

DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' LISTENING COMPREHENSION THROUGH CALL FACILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Of the four skills that are generally acknowledged as fundamentals to learning a language, listening is probably the least respected in the Algerian schools, as it is not recognized in tests. Though undervalued, listening materials are currently accessible with accompanying CDs and DVDs. However, the lack of computer assisted language laboratories in Algerian middle and secondary schools effects the teaching and learning of English listening skill as pupils are not exposed to authentic language situations. Consequently, EFL students at the university level often fail to communicate in the target language. The present study, therefore, is an action research primarily concerned with developing EFL learners' listening comprehension in the environment where computer facilities are used. Its main objective is set out to determine the efficiency of CALL labs in enhancing learners' listening skill. In order to probe this objective, two research instruments were designed including tests and a questionnaire administered to teachers attentively designed to investigate learners' listening difficulties in addition to the importance of using CALL materials. In fact, two tests have been employed; a pre-test before the participants start studying listening through CALL and a post-test while learning through CALL to document their performance in both situations. The selected sample represents a group of thirty (30) first-year university learners randomly chosen from the wider population. The main findings obtained from this investigation demonstrated that most learners show a significant progress when learning listening using computers.

Keywords: Listening skill, listening comprehension, CALL, multimedia computing.

INTRODUCTION

The history of foreign language teaching was characterized by controversies and debates. In the past, listening was not recognized as the learning of a foreign language was based on reading and translation. However, changes in the beliefs about how people learn have largely influenced the foreign language methodology. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, audiolingualism appeared to produce learners who could communicate effectively in the target language. It put the listening skill at the forefront of language teaching pedagogy. The emphasis of this method was on listening to passages; mainly dialogues that contain target grammatical structures, the students would rote practice the dialogues thereby learning them.

In 1960, the method became very popular and the language laboratories began to surge. Soon after, Terrell developed the natural approach based on Stephan Krashen monitor model in which the listening skill was largely recognized. Krashen asserts that languages are acquired when people comprehend messages that he called comprehensible input. The latter hypothesis has also set the stage for James Asher's method called total physical response that

in turn placed listening before speaking. In this method, students are required to react physically to the teacher's orders in order to demonstrate comprehension. By the advent of communicative language teaching, listening became more recognized as the approach advocated the practice of natural language situations. Its main goal is to develop learners' communicative competence, which is the ability to produce utterances appropriate to the context of communication (Wilson, 2008). This approach recommends the use of audio-recordings presenting slices of real life that would not only reflect students' interests but also respond more adequately to the technology supported classrooms.

Kohn (2009) largely acknowledges the role of technology in providing a pioneering potential for modern approaches to language teaching and learning. Technology is mainly suggested to support the communicative objectives of language teaching as it facilitates authentication through multimedia resources. Indeed, the rapid emergence of technology in schools and at home has intensely transformed the teachers' methodology and the students' learning styles.

In this manner, McClintock stated that, "the advent of computers and computer-literate children produced many changes in the teaching and learning strategies used by educators." (qtd. in Moreno, 2010: 538). Consequently, multimedia computing (as its name indicates, it integrates a variety of media such as text graphics, animation, video, sounds and photos in one presentation), has become a new pedagogical tool in foreign language classrooms (Brett and González Lloret, 2009). As far as the listening skill is concerned, Hung (2010) argued that videos are valuable resources that can afford the linguistic and cultural authenticity for language teaching, especially listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Listening Skill

The language four skills are categorized as receptive or productive. Speaking and writing are productive skills whereas listening and reading are receptive skills. In addition, these skills are so integrated. What a learner practice through the exercise of a certain skill is strengthened through supplementary activities related to other skills. Throughout the process of language learning, learners listen then speak which demonstrates the importance of the listening skill in learning the speaking skill. Accordingly, Field (2008: 5) states, "listening is arguably the more important since it is listening which enriches the learner's spoken competence with new syntactic, lexical, phonological and pragmatic information". Nonetheless, it is sometimes considered as a passive skill. In this vein, Nunan (2003) contended that listening is a highly active and cognitive process that entails connecting the received input to already known information, which means that while listening people are "creating meaning". Aural input, in this sense, is crucial in the promotion of listening, thus, it has to be carefully scripted to learners containing target grammatical structures and/or target vocabulary (Wilson, 2008). Listening, usually, happens in the real time, thus comprehension has to take place immediately. It is the primary goal of listening; henceforth teachers have to reflect on what should be done to help learners get meaning from a listening activity.

Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is a key competence EFL learners need to practice for making successful communication. In fact, the term listening comprehension refers to the diverse procedures of decoding the spoken language. These entail knowing speech sounds, understanding the meaning of words and comprehending the syntax of statements. Field (2008) discussed comprehension as the intent towards which listening strives. It is principally the finale result of listening achieved by good listeners with slight apparent energy.

Chastain (1988) has divided listening comprehension into four main components. The first includes the capacity to differentiate between sounds, intonation patterns and the ability to distinguish sound qualities in the foreign language and the same sounds in the native language. Secondly, listening requires understanding the uttered message as a whole. The third component represents the listeners' ability to embrace that message in the auditory memory until it can be administered. The last component is comprehension that involves constructing meaning through relating signals from contextual information to existing knowledge.

Listening comprehension is, thus, difficult due to many causes. In their attempt to examine listening difficulties, researchers have tended to employ two models: the bottom-up and the top-down model. The former focused on decoding the smallest units as phonemes and syllables to lead listeners to meaning. The latter model emphasized the use of the already existing knowledge to predict meaning (Wilson, 2008).

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Using computers for pedagogical determinations in general and in English language teaching in particular is referred to as CALL that is an acronym stands for Computer Assisted Language Learning. Brown defined it as "computer programs designed especially to teach language." (qtd. in Murray, 2007: 748). As a teaching method, CALL incorporates the utilization of multimedia resources; communication tools including e-mail, chat rooms and audio/video conferencing; in addition to specific software and applications planned principally for language learning (Brett and González Lloret, 2009). In this respect, Warschauer considered CALL as an efficient method for carrying instructed materials by arguing that it can reinforce learners, present innovative learning experiences and offer a space for cooperative identity construction (Murray, 2007).

Following the foreign language pedagogical evolution, CALL has gone through a regular progress from behavioural to cognitive and constructive theories of how languages are learnt. Its first application was influenced by the behaviouristic principles. Thus, it was named as behaviouristic CALL. Programmed instruction and drill-and-practice are programs that appeared throughout this era to help students learn by receiving immediate feedback as a stimulus to their responses. As a second phase, communicative CALL was a shift away from behaviourism to afford learners with the authentic context to perform the target language. Consequently, computer use has been developed to be a facilitative tool for language skill practice and CALL activities were changed to incorporate CD-ROM technology in terms of specific Software applications designed to reflect a highly authentic environment stimulated by animation, sound, graphics and texts. The third phase of CALL named as integrative aimed to integrate the four language skills into tasks and experiences. As explained by Warschauer and Healey, "integrative CALL ...seeks both to integrate various skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and also integrate technology more fully into the language learning process" (qtd.in Donaldson and Haggstorm, 2006: 258). This stage witnessed the development of multimedia computing that includes a combination of sound, graphics, text, and video presented in one computerized program.

As for listening comprehension, CALL is claimed to provide a means for learners to get access to authentic listening sources about any topic they are interested in. Teachers' can take advantage of CALL facilities as a basis for listening comprehension exercises. They can use the computer for listening to digital audio recording of a radio broadcast or a related program.

When an audio content is transported to a media player, listeners can listen at their own suitability (Viswanathan, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

Problematic and Objectives

The lack of CALL laboratories in the Algerian middle and secondary schools has been claimed to affect the aural skill performance. Pupils at these two stages are not exposed to authentic listening situations. As a result, they often fail to communicate in the target language. This fact has led to hypothesize that difficulties in recognizing sounds and words in aural input can be resolved by the use of CALL lab. Therefore, the main objectives of this investigation are set out to

- Investigate the effectiveness of CALL laboratories in Algerian universities.
- Explore the efficiency of CALL facilities in developing EFL learners listening skill.
- Draw the officials' attention to the significance of CALL labs in schools.

Participants

This study was conducted in Salhi Ahmed University Center of Naama, Algeria. The subjects involved in the study are thirty (30) first year EFL learners and fifteen (15) teacher. The selected learners are aged between 18 and 22 years old. They are 12 male and 18 female participants. They have studied English for seven before arriving at the university: four years in the middle school and three years in the secondary school.

For the development of learners' communicative skills, the English Section at Naama University Center has provided computer assisted laboratories equipped with all the multimedia resources required for the enhancement of oral comprehension and expression skills. In the first academic year, EFL learners are presented to various modular courses of oral comprehension and expression, written comprehension and expression, grammar, phonetics and other subjects such as general linguistics, literature, civilization, research methodology, social and human sciences in addition to French as a foreign language.

The selected teachers are 10 females and 5 males aged between 28 and 44 years old. They make use of computers and multimedia resources such as the data show as integral parts of the instructed listening materials in all most all lectures.

The selected sample was randomly chosen on the representativeness principle in a sense that the attained data would be representative to the whole population under inquiry to generalize from the findings.

Instrumentation

In order to collect the necessary amount of data, the following research instruments were used.

Aural Test

For the sake of determining the participants' level of oral comprehension and examining the efficiency of CALL lab, the participants were required to do an aural test before and after receiving lectures assisted by multimedia computing. The test was based on a radio conversation between two native speakers of English. It contained simple questions that required clear short answers. The test consisted of four exercises and each exercise contained five items. The first exercise contained five closed questions based on learners' comprehension. The second exercise comprised lists of words based on the difficulty degree. The third exercise consisted of five statements to focus on intonation and stress placement. In

the last exercise, learners were asked to filling a gapped passage containing five blanks. These exercises were designed carefully to tackle the problematic areas in listening comprehension that entail exhaustive practice. Thus, the test items were attributed to aspects of listening that need a high level of cognitive engagement.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire includes twelve items of different types. These items were designed to collect data from teachers of Naama University Center. Thus, the questionnaire addressed first learners' aural comprehension difficulties, the importance of using technology in class, in addition to the teachers' viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of CALL labs in learning aural comprehension. It aims at assessing the role of CALL labs on handling the required features of a valuable listening comprehension course. Besides, some items were devoted to explore the role of effective teaching in learning the aural skill.

RESULTS

The main results obtained from the two data collection methods are going to be systematically analyzed in this section. Firstly, aural skill test was designed in a form of pre-test and post-test to measure the levels of learners' performance before and after receiving computer assisted listening comprehension courses. Secondly, a questionnaire was administered to teachers to assess the role of CALL facilities in enhancing EFL learners' aural skill.

Pre-aural Test

This test was given to the studied group before experiencing listening comprehension through CALL. It aims to document the participants' performance to compare it with their performance in the post-test in order to assess the hypothesized progress.

<i>Exercises</i>	<i>Correct answers</i>	<i>Incorrect answers</i>	<i>No answer</i>
<i>1</i>	36%	47%	17%
<i>2</i>	32%	48%	20%
<i>3</i>	40%	47%	13%
<i>4</i>	42%	48%	10%
<i>Total</i>	37,5%	47,5%	15%

Table 1 Pre-test Results

The table shows the pre-test results of the studied group by presenting the total average of the correct, incorrect and left answers. The percentages in the table reveal that the average of learners correct answers was 37,5%, while the average of their incorrect responses was 47,5%. These results confirm that the studied group faced serious listening comprehension difficulties to the extent that they left an average of 15% without any answer.

Post-aural Test

After experiencing learning listening comprehension in CALL lab, the same pre-aural test was administered to the studied group.

<i>Exercises</i>	<i>Correct answers</i>	<i>Incorrect answers</i>	<i>No answer</i>
1	62%	30%	8%
2	64%	31%	5%
3	59%	34%	7%
4	68%	28%	4%
<i>Total</i>	63,25%	30,75%	6%

Table 2 Post-test Results

The table demonstrates the results of learners' performance in listening comprehension after experiencing learning through CALL. The findings denote that the average of learners' correct answers was 63,25%, the average of their incorrect answers was 30,75%, while the average of the exercises that were left without any answer was 6%. Comparing these results with the pre-test results, the researcher found that there is a progress in the studied group performance. Therefore, the use of language labs has positive effects on learners' aural skill, which firmly confirms the research hypothesis.

Questionnaire

This instrument was administered to a group of EFL teachers. It intended to find about learners aural difficulties, the effectiveness of CALL lab in enhancing the learners' aural skill and the role of effective teaching methods in language labs.

The first aim was assessed in the first four items. The results indicated that 90% of teachers are strongly agree that EFL learners faced serious listening difficulties at the very beginning of receiving instructed materials through CALL. On the listening difficulties, 65% of teachers are agree on the fact that learners' listening difficulties lied in the bottom-up strategy while 35% are agree on the top-down difficulty. However, almost 79% of teachers ensured that learners' listening difficulties have been decreased after studying in CALL labs.

Afterwards, six items were devoted to examine the second goal. Table 3 displays the main findings that show the efficiency of CALL in the enhancement of the aural skill learning.

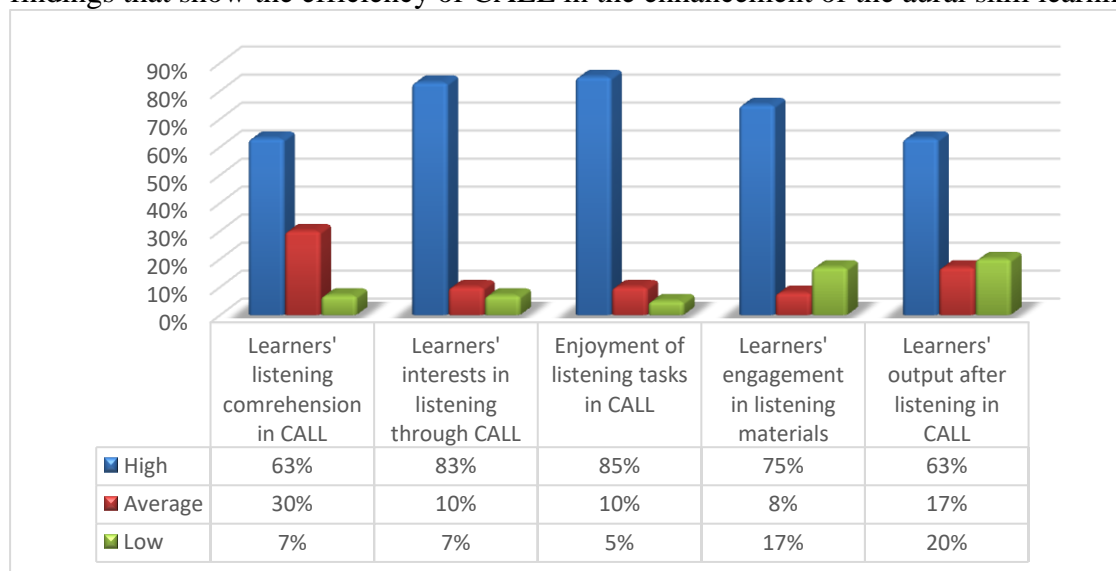


Table 3 The Effectiveness of CALL Materials in Developing Listening Comprehension

The analysis of teachers' responses showed that CALL materials have high positive effects on listening comprehension as it highly attract their attention and enhance their cognitive engagement. In addition, listening through CALL develops learners' output after listening.

On the role of the effective methodology, the majority of teachers stressed that the teachers and learners' training to use CALL materials is of crucial importance for the success of CALL intended benefits. They also agree on the availability of the needed materials and the regular technical repair for effective CALL use.

DISCUSSION

The obtained data revealed that the studied group has shown a valuable progress in listening comprehension after learning in CALL lab. The test results confirmed that learning in CALL labs is influential. Learners' performance has been enhanced after experiencing listening in CALL lab; as it is shown by their scores in the post-test.

The questionnaire results demonstrated that learners' listening comprehension was enhanced while studying through CALL. This, indeed, entails learners' interest in learning through CALL, in addition to their task enjoyment and cognitive engagement. Teachers, essentially, have demonstrated this fact, when 79% of them ascertained that their learners' performance in listening comprehension has been developed by CALL facilities.

As a result, this investigation achieved the researcher's rational, explained the raised problematic and confirmed the suggested hypothesis. The findings proved the importance of using CALL labs in teaching English communicative skills.

CONCLUSIONS

This research paper has given an account to the benefits of CALL facilities in relation to the realization of developed listening comprehension competence. After analyzing data, it was obvious that the employment of CALL as a pedagogical tool was beneficial for aural comprehension. Hence, it is suggested that CALL is a resourceful pedagogical method that has to be employed in all educational institutions.

To conclude, this study has been undertaken in an attempt to highlight the value of CALL in developing learners' aural skill, thus, encouraging officials in middle and secondary schools to provide computer technology to treat EFL learners' listening difficulties as they reported positive results when learning through CALL. Thus, this research is presumed to offer valuable insights to teachers and administrators to use computers for the sake of teaching English to Algerian learners.

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