

Listen

Listening Comprehension Activities

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Introduction

Listening comprehension is one of the most fundamental language skills. Primarily, it is the basis of communication in real life situations, communication is feasible only when the two parties involved are able to comprehend each other. Likewise, it is the axis of communication and learning in the classroom setting. This skill is, therefore, highly emphasized in language classes because without an appropriate input, no proper output is manifested. That is why this skill is considered as the prerequisite of speaking ability. Only after competence in listening comprehension has been established, can learners take on performance and develop it toward communication fluency (Farhady, Jafarpoor, Birjandy, 1995).

On the other hand, listening can be regarded as one of the most complicated and cumbersome language skills to develop. Firstly, languages we hear have built-in redundancy which means that utterances

contain more information than necessary for comprehension. Therefore, the listener needs to be very attentive to perceive all the elements of the text he hears. However, attending to every word and utterance is a tedious and frustrating job, as well as a counterproductive class activity. More importantly, it is beyond the capacity of the auditory perception of every listener. Secondly, in the act of oral communication, the stream of speech continues without waiting for the listener to catch up, so there is no possible opportunity to regress or mediate. Moreover, the absence of the speaker

various aspects of their instruction, from methods of teaching to kinds of term projects. The researchers believe that there should be committees for literally every course of the program in which decisions have to be made about even the very minute issues encountered by the students as well as the instructors.

5) Inter-branch assessments can be conducted in certain intervals to increase students' motivation and to insure that the standards are observed in different branches. The inter-branch assessments can also be conducted in the form of centralized evaluations either on a term or yearly basis.

6) The courses included in the curriculum need a thorough revision, with respect to their relevance, contents, materials, and methods of teaching.

7) The objectives of this major set by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education are not clearly stated. In fact attempts should be made to delineate the objectives so that the knowledge and skills of graduate students can be evaluated against them objectively. An international English proficiency assessment test like TOFEL can be used for evaluating graduates' English proficiency. Regarding the other objectives of the program, appropriate criterion tests must be developed.

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- Students find English To Farsi translation more applicable.
- Students do not find all courses equally useful. Methodology and Morphology are evaluated as very useful. The reason may be that the former has application in teaching and the latter teaches them roots, suffixes, and prefixes which ultimately increase their knowledge of vocabulary.
- Students are generally dissatisfied with the outcomes of the program.

Implications

1) It was found that the admitted applicants to English translation major are *not* competent enough to be able to benefit optimally from the educational program they undergo. In other words, freshman students of this major are too weak in their English to be helped by different educational variables. Perhaps if the major were not headed for training translators and if it were simply developed to increase the English knowledge of the students, admitting applicants with such inadequate knowledge of English could be justified, because in that case the curriculum would consist of different courses of English language teaching and the whole program would pursue one single objective, ie producing competent English speakers. The researchers suggest that the current English translation major presented at the undergraduate level be modified and changed to a graduate major. Instead, a new English major can be developed for the undergraduate level which can function also as the foundation of the other existing English-related graduate majors of TEFL, linguistics, and English literature.

2) The next issue relates to the variability observed among subjects of the same stage in different branches. Every educational program is developed for a particular audience and if for any reason there is too much heterogeneity among the students, most naturally that program will not be able to fulfill its objectives. Since English translation major applicants of Tehran prefer to study in one of Tehran branches, the result of this inevitable competition is that less competent applicants get admitted in the branches of IAU in the neighboring towns of Tehran. As a result, freshman students of different branches are not at the same level of knowledge particularly with regard to general English proficiency. It may be helpful for all branches to administer a placement test to newly-admitted students based on which they can determine how much instruction they need before they can be mainstreamed into the regular program. In fact if the level of the students, admitted each year to every branch, is within a fixed range and does not fluctuate from year to year, the placement test will not need to be administered every year but once after which the intensity and duration of the pre-university courses (as it is called nowadays) can be determined.

3) With the high number of students in classes (sometimes up to 60 in some cases) even the most ideal programs are bound to fail. This problem becomes more detrimental in courses such as Language Lab, Advanced Writing, and different translation courses where students need to receive direct feedback from their instructors on their performance.

4) The program is also suffering from the discrepancies among the instructors regarding

half of the program. As a result, students always show progress from one stage to another, although they are capable of limited translation even at the onset of the program, at Stage 1. The reason for this very behavior is that knowing some grammar and having a bilingual dictionary can suffice for a poor translation.

Conclusion 2

Regarding the success of the program, it was not possible to evaluate the performance of subjects objectively since no such criteria are proposed by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The two tests were originally developed based on what a few instructors in this major expected from the English Translation graduates. The researcher decided to set the tests themselves as criteria for the interpretation and evaluation of the results. Put more simply, based on experience, 75% of the maximum possible score in each test was taken as the criterion, which resulted in the score of 60 in the graded general English test (maximum possible score being 80) and 22.5 in the translation test (maximum possible score being 30). The mean of Term 7 (Stage 4) subjects had to reach the two criteria for program to be evaluated as successful. In none of the branches, such high means were obtained, neither in the general English proficiency test nor in the translation test.

Conclusion 3

Inter-branch comparisons revealed that subjects of the same stage in different branches do not belong to the same population. In fact in all four stages of the program, it was possible to determine the highest and the lowest groups

of subjects based on their average performance. Roodehen and Takestan had consistently the lowest means, while Tehran-North usually had the highest means. High performance of subjects in TNB may partially be related to the fact that one of the two researchers is a faculty member at this very branch and hence the subjects felt more responsible in taking the tests with all their potentials. The entrance examination may be another reason for such a variability because most naturally applicants with higher competence in English try to get admitted in branches located in Tehran. This variability may have external sources as well such as instructor, materials, assessment, and term projects.

Conclusion 4

What can be concluded from the information obtained from the questionnaires can be categorized as the following:

- Students do not have sufficient and accurate information about the objectives and content of the major prior to applying for it.
- Students do not have an accurate evaluation of the degree of their English language proficiency neither upon enrolling as freshman students nor when they are about to graduate.
- Students do not make serious attempts to compensate for their English language incompetence after they are admitted to the university.
- Students do not realize the role that English language and translation can and should play in their career and hence only a small minority is or plans to be involved with jobs which require a relative mastery of the English language.

single branch. In statistical terms, it can be said that students of English Translation Major at different stages of the program do not and possibly cannot belong to one single population. In nontechnical terms, one can say that English translation students are indeed influenced by the program and improve from one stage to the next. To find how many populations may exist, the exact location of significant mean differences were found. In Tehran-North Branch, regarding both abilities, two distinct populations could be found; the turning point seemed to be some time in their sophomore year. In Tehran-South Branch, the leap took place in the first year, since the subjects there did not show significant improvement in their sophomore, and junior years. Their translation ability, however, once again increased noticeably towards the end of the program. Tehran-Central Branch, however, enjoyed a gradual improvement in both abilities from one stage to the next. In Garmsar, the same gradual improvement was observed, especially with regard to the translation ability. Karaj subjects can be categorized to two populations, the hypothetical border line falling some time in their sophomore year; significant improvement was observed in both knowledge areas as subjects moved from their second to third year. In Takestan, subjects at Stages 1 and 2, ie Terms 1 and 3, belonged more or less to the same population. Nevertheless, they manifested significant improvements at Stages 3 and 4. Roodehen subjects available only at Stages 1 and 2 did prove to belong to two different populations with respect to both knowledge areas. Finally, subjects in all branches manifested gradual improvement in translation

ability from one stage to another. Regarding general English proficiency, however, the improvement was more notable from Term 1 to 3 and 3 to 5.

The underlying causes of this pattern of progress may be of different sources:

- Students are usually more motivated in the first terms of their education. Their motivation may be caused by their long strive for getting admitted to the university which is indeed a great success for the majority of Iranian high-school graduates. Furthermore, it may be due to the fact that they have begun a new era of their life and thus are very excited about it. Their excitement and motivation usually diminishes as they reach the later terms of their study.

- In the first three or four terms, students have to pass so many different general English courses. In fact, the curriculum is designed in a way that technical courses are to be taken after the general English of students has improved to some extent. Thus, the courses offered from Term 5 onward are designed to increase the knowledge of students in areas other than English, such as theories of translation, literary criticism, general linguistics, methods of language teaching and testing. In fact, the main progress in general English proficiency is expected to happen in the first two years when courses are particularly headed for this objective. Regarding translation ability, it can be argued that the progress observed in first two years is the result of the improvement they make in general English proficiency. The progress observed in the second half of the program may be the outcome of taking various translation courses particularly offered in this

tests. The a priori comparisons were made between the freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors of all the branches holistically and every branch separately. Another series of one-way ANOVA analyses was conducted to compare the students of different branches with each other.

2. Fisher's Least Significant Test or Protected *t* was used for making multiple comparisons between means with a significant overall F value. The reason for the application of Fisher's LSD was to control the likelihood of Type I errors (Howell, 1989, p 236).

3. The Scheffe Test, as a more conservative test, was performed to make post hoc comparisons between the means regardless of whether or not the overall F was significant. Generally speaking, the Scheffe test makes it harder to reject a true null hypothesis (and thus committing a Type I error) by increasing the critical value.

4. The t-Test was employed to compare the means of pairs of independent samples in one of the branches where subjects were available only at two levels.

5. Pearson Product Moment was used to find out possible trends of togetherness between the translation ability and general English proficiency. In the pilot study, a few correlational coefficients studies were also computed for reliability and validity purposes.

6. The results of the questionnaires were analyzed based on the artificial scales (Henning, 1987) used to objectify the data and then transformed into percentages for easy interpretation.

Results

The two hypotheses were tested against the data obtained from every single branch and against the data of all branches as a whole. Literally, in all cases the obtained F-ratios for the means of groups of subjects on the general proficiency and the translation tests were highly significant (with less than 0.0001% probability of error) and thus both hypotheses were strongly rejected. Post hoc tests indicated that the mean of every group of subjects is not significantly different from the subjects of the next or previous terms. Comparing the means of the subjects of every term across all branches always yielded significant F-ratios indicating that the subjects of the same terms from different branches do not belong to one single population. Running a series of correlational computations between the scores in the two tests of general English and translation ability yielded coefficients ranging from 0.59 to 0.79. The correlation coefficient of 921 subjects in the two tests turned out to be 0.64. The data obtained from the questionnaires were quite revealing regarding the subjects' expectations, self-evaluations, jobs, use of English language, experience in translation, and some other variables related to the success of such programs.

Conclusions

The following conclusions were reached from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered and analyzed in this research project:

Conclusion 1

The two null hypotheses were strongly rejected in all branches as a whole and in every

students have about 12 credits of English literature which give them a good background for literary translation. Journalistic translation was chosen for a similar reason and that is the emphasis given to the translation of news in various courses of this program.

3. A questionnaire was developed to gather qualitative data on the senior students' opinions regarding the general and specific issues of the program.

The final versions of all the three instruments were made only after they had been revised based on the comments of three colleagues and the outcomes of the pilot study in Tehran-North Branch.

Scoring

The scoring procedure can be analyzed in three phases:

1. The general English proficiency tests were scored manually using a key.

2. The scoring of almost 1000 production translation tests may be considered even more challenging than the actual gathering of data in that size. A scale of four factors was developed consulting the expert instructors of literature and translation; the four factors being structure, vocabulary, naturalness, and general comprehension of message. First, two raters scored only 100 tests randomly chosen from the exact sum of 992 papers. Then the raters were evaluated for their inter and intra-rater reliability on those 100 tests. Since the results indicated that the raters are consistent in their scoring, only one of them rated the remaining 892 translations.

3. A sum of 212 questionnaires were

carefully analyzed and the findings were converted to percentages for easy interpretations.

Procedure

Since the study was designed to have a cross-sectional approach towards data gathering and wished to evaluate the status quo, the researcher had to administer the tests to the different groups of subjects without any particular treatment. The important issue was to evaluate an ongoing program without any kind of interference which could result in the betterment or deterioration of the program.

The general proficiency tests were administered in one 80-minute class session. The answers were to be written on answer sheets. The translation test, also taken in 80 minutes, was administered in another session with an interval of 2 to 15 days. Subjects were allowed to use English-to-Farsi dictionaries and thus had to be notified of the day of the translation exam in order to bring their dictionaries along. They were asked to write their answers on separate sheets of paper. The questionnaires were distributed on a different day only to seniors and were to be answered in a 10-minute period.

Data Analysis

The statistical analyses conducted in this study were mainly based on different parametric methods of comparing averages. The ones used here are listed below:

1. One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the average performance of students in general English proficiency and translation

subjects (having passed a total of 110 to 125 credits) were compared with 32 senior seventh term students on both general English and English-to-Farsi translation tests. No significant difference was observed between the mean performance of the two groups on both tests and thus it was cautiously concluded that the performance of the seventh term subjects can represent the exit behavior of graduating students, too.

Instrumentation

Few issues were taken into consideration regarding the instrumentation to be used in this research:

- Subjects at different levels of the program had to be evaluated using the same tests in general English and translation ability to make mean comparisons possible.
- The available general proficiency English tests such as TOEFL and FCE, being too difficult for the subjects, did not enjoy a satisfactory level of discrimination power. Thus, a graded general Proficiency English test had to be developed.
- Since no standardized English to Farsi test was available, a graded one had to be developed.

The instruments developed to serve the purposes of this research are the followings:

1. An 80-item multiple choice test was designed to measure the subjects' general English proficiency. It consisted of 24 structure items, 24 vocabulary items, 24 reading comprehension items, and finally 8 function items. The structure items were based on the content of the material of the two Four-credit

courses the students of English Translation pass in the first two terms of the program. The items were arranged from easy to difficult, ie basic and frequently used structures were tested first. The order of the grammatical structures based on which the items were developed was checked with different English course-books as well as with three EFL teachers. The vocabulary items were mainly based on the book *Essential Words for the TOEFL* (1993) which introduces words in an easy-to-difficult fashion. The four reading comprehension passages were selected from among the TOEFL reading comprehension passages and ESL teaching textbooks based on their readability calculated by the Fog Formula which turned out to be 13, 17.2, 19.4, and 21.5. It should be mentioned that the average readability of 10 reading comprehension passages chosen randomly from different TOEFL tests was calculated to be 22 based on the Fog Formula. The eight function items were developed with regard to the range of interactions the students of English Translation are expected to handle as consulted with three instructors who teach different courses of this program.

2. A production test was developed with the aim of measuring the students' ability in English-to-Farsi translation, the kind of translation which is emphasized in almost all their translation courses. The test consisted of six isolated sentences each presenting a challenging point in translation, and four paragraphs two of which resembled the excerpts the students work on in their literary and journalistic translation courses. The reason for including these two types of text in the test was that the

different kinds of texts.

For investigating whether the two objectives of the program are realized or not, this study attempted to evaluate the gradual improvement of the students with regard to their general English proficiency and translation skill in seven branches of Islamic Azad University (IAU).

Design

Descriptive developmental researches are usually conducted longitudinally, in which one case or a large sample of subjects are evaluated at different stages of their progress (Cohen, and Manion, 1989). Nevertheless, there are many cross-sectional descriptive studies in the literature of SLA and particularly first language acquisition in which representatives of age groups or stages of development simultaneously undergo a thorough investigation and the typical behaviors of each of these stages are compared with each other to trace the patterns of change (Cohen and manion, 1989, Shatz, 1982; Slobin, 1982). Due to time limitations, this study, too, had to be conducted cross-sectionally, evaluating the subjects at four stages with the assumption that every year, the admitted students into the English translation program are more or less at the same level with regard to their general English proficiency and translation ability. This assumption was based on the fact that the same criteria are employed for the screening of applicants in different years, and thus freshman students of the English translation major of different years enjoy more or less the same level of competency in general English.

Hypotheses

The quantitative data gathered in this study were analyzed to test the following two hypotheses:

1) There is no significant difference between the average performance of subjects at four levels of the program in the graded general English proficiency test.

2) There is no significant difference between the average performance of subjects at four levels of the program in the graded English to Farsi translation test.

Subjects

The population being all the undergraduate students majoring in the English translation program both in state and IAU, the sample of this research was selected from seven branches of IAU in Tehran and the neighboring towns, ie Tehran-North, Tehran-Central, Tehran-South, Garmsar, Karaj, Takestan, and Roodehen branches. From every branch, a sample of at least 140 subjects was randomly chosen. Every group of 140 subjects comprised of 4 groups of students (usually 30 to 40 subjects each), representing the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students. The freshman subjects were all in their first term and had at most 8 weeks of instruction in general English courses only. The sophomores were in their third term and had passed 30 to 35 credits. Junior students, being in their fifth term, had passed a sum of 65 to 70 credits. Senior students, having passed about 100 to 110 credits, were usually in their seventh term. In the pilot study in Tehran-North Branch, 30 eighth term

could have had a better record, had it been fully implemented.

Introduction

The ever growing diversity of human knowledge has led to the establishment of numerous different categories of science and, thus, the advent of hundreds of various disciplines each requiring its own methodology and, inevitably, its system of evaluation. The discipline of second/foreign language teaching is no exception to the aforementioned fact although there is a consensus that the evaluation part of the field has not received the attention it deserves. Beretta (1992) complains about this very shortcoming and states that "to date, very few books have appeared on the evaluation of language teaching programs in general" which "compares unfavorably with the general field of educational evaluation" (p 5). The status quo is that evaluation though "an intrinsic part" (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1996, p 3) of foreign/second language teaching is not a widely-practiced activity.

Generally speaking, evaluation in education and language teaching takes its specific formal and informal forms. It ranges from small-scale classroom quizzes to large-scale evaluations of textbooks and curricula. Johnson (1989), in his overview of the book *the Second Language Curriculum*, asserts that curriculum development and renewal can only proceed effectively if supported by evaluation. The significance of evaluation becomes more patent when one realizes that there is *not* always a direct equation between planning, teaching,

and learning. In other words, there is always this concern that what is planned will not necessarily be taught and what is taught will not necessarily be learned (Nunan, 1989). The reason may be that in the implementation of what is to be done at each of these three stages, the involved parties run into problems. Evaluation studies, in general, aim at first confirming the existence of faulty implementations in the aforementioned stages and then at locating their whereabouts.

The undergraduate English translation program in Iran has become one of the most wanted majors in humanities and every year thousands of students enroll in this program with the hope of becoming competent speakers of English with specialized abilities to translate Farsi to English and more desirably English to Farsi. The complications of this program particularly arise from the duality of its objectives. In fact, one cannot categorize it as an ordinary language teaching (TEFL) program since it also aims at training translators. That is, this major is not designed just to teach English language to Iranian students at an undergraduate level, nor is it designed just to train students who are competent in Farsi and English and only need to learn the theoretical and practical principles of translation. The Supreme Council of Programming in the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education has set the following two objectives for this program:

1. gaining general proficiency in all the four skills of English language, and
2. gaining translation skills and having adequate opportunities to actually translate