

## THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE ON LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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### ABSTRACT

*This study tries to investigate the influence of cultural knowledge on developing Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. To this end, a proficiency test was conducted to one hundred and twenty language learners. Ninety of intermediate language learners were chosen based on their scores on a test and randomly assigned to three groups. Every group was exposed to a specific condition as follows: AC (American culture), PC (Persian culture) and CF (culture free). Before any treatment sessions, the same pre-test was administered. After 8 weeks (24 hours) of treatment session with an experienced teacher, to investigate whether or not any changes happened, three groups took a post-test. The result of post-test showed that the performance of groups was different, especially group (AC) which was significantly different from the pre-test. This indicated that the more, participants were exposed to familiarity to cultural knowledge of the language, the more they improved their listening comprehension.*

**KEYWORDS:** Listening, Listening comprehension, Culture, Cultural knowledge, Schemata

### INTRIDUCTION

Listening plays an important role in communication as it is said that, of the total time spent on communicating, listening takes up 40-50%; speaking, 25-30%; reading, 11-16%; and writing, about 9% (Mendelsohn, 1994). There is a hypothesis that listening comprehension is a combination of two types of processes; top-down or higher level processes and bottom-up or lower level Processes. The term top-down processing came originally from computer science and carried the meaning of “knowledge driven” (Field, 1998), Top- down happens when schema or culturally background knowledge of the topic are applied to the incoming speech stream.

In 1932 schema theory was introduced by Frederic Bartlett during working on constructive memory (Field 1998). He regarded schemas a part of top-down processing. While bottom up involves perceiving such as phonemic one and parsing that is segmenting the speech stream of the linguistic input. Gebhard (2000), states that background knowledge is our interpretation of world experience. The importance of this knowledge specially comes to scene when students run in to language processing problems. Listening then is not just mere linguistic feature of text but the relation of both or in another words bottom and top down. He also adds comprehension is much easier the time that listener places what he hears in a context and mix it with his intention.

Familiarity with the topic makes listening easier for the listener as he is able to relate to his own background knowledge.

Yule (1996) points out that *cultural schemata* are developed “...in the context of our basic experiences” They will be explained as the culture of topic being acquired and with bringing cultural familiarity it helps listener to restructure the story line through referring to more personally and culturally appropriate scripts. The listener’s stereotypical knowledge based on prior experiences make the scene for him or her to construct expectations in terms of seven areas: speaker, listener, place, time, genre, topic, and co-text. Since the 1980s, listening pedagogy has focused on the linguistic aspects of comprehension to schema-based view which stresses the importance of activating learners’ background knowledge. The study of Jensen and Hansan (1994), which considered the influence of prior knowledge on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in a listening-test performance, showed that prior knowledge was a significant main effect for five of the eleven lectures.

The other study refers to Chiang and Dunkel (1991), who had an experiment with Chinese EFL students. The subjects listened to two lectures and their comprehension was measured by a multiple-choice test that had both passage dependent and passage independent items. The subjects scored higher on the familiar topic lecture than on the unfamiliar topic lecture. The results showed a significant effect on the passage-independent items. They concluded that the interaction between prior knowledge and test type might show that passage-independent items had provided a measure of background knowledge. In a study by Zheng (2003) in his Listening class at Nanzan Tandai, his material was contemporary American TV drama, *Veronica Mars*. One episode involved some flashbacks of a bunch of friends going to a senior prom in a limo together or veronicas father scolding her date for booking a room for proms night. The students reported more difficulty hearing this episode, having finished the episode because Japanese High Schools don’t have a “Senior Prom,” a graduation dance party. After explaining what it was the students understood it better because they could apply Schema Theory: they compared it to the graduation party at Nanzan Tandai. Thus, he came to this conclusion that when the listening is not in tune with the situation, recognizing schema would be more difficult.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses the following research question:

- 1) Is listening comprehension influenced by American cultural knowledge?
- 2) Is listening comprehension influenced by culture free materials?
- 3) Is listening comprehension influenced by Persian cultural knowledge?

## METHODOLOGY

This is an experimental research, in which the respondents were exposed to the treatment in both the experimental and control groups. Group A (English culture), Group B (Persian culture) and group C (culture free). These three groups were provided throughout the whole semester. The

treatment sessions was throughout the semester—8weeks (24hours). It started with an experienced teacher to hold the sessions for groups.

### ***Participants***

This study was performed at two private language institutions, in Karaj, Iran. The subjects of this study were learners from the different private Language schools who were in the same semesters. In total, there were 120 male and female students between 16 and 25. All of the participants were from Karaj. Most of the learners had been studying in Karaj language schools for at least a year. The English proficiency level of these learners was intermediate in order to the fact that the atmosphere of instruction is English; they had sufficient exposure to English language. Moreover, each term before starting new term students should take Entry test of American series that are reliable and are classified to show the students appropriate level. To choose the homogeneous groups, a sample proficiency test to one hundred and twenty male and female students in private language institutions were administered, based upon their availability. Ninety students were selected. Male and female were chosen randomly. They were three groups. Group (A), Materials with the target language (English and American culture orientation, group (B), Materials with the source language (Persian culture) and group(c), Materials that reflect culture free. The way they were selected in these three groups were random.

### ***Instruments***

The materials in this study included section of a sample proficiency test, American English File series (Oxenden & Koenig, 2011), IELTS speaking Test (Iravani, 2000), New interchange series (Richards, 2005), and other Internet reliable sites (such as, Wikipedia.com, bbc.com, and cnn.com). The test of proficiency contained 25 multiple-choice items. It was extracted from “American English File Entry test for Intermediate level (Oxford university press 2009). The reliability of the test was .783 based on Alpha Cronbach. The listening materials to administer during the whole term were American English File series (Oxenden & Koenig, 2011), which in recent years has been one of the most favorite teaching materials. To have appropriate Persian culture listening materials, IELTS speaking Test (Iravani, 2000), was the other source for this study. As the aim of this study was the influence of culture on listening comprehension, varieties of motivating listening materials were selected from this book. According to Oxenden (2011), for most students, listening is the hardest skill and it is important that listening material is both interesting and provide the right level of challenge and should be exposure to authentic language. Also Grittner (1980), believes that if a teacher wants to be insure of transferring to real life conversational situations, he has to provide language material that is presented with authentic native accents and intonation at a speed of utterance that is normal for native speakers of the language.

As this study needed authentic listening materials to have better result of cultural understanding, this book was selected. The other listening material was new interchange series (Richards, 2005), that is the world’s most successful series for adult and young adult learners with real world topics, natural and task-based listening activities which is suitable to age range of participant.

### ***Procedures***

The first step before choosing the participants as homogenous ones was to verify the reliability of the proficiency test. It was distributed to some of the participants. After that, the test reliability was calculated separately by means of Alpha Cronbach formula. The result was .783. According to Alpha formula if the calculated number is more than .70, it is reliable. Thus, it showed of high reliability of test. Finally, the questions distributed to all of them. Having got the scores from proficiency test, the average mean of the scores (out of 100), was calculated and ninety subjects, which scored two standard deviation above and below the mean (between 36 and 64), were selected as intermediate level in this study. The subjects took the proficiency test before any treatment sessions. Due to the fact that they were not then in groups, the researcher divided them in three groups randomly males and females as intermediate level. The subjects in these groups took the pre-test listening comprehension. The materials were selected from American English File series and other reliable sources. Due to the fact that the influence of culture on listening comprehension was the study point, three types of materials were proposed: materials that reflect English and American culture, materials that reflect Persian culture and materials that reflect culture free. Group A (English culture), Group B (Persian culture) and group C (culture free). These three groups were provided throughout the whole semester. The treatment sessions was throughout the semester—8 weeks (24 hours). It started with an experienced teacher to hold the sessions for groups. Some topics like dating, dreams with English culture interpretations, Risk-taking pre schools and etc... Which all were different and new with our culture to have better result and also some topics to represent Iranian culture and finally culture free materials. Ultimately, the groups took listening comprehension test. As mentioned before, reliable sources were involved.

### ***Data Analysis***

The 90 participants who were selected for the study grouped in three classes of (Ac), (cf) and (pc) in treatment sessions which mentioned earlier in Methodology section. The data analysis that was used to find out the difference between those three groups constituted ANNOVA one-way test, Paired samples test and Duncan table. In order to the aim of the study which was investigating whether there would be significance difference between pre and post test as statistically significant, the Paired samples test was applied. If the significance value is greater than .05 ( $\alpha > .05$ ) the data is normally distributed. Normal distribution of data means that most of the participants' scores are close to the average.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The result of the study showed that the higher mean score in the post-test was remarkably different at  $p < 0.01$ . This significant improvement in the post-test was attributed to topic knowledge that the participants acquired from the treatment lessons.

Table 1: Pre test scores of the three groups

Descriptive Statistics			
Dependent Variable: Mark			
Culture	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
American Culture-Pre	70.2333	2.51456	30
Culture Free-Pre	69.4000	1.99309	30
Persian Culture-Pre	69.8667	2.09652	30

The first task was calculating the means and standard deviations of the three groups in pre-test. As table 1, illustrates the mean scores of the three groups, American culture, (AC) Persian culture (PC) and culture free (CF) in pre-test. To start the investigation statistically, the results were first put under a series of statistical analysis. As it was observed, the mean scores gained by (AC) was  $70/23 + \frac{2}{52}$ , (pc) was  $69/40 + \frac{1}{99}$  and (CF) was  $69/86 + \frac{2}{10}$  as standard deviation which is a measurement of the variability of data about the mean.

Table 2: Post test means

Dependent Variable: Mark			
Descriptive Statistics			
Culture	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
American Culture-Post	89.8333	2.06920	30
Culture Free-Post	70.1000	1.56139	30
Persian Culture-Post	75.1000	2.96357	30

Dependent Variable: Mark

Culture	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
American Culture-Post	89.833	.415	89.008	90.658
Culture Free-Post	70.100	.415	69.275	70.925
Persian Culture-Post	75.100	.415	74.275	75.925

The scores of three groups were shown significantly different except group(C), which mean score was 69/40 in pre-test and 71 in post-test and changed a little. In group (A), while the mean score in pre-test was 70, it changed dramatically to 89/83. In group (B), in pre-test there was not significance difference between culture free and Persian groups in pre-test as 69/86 but during treatment sessions it differed extremely to 75. As a result, in regard to effect of cultural knowledge on performance of groups, it differed significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the treatment to the students seems to have caused some change. In order to have better understanding of this significance, standard of deviation according to 95% confidence interval was run.

Table 3: paired samples Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	CFpre – Cfpost	-.70000	1.08755	.19856	-1.10610	-.29390	-3.525	29	.001
Pair 2	AmCpre – AmCpost	-19.60000	1.13259	.20678	-20.02292	-19.17708	-94.786	29	.000
Pair 3	Pcpre – Pcpost	-5.23333	2.59553	.47388	-6.20252	-4.26415	-11.044	29	.000

As this table showed, the paired samples t-test was run to make sure that the remarkable difference in the mean scores was statistically significant first, group (A) for a degree of freedom of 29 and  $t = 94/786$  and due to the fact that ( $p < 0/0001$ ) with the mean scores of 19/6 showed that treatment sessions had the most impact on American culture group in post test scores. Thus a conclusion may be drawn here is that the null hypothesis number one was rejected. Then, group(B) showed that there was a significance difference between pre and post-test and the exposure to Persian materials during the treatment had an impact on participants performances. ( $p < 0/0001$ ,  $t = 11/044$ , mean scores of 5/23) Therefore, the null hypothesis number three was not confirmed. And finally, As the table showed, there was no significant difference between pre-test and post-test of group (C), ( $p < 0/001$ ,  $t\text{-value} = 3/52$ , mean scores of  $-0/7$ ). The results, however, confirmed the null hypothesis number 2 and indicated that this group, having exposure to culture free materials, they could not be successful in improving their listening comprehension.

In the pre-test, subjects could not determine answers to the comprehension questions as they faced a lot of barriers in the form of new vocabulary. As they tried to subdue this, the process of interpreting the text was interrupted. Therefore, they could not identify the main ideas and information in the lecture that they needed to answer the comprehension questions. The results showed that the higher mean score in the post-test was remarkably different at  $p < 0.01$ . This significant improvement in the post-test was attributed to topic knowledge that the participants acquired from the treatment lessons. As discussed earlier in table3, the null hypothesis number one states that there is no relation between listening comprehension and American culture orientation materials.

The result of the study contradicted that with  $t = 94/786$  and ( $p < 0/0001$ ). This proved that the more the listeners are aware of specific cultural materials in Target language, the more they comprehend. According to the null hypothesis number two, culture-free materials do not have



any significance on listening comprehension. As the result showed, ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $t$ -value = 3/52, mean scores of -0/7), there was not significance difference between the pre and post test and the hypothesis was not rejected. And finally, the null hypothesis number three states that there are not any relations between Persian culture orientation materials and listening comprehension. This was not confirmed, since the result showed that. ( $p < 0.0001$ ,  $t = 11/044$ , mean scores of 5/23).

Considering to the first research question of the present study, it attempted to answer the question of whether listening comprehension is influenced by American cultural knowledge. During the period of the treatment, the participants in the experimental group were encouraged to acquire the specific cultural materials. After using t-test to compare the results of the post-tests there was a big difference between the pre and post-test at the end of the study.

The second research question of this research tried to probe if listening comprehension influenced by culture free materials by comparing the results of the post- tests; it was found out that there was no statistically significant difference between the experimental group and the control group.

Addressing the third research question of this research that attempted to find out whether listening comprehension is influenced by Persian cultural knowledge, the analysis demonstrated that the pre and post-test of participants changed to confirm that cultural knowledge and language are inseparable.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the study, the following conclusions may be drawn:

Listeners need to build a mental frame work with which to relate the new information to what they already know. This is a crucial feature of any kind of listening materials. Therefore, as long as listeners are exposed to specific culturally-oriented texts (e.g., English culture texts) they can develop their listening comprehension.

In order to develop listening comprehension, cultural familiarity, background knowledge and linguistic complexity are vital linguistic and meta-linguistic features. Therefore, as long as these three factors are applied and learners are exposed to, listening comprehension can be developed.

According to the results of study, what should be taken in to consideration is to provide Iranian EFL course books for an intercultural communication. Since they focus on immoderately language forms, not having enough diverse social issues and do not fulfill student's awareness of the target language culture. Therefore, language teaching will be enhanced provided that culture and other aspects such as grammar and vocabulary are intertwined with each other. It cannot obviously asserted that features like sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and grammar have the final say, their significant rule in listening comprehension cannot be ignored. Having cultural knowledge is an element that should not be forsaken by teachers. Thus, it would be weird to expect that students comprehend while they do not have the slightest background knowledge about what they listen. Therefore, teachers should bear in mind that background knowledge not

only helps students have better listening experience, but also helps them to become more active listener than passive one.

However, conveying of culture is inevitable if culture is consciously or unconsciously part of the teachers' pedagogic aims. The content of what is taught have been always in some way related to culture as Tsou (2005) asserts "each lesson is about something and that something is culture" (p.20).

### ***Implications***

The implication of the results is that what should be taken into consideration is to provide Iranian EFL course books for an intercultural communication. Since they focus on immoderately language forms, not having enough diverse social issues and do not fulfill student's awareness of the target language culture. According to the result of study Teachers should bear in mind that background knowledge not only helps students have better listening experience, but also helps them to become more active listener than passive one.

### ***Further research***

Conducting the investigation on the effect of cultural materials on listening comprehension of intermediate learners of English language leaves room for implications and suggestions for further research whether different levels (elementary-pre-intermediate and advanced levels) would be influenced by applying the schema-based processing to the same degree, Or if at all levels listening proficiency levels over ride the cultural knowledge. Moreover, the participants in this study were male and female randomly and the factor of gender was not taken into account, so hereafter researches can raise this question; if there is a relationship between gender and listening comprehension based on cultural knowledge? In this study, two types of three cultural materials were investigated. Thus, the results of this study could be extended by investigating the third one that whether the international target language materials will influence the listening comprehension of EFL learners of different levels.

### ***Limitations of the study***

The Prior limitation of this study was the length of the treatment for three groups. Maybe this length of time is not long enough to reach a reasonable result and consequently their listening comprehension abilities. Future studies can allocate more time to the treatment period and deal with more listening materials. Another limitation of this study was the number of the participants. By increasing the number of participants and the period of treatment, the reliability of the finding can be enhanced. Thus, the generalized point is limited

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