The Shortcomings of Teaching Listening in the Institutional Setting in Iran[*]

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THIS article will discuss the underlying reasons for the underdevelopment of listening comprehension skill among Iranian learners from a pedagogical point of view. Listening encompasses the many processes involved in understanding and making sense of spoken language. These include recognizing speech sounds, understanding the meaning of individual words, and/or understanding the syntax of the sentences in which they are presented. For longer texts, listening also involves a great deal of intellectual activity to link the causal relationships expressed in the discourse.

However, developing listening comprehension is not just about listening to an audio document and trying to answer a range of global and detailed questions. It is also about preparing learners before the actual listening with the help of pre-listening activities, which are discussed in depth in the present article, as well as post-listening activities which are aimed at, among others, analyzing one's mistakes and learning from them.

The importance of this research resides in the fact that a large number of Iranian graduates have to pass high-stakes language tests in order to immigrate. However, many of these candidates fail to achieve the level they need in the listening test while doing relatively well in the speaking test.

This is especially true for tests of French such as TEF and TEFAQ and in a lesser extent for tests of English such as the IELTS. One might suppose that since listening naturally precedes speaking, candidates must have a more difficult task dealing with speaking tests. Nevertheless, there is a large body of convincing evidence justifying the intrinsic complexity of the listening tests.

Many researches have been conducted, in Iran and abroad alike, to address the issue from a learner's point of view but very few have shed light on how teachers' teaching habits could shape learners' perspective.

The problem addressed in this study is, in particular, to understand how the gap between the levels of the two oral skills in the majority of Iranian learners is affected by the teaching habits of Iranian teachers. To this end, a questionnaire was designed and posted online or sent to the teachers' e-mails. The printed version of the questionnaire was also distributed in language institutes in Lāhījān, Rasht, and Tehran. Sixty teachers who taught adults at the time were chosen to participate. Of these, 27 taught French and 33 taught English. The majority of the participants were women while only 14 male teachers participated in the survey. The average age of the participants was 29.7, and the average teaching experience of them was 5.6 years.

The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section gathered general information such as gender, age, teaching experience, and academic degree as well as the participant's attitude towards the four language skills. To protect privacy and encourage free expression, the questionnaire did not include a "name" field. The second section of the questionnaire targeted the teaching practices of teachers and their frequency, including pre-listening and post-listening activities. The third and last section collected information on how many times teachers would have their learners listen to the same audio document and how often they would rewind a key part of the audio for the learners. It also included an open-ended question, prompting participants to describe the techniques they would employ, which was not addressed in the questionnaire.

Based on the results, four conclusions were drawn: First, teachers give the priority to speaking; thus, instilling this mentality into their learners through their classroom practices. Second, Iranian teachers make learners listen to the spoken text a second time as the only possible solution to incomprehension. However, there is little virtue in listening over and over without some effective intervention on the part of the teacher. Third, teachers do not cultivate in their learners problem-solving abilities. This is not to say that they do not invite their learners to use their understanding of

the context to guess the meaning of the words that are unknown to them, but nurturing a problem-solving frame of mind necessitates critical thinking skills before any other thing. Finally, Iranian teachers do not recognize pre-listening activities. Even when there are pre-listening activities, they are only considered as a simple introduction to the topic, whereas the right implementation of such activities would equip learners with what they need for a pleasant listening experience.

Keywords— listening comprehension, educational shortcomings, Iranian teachers, Iranian learners, high-stakes tests, pre-listening activities, listening comprehension difficulties.

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