has been neglected by tutors and researchers and paid less attention than the other language skills and therefore has often been referred to as a "passive" or "receptive" skill (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Oxford, 1993).

Pre-reading instruction, as it is implied by its name, occurred before a particular text is read by English language learners (ELLs) or a particular unit or lesson is began. L2 experts have suggested that using pre-reading activities makes

texts more convenient for learners to understand (Grab & Stoller, 2001; Holmes & Roser, 1987; Taglieber, Johnson, & Yarbrough, 1988). Some areas are categorized in pre-reading instruction for English language learners. First, it may cause to activate background information and it also gives the learner a chance to assess if this prior knowledge is accurate or not. When the tutor knows what the L1 or L2 learners understand and do not understand about the topic, he can develop an effective lesson for the upcoming reading (Holmes & Roser, 1987).Because of providing a reader the essential background knowledge and organize those activities to comprehend, pre-reading activities can be called 'enabling activities' Tudor (1989). It also helps English language learners figure out what to expect from the reading and model strategies that learners can use independently eventually (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). Taglieber et al. (1988) further explained the effects of pre-reading instruction for English language learners by adding Hansen's offer that not only do pre-reading activities make native speakers prepared for the concepts that follow, but by facilitating the reading task and linking the new content more meaningful to background knowledge, pre-reading activities change reading to a more interesting task.

Pre-reading instruction can be revealed in a variety of areas which may be include the preview of text (pictures, titles, subheadings, etc.) to provide a gist of or to skim the text, to formulate questions and answers about information in the text, to discuss topics in the text, to explore hints related to the texts to previous read (Grabe & Stoller, 2001).

1.1Review of the related literature

Since listening is one of the main skills in the process of language learning, many researchers showed eagerness in finding the effect of different variables on this receptive skill. As a result, there have been many valuable findings on the effectiveness listening comprehension.

One of the main findings of the research on listening comprehension was giving priority to the comprehensible input (Salazar, 2002). Ellis (1994) assumes that learners need to understand input in order to learn from it. In other words, Krashen's hypothesis about comprehensible input refers to the fact that in order for a language to be learned, it needs a comprehensible input. That is to say, listening as an input provider must be comprehensible enough to let the listener conduct the follow-up activities.

Hui (2010) attempted to investigate and compare the effectiveness of pre-listening vocabulary instruction and providing background knowledge on EFL learners' listening comprehension. His experiment involved 120 subjects who were sophomores of Tianshui Normal University, majoring in history. They came from three natural classes and pre-test indicated that there was no significant difference among their listening comprehension proficiency. So in the experiment, they were randomly divided into control group (CG), vocabulary instruction (VI) group and background knowledge instruction (BKI) group. All subjects completed a comprehension test after listening to four passages of unfamiliar topics. But before listening to the passages, only VI group and BKI group received instruction of vocabulary and background knowledge, respectively. His experiment results revealed that the providing of related background knowledge takes significant effect on learners' listening comprehension. He stated that although lack of vocabulary is the listeners' major concern, vocabulary instruction shortly before listening does not have a significant facilitative effect on learners' listening comprehension. Vocabulary instruction by itself was not found as an effective means of enhancing listening comprehension.

Gobel (2011) investigated the effect of Reading While Listening on overall English comprehension among a group of EFL students. He conducted the study with a total of 162 ESL learners and gave them two semesters of treatment. His findings demonstrated a statistically significant gain in pre-TOEFL ITP scores. Through a multiple regression analysis, he explored the effect of quantity of Reading While Listening on TOEFL gain scores. His results indicated that the amount of Reading While Listening was a significant predictor of TOEFL ITP gain scores.

Farrokhi and Modarres (2012) studied the effect of two pre-task activities of 'glossary of unknown vocabulary items' and 'content related support' on improvement of Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. They carried out the study across two different levels of 'low proficiency' and 'high proficiency' with three groups – two experimental and one control – in each level. One experimental group received "glossary of unknown vocabulary items" with the pronunciations and the other group received content related support (in written form) with the aim of activating background information prior to administering the post-lecture listening comprehension questions. After statistical analysis they found that in low proficiency level, vocabulary group outperformed both content and control groups while in high proficiency level, content group outperformed the other groups.

Bennett (n.d.) investigated the effects of two distinct pre-listening activities: activating prior information with the help of a Mind Map and pre-teaching vocabulary. He conducted the study on two freshmen English classes with a total of forty-five Taiwanese English major undergraduates and administered a TOEFL CBT practice test to assign the participants into two proficiency sub-groups of low and high. Over a seven week period, he administered six listening comprehension quiz after a pre-listening treatment and found that between the two distinct pre-listening activities there was no significant overall effect on accuracy scores. On the contrary, when each topic was separated and analyzed individually, results varied. He also found a significant differences between the two proficiency groups in regards to the overall accuracy of scores, but did not witnessed an interaction between the factor of proficiency and treatment.

As it is obvious from the literature, there are few studies that consider the importance of pre-reading activity through listening on listening comprehension of intermediate EFL learners. Therefore, the researcher decided to investigate the effect of pre-reading activity through listening on listening comprehension.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As (Chang & Read, 2008) pointed out listening has full of stress for many L2/FL learners, and hard work. It is believed that listening comprehension is harder than reading comprehension (Graham, 2006). Therefore, it is crucially important to identify factors that affect listening comprehension in this course and to determine the size of these effects to help learners improve their achievement in Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) learning. Pre-reading activity is regarded as one of the most important macro-skills in the area of L2/FL learning that affect listening comprehension.

On the other hand, L2 listening and comprehension skill is seemed to be rather undervalued for Iranian EFL students, amongst all language learning strategies, since this is not explicitly taught in English classroom pedagogy. In addition, developing listening skills is not taken in to account in English language instruction and learning. Listening skill, at school level, in Iran, is not taught out of the domination of the traditional *Grammar Translation Method* (GTM) that only emphasized on writing and reading skills. Meanwhile this method at university level, depending on the field of study is surrounded to reading skill, mainly taught for 3-5 hours per week for each term. Often, in English language institutes, in Iran, the instruction of listening skills are specified in their syllabus, tutors usually do not teach listening skill but test it in EFL classrooms. As a result, teaching listening in an explicit process is overlooked, listening skills' product are measured through exams (Bozorgian & Pillay, 2013).So pre-reading activity on the listening comprehension is one of activities that is neglected by researchers.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

Participants of the present study were 50 intermediate learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the Pardazesh language institute in Babolsar including 21 males and 29 females taken from two intact classes of the institute. So, the sampling design of the study was *convenience non-probability* design. For the purpose of homogeneity, prior to research a Nelson English Language Test, as a proficiency test, was given to the initial 50 students and 34 students – 13 males and 21 females – whose scores were between one standard deviation minus and plus the mean took part in the study. These students then were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups and each group included 17 students. All participants were in the age range of 18 to 22.

2.2 Instruments

To carry out the present study different instruments were used. The first instrument was the *Nelson English Language Test* which was used as a tool for homogenizing participants of the study. The Nelson English Language Test is a battery including 40 separate tests for ten levels of language proficiency which range from beginner to advanced. The levels are numbered from 050, 100, …, to 500. Each test consists of 50 items. Furthermore, for the purpose of the present study a test in intermediate level – number 250 – was used (see Appendix A). The second and third instruments were the listening sections of two different versions of *Preliminary English Test (PET)* which provide a practical way of assessing students' level of L_2 listening (see Appendix B). One of them was used as pre-test and the other as post-test. The reliability of the listening part of the PET as reported in the official website of the Cambridge university http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/principles – is 0.77 with Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) index of 2.14. The listening part of PET is composed of 25 close-ended items in which each correct answer receives one point. The time needed for administration of the PET was about 30 minutes, plus 6 minutes to transfer answers to the answer sheet. The students' answer sheets were scored according to the answer key provided by the manual of the test.

Expanding Tactics for Listening book was used as a material for teaching during class sessions. Students listened to audiotapes and completed the provided activities. Expanding Tactics for Listening is the third level of the Tactics for Listening series. It is intended for intermediate students who have studied English previously but need further practice in understanding everyday conversational language. It contains 24 units. It can be used as the main text for a listening course, as a complementary text in a conversation course, or as the basis for a language laboratory course. Each unit features a topic that relates to the everyday life and experiences of adults and young adults.

2.3 Procedure

At the first stage, a Nelson English Language Test as a proficiency test was administered to the students and based on the results of this test those students whose scores were between one standard deviation minus and plus the mean were selected to participate in the study. The subjects involved in this study were randomly divided into two groups; one as experimental and the other as control. Students in both control and experimental groups participated in the listening part of a PET as the pre-test to take up the initial differences between the groups. The study was conducted during 12 class sessions. Both control and experimental groups were informed that they were to listen to the passage, try to understand it, and then answer the forthcoming questions. Every session, students in the control group just listened to the passages and answered the predetermined questions. In other words, they listened to audiotapes of *Expanding Tactics for*

Listening by Jack C. Richards (2003) and then accomplished the provided exercises without the help and guidance of the teacher.

Similarly, experimental group listened to the same passages but the difference was that they were given a general written summary of the forthcoming listening passage one session prior to the listening to the passages. The aim of this pre-listening activity was to activate the background knowledge of the participants and to provide them with an overall view of the topic of the listening task to be done in the next session.

At the end of the treatment period, the post-test was administered to the students in two groups and its results were compared to the results of the pre-test to see if there were any significant differences between the performance of the groups.

2.4 Design

The present study included pre-test – post-test – control group design. However, as the participants have not been randomly selected, the study is regarded as a *quasi-experimental* research. In this study, the pre-reading activity was the independent variable (with two levels of doing and not doing pre-reading activities) the effect of which on the listening comprehension of the students as the dependent variable was investigated.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was done by SPSS software version 17. A number of descriptive and inferential statistics were run on the data. The data were analyzed descriptively using mean and standard deviation. An ANCOVA was run not only to compare the performance of both experimental and control groups after the treatment period but also to show whether post-test differences were due to treatment – pre-reading activity – effect or their differences in pre-test.

At first, the results of English Language Proficiency Test are reported. Then, descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test in both control and experimental groups are given. Finally the results of ANCOVA comparing the performance of the two groups in the pre-test and post-test are presented.

3.1 The Results of the English Language Proficiency Test

As it was stated, a Nelson English Language Test was used to homogenize the participants of the study. To select the participants, all initial 50 students took part in Nelson English Language Test and students whose score was between one standard deviation minus and plus the mean were participated in the main study. Table1 shows the descriptive statistics of the participants' Nelson scores.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Nelson English Language Test Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Nelson	50	15	50	35.80	9.125
Valid N (listwise)	50				

As the table shows, overall mean and standard deviation of the initial participants' Nelson English Language Test scores were 35.80 and 9.125, respectively. From these initial participants, 34 students whose score were between 27 and 44 were chosen.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics for Control Group

Table 2 reflects the descriptive statistics for the participants in the control group.

Table 2
The Results of the Participants' Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores in Control Group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test in Control Group	17	13	19	15.82	1.776
Post-Test in Control Group	17	15	21	17.53	2.004
Valid N (listwise)	17				

From the table it can be clearly seen that participants' pre-test mean score in control group was 15.82 with the standard deviation of 1.776. Concerning the post-test, participants' mean score was 17.53 with the standard deviation of 2.004. Figure 3.1 shows the students' pre-test scores in control group:

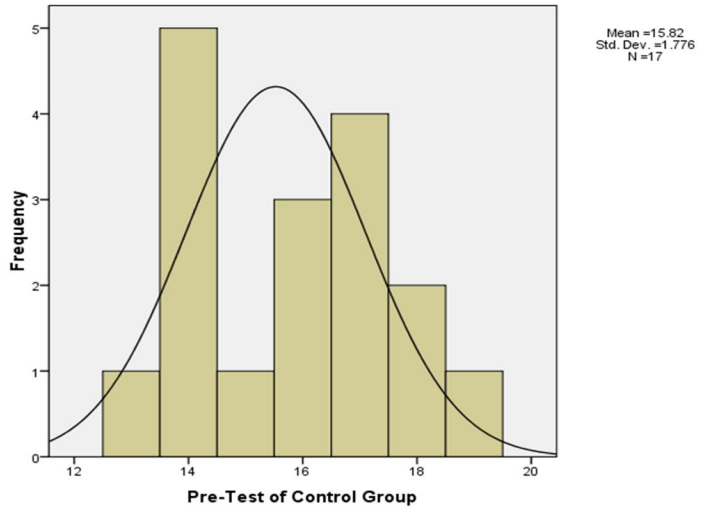

Figure 3.1. Students' Pre-Test Scores in Control Group

Figure 3.2 presents the students' post-test scores in control group:

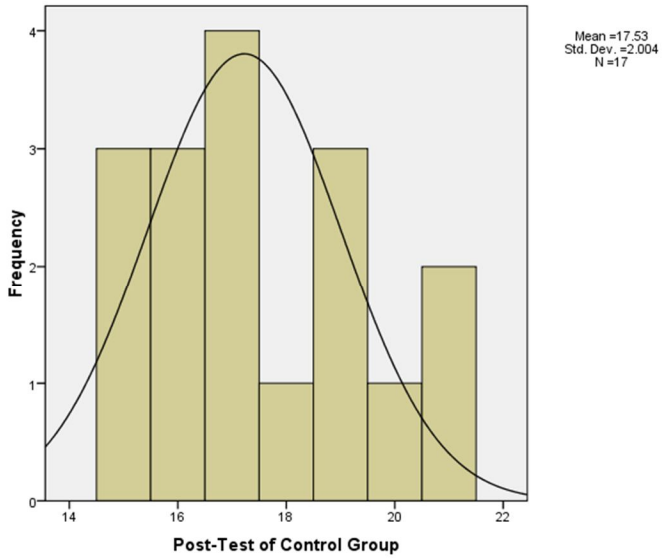

Figure 3.2. Students' Post-Test Scores in Control Group

3.1.3 Descriptive Statistics for Experimental Group

Table 4 reflects the descriptive statistics for the participants in the experimental group.

Table 3
The Results of the Participants' Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores in Experimental Group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test in Experimental Group	17	12	18	15.41	1.805
Post-Test in Experimental Group	17	16	24	19.94	2.076
Valid N (listwise)	17				

As the table illustrates, it has been found that students' mean score in pre-test was 15.41 with the standard deviation of 1.805; whereas in the post-test, experimental group revealed a mean score of 19.94 with the standard deviation of 2.076. Figure 4.3 shows the students' pre-test scores in experimental group:

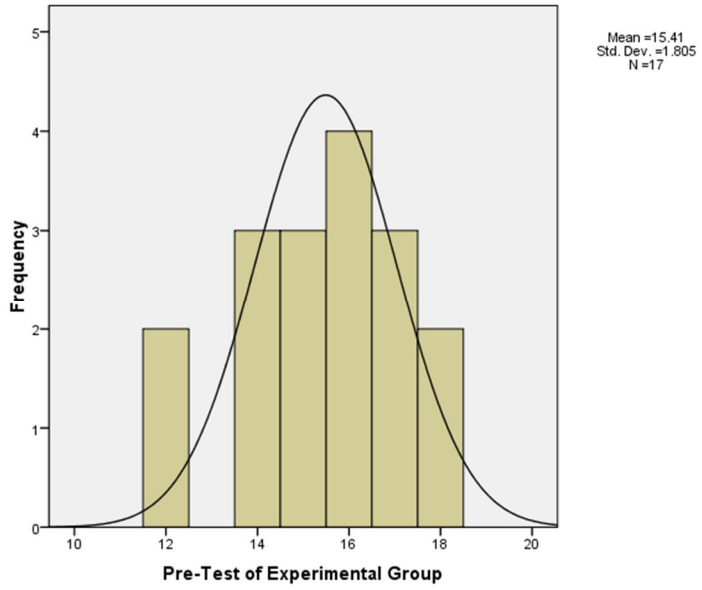

Figure 3.3. Students' Pre-Test Scores in Experimental Group

Figure 3.4 indicates the students' pre-test scores in experimental group:

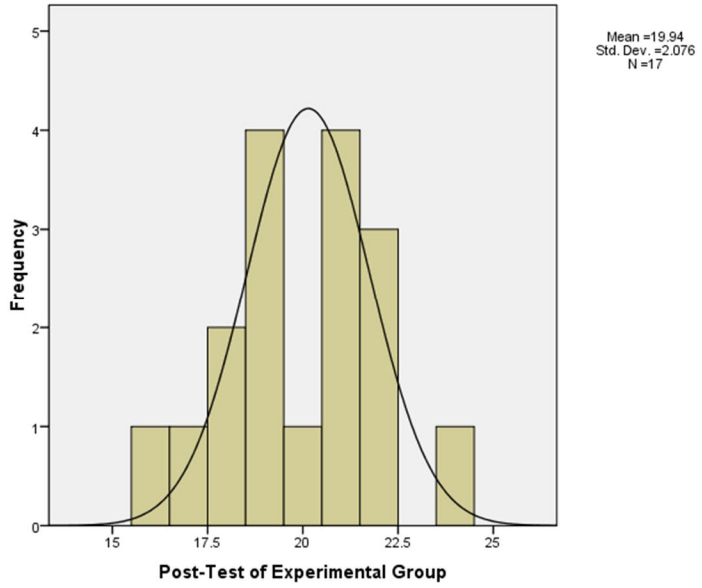

Figure 3.4. Students' Post-Test Scores in Experimental Group

3.1.4 The Results Regarding the First Research Hypothesis

In order to make sure about the normal distribution of the scores in both control and experimental groups, One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was run on four sets of scores. Table 5 presents the results of this test:

Table 4
One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test for Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores in Control and Experimental Groups

		Pre-Test of Control Group	Pre-Test of Experimental Group	Post-Test of Control Group	Post-Test of Experimental Group
N		17	17	17	17
Normal Parameters[a,,b]	Mean	15.82	15.41	17.53	19.94
	Std. Deviation	1.776	1.805	2.004	2.076

Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.201	.157	.192	.145
	Positive	.201	.088	.192	.145
	Negative	-.158	-.157	-.121	-.166
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.827	.648	.793	.683
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.500	.795	.555	.740

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

As it is indicated in Table 3, P-value for each set of scores is higher than 0.05, therefore all sets of scores have normal distributions and the parametric test of ANCOVA can be used.
In order to investigate the research hypothesis and for the purpose of eliminating the effect of pre-test on students' performance in the post-test, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run with the SPSS software version 17. Table 4.5 shows the results of Levene's test of equality of error variances.

Table 5
Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
1.595	1	32	.216

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

a. Design: Intercept + Pre-Test + Groups

From the above table it is clear that the underlying assumption of homogeneity of variance for the one-way ANCOVA has been met – as evidenced by $F(1, 32) = 1.595$, $p = 0.216$. That is, $p (0.216) > .05$.
As the relationship between the dependent variable – post-test – and the covariate – pre-test – should be similar for two groups, the homogeneity of regression lines was checked at the first stage the results of which are presented in Table 7

Table 6
Homogeneity of Regression
Dependent Variable: Post-Test

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	129.122[a]	3	43.041	24.137	.000
Intercept	10.360	1	10.360	5.810	.022
Groups	3.025	1	3.025	1.697	.203
Pre-Test	79.179	1	79.179	44.403	.000
Groups * Pre-Test	.725	1	.725	.406	.529
Error	53.495	30	1.783		
Total	12117.000	34			
Corrected Total	182.618	33			

a. R Squared = .707 (Adjusted R Squared = .678)

As it is shown in Table7 the P-value is equal to 0.529 which is higher than 0.05, so interaction between the independent variable and covariate is not significant and the assumption of the homogeneity of regression is accepted. Therefore, the ANCOVA can be performed. Figure 3.5 shows the liner relationship between covariate and dependent variables.

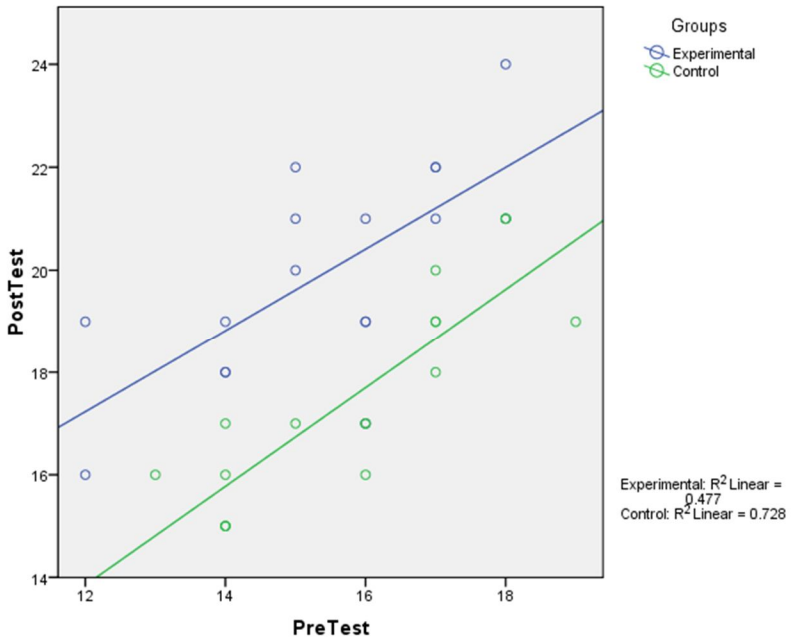

Figure 3.5. Linear Relationship between Pre-Test and Post-Test in Control and Experimental Groups

With regard to the null hypothesis of the study, that is, *There is not a significant difference in listening comprehension test scores between students who received treatment (experimental group) and students who did not receive the treatment (control group),* an ANCOVA was conducted. According to Dornyei (2007), in quasi-experimental studies, the use of ANCOVA contributes to the reduction of the initial group differences. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 7

Table 7
Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA)
Dependent Variable: Post-Test

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	128.398[a]	2	64.199	36.705	.000	.703
Intercept	10.528	1	10.528	6.020	.020	.163
Pre-Test	78.956	1	78.956	45.143	.000	.593
Groups	64.456	1	64.456	36.852	.000	.543
Error	54.220	31	1.749			
Total	12117.000	34				
Corrected Total	182.618	33				

a. R Squared = .703 (Adjusted R Squared = .684)

As it is shown in Table 7, the first line highlighted shows that the pre-test is significantly related to the post-test (P< 0.05) with the magnitude of 0.593. The next line is the indicator of the main effect of the pre-reading activity through listening on the dependent variable – listening post-test. After adjusting for pretest scores, there was a significant effect of the group, $F(1,31)= 36.852$, $p < 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.543$. As P-value is less than 0.05, the difference between two groups is significant and the effect of pre-reading activity through listening on L2 listening skill is clear. Therefore, the research null hypothesis is rejected and the answer for the research question will be 'YES'. That is, there is a significant difference in listening comprehension test scores between students who did pre-reading activity through listening and those students who did not this activity during the treatment period. As it is clear from Table 8 students in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group.

Table 8
Estimated Marginal Means for Experimental and Control Groups

Dependent Variable: Post-Test

			95% Confidence Interval	
Groups	Mean	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimental	20.122[a]	.322	19.465	20.778
Control	17.349[a]	.322	16.692	18.005

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pre-Test = 15.62.

3.1.5 The Results Regarding the Second Research Hypothesis

In order to investigate the second research hypothesis an independent samples t-test was run. Tables 4.9 and 4.10 present the results of this analysis.

Table 9
Descriptive Statistics of Post-test in Control Group

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	6	17.50	2.168	.885
Female	11	17.55	2.018	.608

As it is clear from Table 9, 6 male and 11 female students were in the control group.

Table 10
Comparison of Males and Females' Post-test Listening Score in Control Group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.195	.665	-.043	15	.966	-.045	1.050	-2.284	2.193
Equal variances not assumed			-.042	9.754	.967	-.045	1.074	-2.447	2.356

The Levene's Test for Equal variances yields a p-value of 0.665. This means that the difference between the variances is statistically insignificant and the statistics in the first row should be used. The p-value is equal to 0.966 which is more than 0.05 and indicates that there is not any significant difference between males and females' post-test listening score in control group. The 95% confidence interval for the difference between two means is (-2.284, 2.193).

3.1.6 The Results Regarding the Third Research Hypothesis

In order to investigate the third research hypothesis another independent samples t-test was run. Tables 11 and 12 present the results of this analysis

Table 11
Descriptive Statistics of Post-test in Experimental Group

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	7	20.29	1.604	.606
Female	10	19.70	2.406	.761

As it is clear from Table 11, 7 male and 10 female students were in the experimental group.

Table 12.
Comparison of Males and Females' Post-test Listening Score in Experimental Group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.903	.357	.560	15	.584	.586	1.046	-1.643	2.814
Equal variances not assumed			.602	14.991	.556	.586	.973	-1.488	2.659

The Levene's Test for Equal variances yields a p-value of 0.357. This means that the difference between the variances is statistically insignificant and the statistics in the first row should be used. The p-value is equal to 0.584 which is more than 0.05 and indicates that there is not any significant difference between males and females' post-test listening score in control group. The 95% confidence interval for the difference between two means is (-1.643, 2.814).

4. CONCLUSION

The most significant finding resulting from this study was that pre-reading activities through listening had an effective role in improving the students' listening skill. This finding can be explained by the schema theory and the relevant theories on listening process. Pre-reading activity provides the listeners with background knowledge of the topic to be listened. This background knowledge of the topic can facilitate the listeners' activation of resident schema and building absent schema; rich content schema can compensate for the inadequate linguistic schema. Secondly, pre-listening providing the background knowledge of the topic can encourage the listeners more to employ the top-down processing model to predict, to select the information properly and to eliminate the ambiguity quickly. Findings of the study support a focus on background knowledge in the actual teaching practice of EFL listening comprehension, and urge the learners to pay more attention to the accumulation of background knowledge.

A number of studies have intended to investigate the effect of different pre-listening activities on L2 listening comprehension. In this section, their obtained results are compared with the findings of the present study.

Findings of the present study confirm the results of the Hui's (2010) experiment. His experiment results revealed that the providing of related background knowledge takes significant effect on learners' listening comprehension.

Results of this study were also in line with the findings of Gobel (2011). His results showed that the amount of Reading While Listening was a significant predictor of TOEFL ITP gain scores. It means that both of the studies came to the conclusion that reading about the text of the listening can improve the students function in comprehension of the intended materials.

Farrokhi and Modarres (2012) studied the effect of two pre-task activities of 'glossary of unknown vocabulary items' and 'content related support' on improvement of Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension across two proficiency levels of low and high and found that in low proficiency level, vocabulary group outperformed both content and control groups while in high proficiency level, content group outperformed the other groups. Their findings in both levels were in line with results of the present study. In other words, content group in both low and high proficiency groups outperformed the control group although in the low level vocabulary group was better than content one.

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