

The Effect of Yemeni EFL Learners' Low Listening Proficiency on Their Performance in the TOEFL IBT Integrated Test of Writing

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Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the relationship between students' weakness in listening skill and its effect on their performance in the TOEFL IBT integrated task of writing. It also investigates the balance among the students' four language skills. The participants of the study are senior students of Rada'a Education College of Albaydaa University, Yemen. Thirty learners are systematically chosen. They are given an integrated task of writing taken from TOEFL IBT and an independent writing task. The analysis of the data revealed that the scores obtained in the writing task based on listening were very low, if compared with the scores obtained in the independent writing task. It showed that the lower performance of the students in the integrated task is not also attributed to students' reading or grammatical and lexical weakness, rather, it is due to the students' listening problems since most of the words given in the listening passage are familiar to the students. The findings revealed that the students' poor listening comprehension is merely a reflection of what they were taught. They have almost received no training in listening if compared with other courses of reading, writing and grammar.

Keywords: TOEFL; Listening; Integrated Test of Writing; Yemen

Introduction

Insightful observation of English teaching practices in Yemen has noticed that the teaching of the skill of listening is still the weakest link in the language teaching processes. Although learners have highly mastered English grammar basics and vocabulary, their listening comprehension of social

contexts is often weak (Almansoob & Alrefaee, 2018). The method of grammar-translation of teaching English has been found inappropriate to the demands for producing efficient English listeners and speakers. This study casts light on the students' listening proficiency at Albaydaa University, Rada'a Education College and compares such proficiency with the other skills, most notably, writing.

Most Yemeni university students are good and proficient in reading and writing but when it comes to listening and speaking, they face many challenges due to the insufficient materials taught in the college accompanied by the students' absence of awareness (Ahmed, 2018). There is an absolute absence of the facilities such as tapes, recorders, videos, computers, data shows, visual supports, and also new copies of course books for the students to promote listening skills (Hwaider, 2017). This has resulted in the students' difficulty encountering situation when they listen to native speakers. One major problem facing graduates is when they have a TOFFL test, especially the new version, TOEFL IBT. The new integrated task of writing needs to use more than one language skill. It reflects the way language is used on campus everyday—from the bookstore to the classroom. The new test of writing requires learners to write a response to materials they have read and heard. This kind of test is new when it comes to Yemeni university students whose study is based on individual skills. They are trained well to write and read. Yemeni University learners are taught four courses in writing and four in reading in the first and second levels. However, listening is totally ignored in the university curricula. This study is meant to figure out the students' weakness in listening, compared with the other language skills, namely, reading and writing.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Listening has an important role both in academic contexts and in daily life. It is of vital importance for people to maintain effective communication (Yıldırım & Yıldırım, 2016). In spite of the importance of listening in the development of the cognitive and communicative skills, it has not yet taken its important position in language teaching and learning and in curriculum designing. Listening courses are almost ignored in college teaching in Yemen. In the recent history of English language pedagogy in the country, some techniques of Grammar-Translation Method and other traditional teaching approaches have been widely adopted and teachers highly concentrate on improving the writing skills of their learners. However, authentic and real life exposure of L2 is considered a secondary if not marginal goal in teaching. Cultivating the listening and speaking skills of the learners, as a result, is paid less attention. In this lame approach, EFL learners are turned to be totally passive. They greatly depend on their teachers who in turn receive a zero amount of preservice training in authentic listening (Hwaider, 2017). Although the learners get significant amounts of grammar and English words, they have commonly been unable to apply their L2 knowledge to real life contexts. As a result, being in a direct contact with a native English speaker for them is a challenge. They have found it difficult to be involved in a spoken conversation and to adapt to college English teaching. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to find out the students' competence in other skills, most notably, writing and reading, where the students have received some trainings during the study years and compare it with listening where students have received almost nothing except what they hear orally from the teachers. It aims at investigating the effect of the

absence of listening training courses for the senior students of Rada'a Education College on their performance in the TOEFL exam.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Listening is the first language mode that children acquire. It provides the foundation for all aspects of language and cognitive development, and it plays a life-long role in the processes of communication. A study by Wilt (1950) reveals that people listen 45 % of the time they spend communicating. This study is still widely cited (e.g., Martin, 1987; Strother, 1987). Wilt contends that 30 % of communication time was spent speaking, 16 % reading, and 9 % writing. Such a finding confirms what Rankin discovered in 1928, that people spent 70 % of their waking time communicating and that three-fourths of this time was spent listening and speaking. A proficient listener is capable of doing these four things simultaneously.

According to Bulletin (1952), listening is the fundamental language skill. It is the medium through which people gain a large portion of their education, their information, their understanding of the world and of human affairs, their ideals, sense of values, and their appreciation. In this day of mass communication, much of it oral, it is of vital importance that students are taught to listen effectively and critically. According to second language acquisition theory, language input is the most essential condition of language acquisition. As an input skill, listening plays a crucial role in students' language development. Krashen (1985) argues that people acquire language by understanding the linguistic information they hear. Therefore, language acquisition is achieved mainly through receiving understandable input and listening ability is the critical component in achieving understandable language input. It is essential for language teachers to help students become effective listeners.

Howatt and Dakin (1974) define listening as the ability to identify and understand what others are saying. This process involves understanding a speaker's accent or pronunciation, the speaker's grammar and vocabulary, and comprehension of meaning. Thomlison's (1984) definition of listening includes "active listening" which goes beyond comprehending as understanding the message content to comprehension as an act of empathetic understanding of the speaker.

Furthermore, Gordon (1985) argues that empathy is essential to listening and contends that it is more than a polite attempt to identify a speaker's perspectives. Rather more importantly, the empathetic understanding expands to "egocentric pro social behavior". Thus, the listener altruistically acknowledges concern for the speaker's welfare and interests. Ronald and Roskelly (1985) define listening as an active process requiring the same skills of prediction, hypothesizing, checking, revising, and generalizing that writing and reading demand; and these authors present specific exercises to make students active listeners who are aware of the "inner voice" one hears when writing. Alrefae (2018) applauds that proficiency of EFL Yemeni learners is not enough if they have no knowledge of the actual use of the language in a social context. According to him, Yemeni EFL learners fail to understand and convey the meaning yet they are proficient in English. Listening is not only to understand the semantic meanings of words but also includes the pragmatic contextual meaning of words in a social context.

There are two closely related studies regarding the Yemeni context. The first study is that of Hwaider (2017). In this study, the researcher investigated into the problems Yemeni teachers encounter when teaching listening for their students. Fifty secondary school teachers responded to a questionnaire. Her study concluded that the listening skill is the most difficult among all language skills for the learners. The findings revealed that there is a set of linguistic and nonlinguistic problems in listening.

Yassin and Abdul Razak (2018) conducted a study investigating Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Among Yemeni University Learners of English with a particular scale in the skills of listening and speaking. The major findings of the study revealed that the learners experience a moderate level of anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The participants of this study are the students of senior level in Albaydaa University, College of Education. The total number of the students is 80 but due to time limitation and instrument unavailability, the researcher systematically chose 30 students.

The participants are asked to write an essay based on a recorded video of university lecture and a written paragraph related to the same topic of the recorded video. This kind of an integrated task was chosen deliberately to show how listening is going to affect their performance in writing and to compare listening with the other skills. Another independent test of writing an essay was also given to the participants to find their performance and compared it with that of the integrated task of writing.

Method of Sampling

The researcher used serial numbers for all the individuals in the research population. Then, the researcher selected every fourth person till the required number was complete.

Data collection instrument

Responses to all writing tasks were also collected. The responses were, then, evaluated by two to four raters, colleagues in the college, on a score scale of 0 to 20 according to the Rubrics below. The answer to the integrated writing task is evaluated on the quality of writing (preciseness, appropriateness, organization and use of vocabulary and grammar). The evaluators realize that test takers' writing is the first draft. Test takers are not expected to write a comprehensive well-structured essay. As a result, a test taker may obtain a good score with a response that has some errors.

Table No. 1. Independent Writing Rubrics

| Marks | Basis of correction |
|-------|---------------------|
|-------|---------------------|

| | |
|------|--|
| 10-8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following: • effectively addresses the topic and task • Is well organized and well developed, using clearly appropriate explanations, exemplifications, and/or details • Displays unity, progression, and coherence • Displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety, appropriate word choice, and idiomaticity, though it may have minor lexical or grammatical errors |
| 7-5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay at this level largely accomplishes all of the following: • Addresses the topic and task well, though some points may not be fully elaborated • Is generally well organized and well developed, using appropriate and sufficient explanations, exemplifications, and/or details • Displays unity, progression, and coherence, though it may contain occasional redundancy, digression, or unclear connections • Displays facility in the use of language, demonstrating syntactic variety and range of vocabulary, • though it will probably have occasional noticeable minor errors in structure, word form, or use of idiomatic language that do not interfere with meaning |
| 4-2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay at this level may reveal one or more of the following weaknesses: • Limited development in response to the topic and task • Inadequate organization or connection of ideas • Inappropriate or insufficient exemplifications, explanations, or details to support or illustrate generalizations in response to the task • A noticeably inappropriate choice of words or word forms • An accumulation of errors in sentence structure and/or usage |
| 2-1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay at this level is seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses: • Serious disorganization or underdevelopment • Little or no detail, or irrelevant specifics, or questionable responsiveness to the task • Serious and frequent errors in sentence structure or usage |
| 0 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An essay at this level merely copies words from the topic, rejects the topic, or is otherwise not connected to the topic, is written in a foreign language, consists of keystroke characters, or is blank |

The basis of correction mentioned in table 1 and 2 was taken from the TOEFL website, modification, omission were also made to meet the purpose of the study.

Table No. 2. Integrated task

| | |
|-------|---|
| marks | |
| 10-8 | <p>A response at this level successfully selects the important information from the lecture and coherently and accurately presents this information in relation to the relevant information presented in the reading.</p> <p>The response is well organized, and occasional language errors that are present do not result in inaccurate or imprecise presentation of content or connections</p> |
| 7-5 | <p>A response at this level is generally good in selecting the important information from the lecture and in coherently and accurately presenting this information in relation to the relevant information in the reading, but it may have minor omission, inaccuracy, vagueness, or imprecision of some content from the lecture or in connection to points made in the reading. A response is also scored at this level if it has more frequent or noticeable minor language errors, as long as such usage and grammatical structures do not result in anything more than an occasional lapse of clarity or in the connection of ideas</p> |
| 4-2 | <p>A response at this level contains some important information from the lecture and conveys some relevant connection to the reading, but it is marked by one or more of the following:</p> <p>Although the overall response is definitely oriented to the task, it conveys only vague, global, unclear, or somewhat imprecise connection of the points made in the lecture to points made in the reading.</p> <p>The response may omit one major key point made in the lecture.</p> <p>Some key points made in the lecture or the reading, or connections between the two, may be incomplete, inaccurate, or imprecise.</p> <p>Errors of usage and/or grammar may be more frequent or may result in noticeably vague expressions or obscured meanings in conveying ideas and connections</p> |
| 1 | <p>A response at this level contains some relevant information from the lecture, but is marked by significant language difficulties or by significant omission or inaccuracy of important ideas from the lecture or in the connections between the lecture and the reading; a response at this level is marked by one or more of the following:</p> <p>The response significantly misrepresents or completely omits the overall connection between the lecture and the reading.</p> <p>The response significantly omits or significantly misrepresents important points made in the lecture.</p> <p>The response contains language errors or expressions that largely obscure connections or meaning at key junctures or that would likely obscure understanding of key ideas for a reader not already familiar with the reading and the lecture.</p> |
| 0 | <p>A response at this level merely copies sentences from the reading, rejects the topic or is otherwise not connected to the topic, is written in a foreign language, consists of keystroke characters, or is blank</p> |

THE EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The chosen students, as mentioned, are the senior students of education college of Rada'a. They have never been exposed to such test before. The 20 students took two tests of writing. Since the aim of this study is to investigate the students' proficiency of listening, the students are given a prior test instruction of how to get the test answered and how to take notes while listening and reading. Then, test reading passage was distributed and the students were given one minute to read and take notes while reading, students then listened to a lecture related to the same topic and finally they wrote essays based on what they have read and heard. The second test was meant to test the students' writing ability to ensure that the lower performance in the integrated test of writing is as a result of listening. The test given to the students was taken from the TOEFL program, Kaplan version 2008.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data obtained from the two tests will be presented in detail. The analysis of data is divided into two parts. Part one is a comparison of the two tests, independent writing and dependent writing, where the independent variable is added, listening passage. Part two is an analysis of the data obtained from the dependent writing task where the students have written essays based on what they have listen and heard. The second part is meant to figure out whether the lower performance in writing is attributed to listening or reading passage.

Part one

The students were given two tests; one is independent writing task of writing where students are required to write an opinion and support it based on their own knowledge and experience and the other is a dependent writing task that requires test takers to write an essay based on materials they have read and heard.

Table no. 3 . simple comparison of the two tests

| Test of writing | N | Maximum score | Minimum score | Mean | Median |
|------------------|----|---------------|---------------|-------|--------|
| Independent test | 20 | 18 | 1 | 14.22 | 13.8 |
| Dependent test | 20 | 13 | 0 | 8.75 | 7.83 |

The above table shows that students' performance in the independent writing task is much better than dependent writing task. The scores of the tests indicate the significant differences as it shows that the independent task highest mark is 18 while it is only 13 in the integrated task.

According to table 3, the mean score of the independent task is 14.22(71.1%) whereas the mean score of students' performance in the integrated task of writing is 8.75(43.75%). The median in test 1 is also 13.8 while it is only 7.83 in test 2. The mode in test 1 is 14.5 while in test 2 is 10.5. The number of students who scored between 1 to 4 in independent writing task is only one while in the dependent writing task they are three students as shown in table 4.

Table no. 4. the students' scores interval

| Score interval | test 1 f | percentage | test 2 f | percentage |
|----------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|
|----------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|

| | | | | |
|-------|---|-----|---|-----|
| 1_4 | 1 | 5% | 3 | 15% |
| 5_8 | 1 | 5% | 7 | 35% |
| 9_12 | 7 | 30% | 8 | 40% |
| 13_16 | 9 | 45% | 2 | 10% |
| 17_20 | 3 | 15% | 0 | 0% |

Table 4 presents the students' scores interval along with their frequencies and percentages, test 1 is the independent writing task and test 2 is the integrated writing task.

The highest frequency in the independent task lies between 13 to 16 which showed that half of the students scored very well, unlike the other test of dependent writing task where the highest percentage lies between 5-8 and 9-12 which showed more than half of the students scores. The two figures below show the curve of the distribution of the mean, median and mode of the two tests.

Figure No. 1. Skewness of Test One

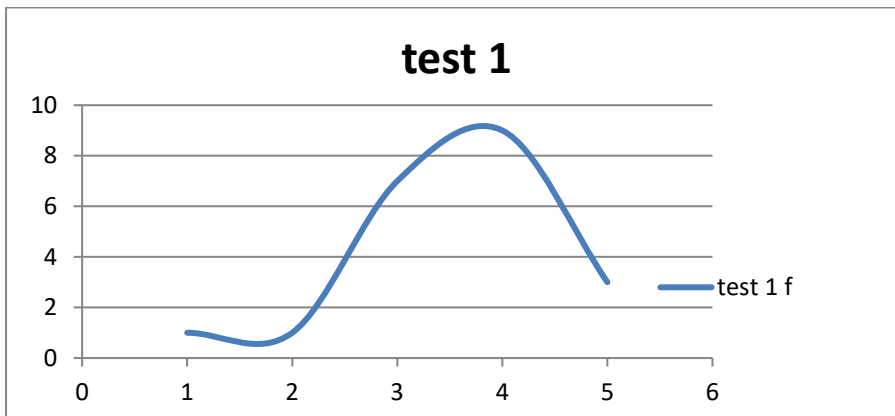


Figure one shows how the items are clustered around the average. It indicates the good performance in the test as the mean is higher than both the median and the mode. The curve shows negative skewness. In case of negative skewness, it is: $X < M < Z$

Figure No. 2. Skewness of Test 2

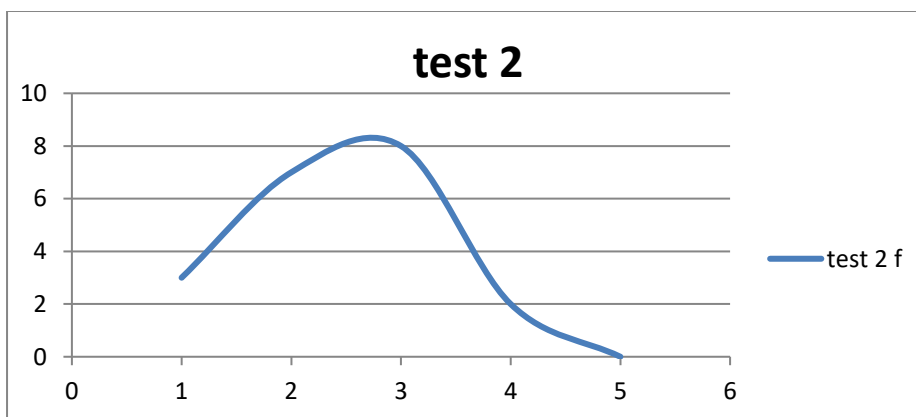


Figure two below shows how the items are clustered around the average. It indicates the low performance in the test as the mean is lower than both the median and the mode. The curve shows positive skewness. In case of positive skewness we have: $Z < M < X$

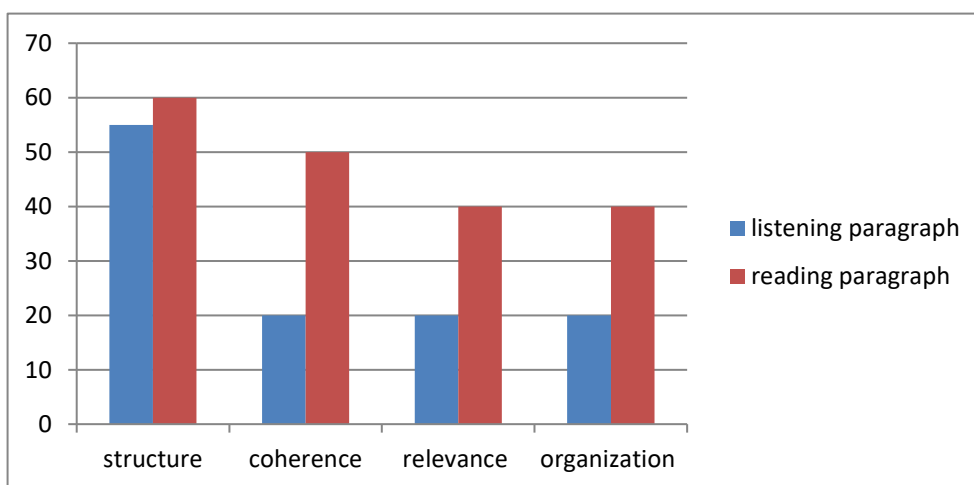
Part two

The mean scores of the students’ performance in the dependent writing task is 8.75 (43.75%) and the students mean scores of the independent writing task is 14.22 (71.1). This has proved that the students writing ability is good and the low performance in the integrated writing task may be as a result of reading passage or the lecture. For this matter, the researcher has reevaluated five students’ papers to figure out the reasons behind the low performance of the students, whether their low performance is attributed to the reading passage or the lecture. Each paper was reevaluated four times by the researcher. For example one evaluation was meant only for coherence of each reading and listening paragraph, the other three are for organization, relevance, structure. In every time, a mark was given.

Table No. 5. The Percentage Of Each of The Four Mentioned Writing Skills of Both Paragraphs of Listening and Reading.

| Writing skills | Paragraph percentage related to listening | paragraph related to Reading percentage |
|----------------|---|---|
| structure | 55 | 60 |
| coherence | 20 | 50 |
| relevance | 20 | 40 |
| organization | 20 | 40 |

Figure No. 3. Both The Percentages of The Reading and Listening Paragraphs



According to figure 3, the students' poor performance is not attributed to their reading and it is mainly because of listening. The structure of the two paragraphs is quite the same which also supported the idea that the students are good in grammar. Coherence, relevance and organization of the listening paragraph are very poor. They all share the same mark. This confirms the hypothesis that the poor performance of the students is as a result of their listening difficulties and not because of the reading passage. Though, the vocabulary in listening passage is much the same as the one in the reading, but the students are not aware of their pronunciation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are presented in the order of the research hypotheses. The poor performance of the students in the writing integrated task is attributed to their low proficiency in listening. The analysis revealed that students mean scores in the independent task is 71.1% while it is only 43.75% in the integrated writing task where students' writing was based on what they have read and heard. It simply means that students writing ability is good and the poor performance is not attributed to their writing skills rather it is mainly because of the students' listening problems. The analysis also revealed that students reading skill is good as it appears in reading related paragraph which, similarly, indicates that the students have no problem in reading either.

The students' proficiency in the other skills, writing and reading, is better than in listening in which they have received some training while studying. The percentages of reading related paragraph skill performance in the integrated writing task were 60%, 50%, 40% and 40% for structure, coherence, relevance and organization respectively. While, in the other hand, the listening related paragraph percentages are 55%, 20%, 20%, and 20% for structure, coherence, relevance and organization respectively. These percentages indicate that the students' grammatical and lexical skills are good. The sole reason behind their low performance is their lack of listening comprehension skills. This comes in line with Meyer and Sberanek (1985) argument that listening is neither spontaneous nor instinctive. Namely listening needs a symmetrical training just as other skills. Listening skills are essential for learning since they enable students to acquire insights and information, and to achieve success in communicating with others.

The results of the study proved that there is statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two tests. The results indicate that the poor performance of the integrated writing tasks is neither attributed to student reading skill nor to their lack of grammatical structure. Instead it is only because of their listening problems. The student skills of reading, writing and grammar are good as the students have received a lot of training while studying. The study has shown the importance of listening courses for university learners. Bulletin (1952) states that listening is the fundamental language skill. It is a vital source to access education, to get familiar with what is in the outside world. This is especially in this era of mass communication where information is orally presented. It has become a necessity to teach EFL learners how to listen critically and effectively.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that listening is a skill which urgently needs practice. This affirms Meyer and Sberanek (1985) argument that listening is neither spontaneous nor instinctive. Namely, listening needs a symmetrical training. It can be best developed with practice just as reading and writing. Guiding students through the process of listening provides them with the knowledge from which they can successfully complete a listening task; it also motivates them and puts them in control of their learning. The results of the experiment indicate that listening comprehension is foundational in learning a foreign language and courses for listening should be assigned in the university level just as other language skills. Furthermore, listening comprehension levels do influence the capacity for improvement in other language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing. The evidence from this study suggests sound reasons for emphasizing listening comprehension, which highlights the importance of spending much more time doing it in the process of teaching–learning a foreign language.

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APPENDIX

Writing integrated task

1. Passage

The students were given two minutes to read this passage then they listened to a lecture related to the same topic and they wrote essays on the basis of what they have read and heard.

Does TV affect school performance ?Many researchers have found that there are strong links between television viewing habits and children performance in school .Studies have shown that children who spend a lot of time in front of the T V get lower grades than their peers who watch little or no TV .it has been shown that children who have television sets in their bedrooms earn lower test scores than children with no television sets in their bedrooms .There are those who see television as a potential educational tool. However, there are actually very few programs on TV that teach children important academic or thinking skills. Most programs aimed at children, such as cartoons, for example, contain little valuable content. Children who spend more time watching TV, spend less time doing homework or interacting with other people. They learn to be passive rather than active. Research supports the view that parents interested in supporting their children’s’ success in school should keep the television turn off.

2. Transcript of listening passage

Available online, SEE REFERENCE

The independent writing-task

Every generation of people is different in imporatnt ways ,how do your generation different from your parents’ generation .use spcific reseans and example to explain your answer.

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