

The Effect of cultural knowledge on EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

The Case of Moroccan Third Year University Students

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Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of cultural knowledge on Moroccan EFL university students' comprehension. Therefore, it tried to find out: 1) whether the absence or presence of appropriate cultural schemata has an effect on students' listening comprehension, and 2) whether prior instruction influences students' proficiency in listening comprehension. To meet these objectives three kinds of research instruments were designed: recall protocol, comprehension Questions in the form of open-ended questions, and a feedback questionnaire.

The data was collected from two groups (control group and experimental group) and it was a subject of descriptive statistical analysis. The findings revealed significant differences between the two groups in favor of the experimental group.

The study ended up with one main pedagogical implication that suggests EFL teachers to include pre-listening activities because they will improve students' comprehension when dealing with culturally loaded texts.

Keywords: Culture, the experimental group, the control group, idea units.

1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale of the study

The first reason behind conducting this study is because of the importance of listening in EFL classes. Listening is considered by Nunan (1998) as “the basic skill in language learning. Without listening skill, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. In fact over 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening”.

On the other hand, Moroccan EFL students cannot interact successfully in real life situations although they master the linguistic rules simply because they don't understand the natural native speech. So this raises the question about the problems that can hinder Moroccan EFL students' understanding of real life listening.

One of the problems is the interference between the source culture and the target culture. That is, the learner may misinterpret a foreign sentence if he/she is not familiar with the target culture.

For this reason, the present study will try to find out whether the absence of appropriate cultural schemata affects students' listening comprehension.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions of the present study are as follows:

- 1) Does unfamiliarity with American or British culture affect listening comprehension of Moroccan EFL university students?
- 2) Does prior Instruction of the target culture (British or American) has an impact on Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension?

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The impact of cultural background knowledge on listening comprehension

Several studies show that cultural knowledge affects students' listening comprehension. For instance, In order to determine the impact of religious background knowledge on listening comprehension of ESL students of different religions, Markham and Latham (1987) introduced

listening to passages that describe prayer rituals of Islam and Christianity. The data indicated that religious background influences listening comprehension. The subjects in this study recalled more information and provided more elaborations and fewer distortions for the passage that related to their own religion.

Another study was carried out by Schmidt-Rinehart (1994) in order to discover the effects of topic familiarity on L2 listening comprehension. University students of Spanish at three different course levels listened to two passages, one about a familiar topic and another about a new topic. The passages represented authentic language. Students were asked to recall the passages after listening. The students scored considerably higher on the familiar topic than on the new one. So she concluded that background knowledge in the form of topic familiarity plays an important role in facilitating listening comprehension.

2.2 The effect of prior instruction on listening comprehension

Studies conducted within the framework of Schema theory have shown the effect of prior instruction on reading as well as listening comprehension. Another theory which assumes the impact of prior knowledge on new knowledge is Ausubel's theory of advance organizers. The latter assumes that learning and retention of new material is facilitated when general concepts related to the topic are introduced to learners prior to the new material. Ausubel describes advance organizers as relevant subsuming concepts under which more specific concepts are subsumed. They bridge the gap between what learners know and what they need to know before introducing the new material.

So there is a similarity between advance organizers and schema theory because both of them require prior appropriate knowledge for the sake of grasping the meaning of a written or spoken text.

Some empirical studies conducted on listening comprehension have shown the importance of prior instruction on listeners' ability to comprehend and interpret the material listened to. For instance, Othman and Vanathas (2004) conducted an experiment that tried to find out the impact of topic familiarity on listening comprehension. These researchers conducted their study on a group of 34 intermediate level students from different nationalities who were studying Business at a private institution.

These students listened to an unfamiliar text and answered some comprehension questions related to the passage they listened to as a pre-test. After that, they benefited from 4 weeks of treatment lessons. As a post-test, the students listened to another passage similar to the one used in the pre-test in terms of linguistic level and answered comprehension questions. The findings indicated that the treatment had a positive impact on students' results.

Therefore, prior instruction is a crucial factor for any class because it prepares students to grasp new unfamiliar issues.

3. Methodology

3.1 The research design

In order to meet the objectives of this study, two groups were selected randomly from a number of third year university students. One group benefited from cultural instruction before listening to the text (the experimental group) and the second group listened to the same text without prior exposure to any instruction (the control group).

After listening, both groups were engaged in recalling the text, responding to open ended questions and to a feedback questionnaire.

The diversity of instruments used in the study was assumed to enrich the findings and to reinforce the validity of the study. The recall protocol was designed to test students' listening comprehension in terms of the number and types of recalled idea units. Second, comprehension questions in the form of open ended questions are assumed to enrich the results because they will test students' comprehension about specific information that might not be included in the recalls. Finally, the feedback questionnaire will enrich the findings because it will give an idea about students' reactions to the test and provide the study with the different strategies used by the students while listening.

To measure the difference between the two groups, the recalls of the control group and the experimental group will be compared based on the number and quality of idea units provided by each group. Before the main study took place, a pilot study had been conducted to test the validity and reliability of the instruments used in this study. The same procedures were followed in both the pilot study and the main study.

3.2 The pilot study:

The pilot study sample consists of 6 students (3 males and 3 females) chosen randomly from a third year university students' class belonging to the department of English of the Faculty of Letters at Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Beni Mellal. The group was divided randomly into an experimental and a control group consisting of three students each. The experimental group included 2 males and 1 female while the control group included 2 females and one male.

This sample shared the same characteristics as the sample used for the main study in terms of proficiency in English and the age range (from 20 to 23 years). Both groups listened to the text used in the main study with the aim to find out whether the material used for listening is appropriate for the level chosen and the purpose of the study. The text was about the presidential elections in USA, taken from Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test, Fourth Edition, 2006.

The results of the pilot study did not show any serious difficulties in terms of linguistic level, length of the text, procedures. Students of both groups found the text adequate and interesting and show a great eagerness for the listening task. So the main study followed the same text and procedures used in the Pilot study.

3.3 The main study:

3.3.1 The sample:

The main study consisted of twenty subjects (10 females and 10 males) who belonged to the same level and the same university as those tested in the piloting study. This group was divided into two groups, an experimental group, which consisted of 10 students (5 females and 5 males), and a control group that consisted of 10 students (5 females and 5 males).

These students' age ranged from 20 to 23 years old as mentioned above. As for their proficiency in English, it was assumed that since they belong to the same class, there should not be much difference between the two groups linguistically speaking.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that this study chose third year university students as a sample because they are considered to have enough linguistic proficiency to handle the listening material used in the study. This made it possible for the researcher to prevent linguistic problems from interfering with the cultural knowledge this study aims to test.

3.3.2 Instruments:

During data collection, the present study used three different instruments. These instruments include a recall protocol, comprehension questions, and a feedback questionnaire. The diversity of the instruments was assumed to enrich the findings and to reinforce the validity of the study.

3.3.2.1 The recall protocol:

The recall protocol is the main instrument in this study because it's widely used in studies such as the present one. It helps the researchers to know the extent to which listeners would understand a text through observing the number and types of recalled idea units and also the number and types of errors made by listeners.

Thus, this instrument will show us the degree to which background knowledge affects listeners' comprehension.

3.3.2.2 Comprehension questions:

This instrument contained open ended questions to test listeners' comprehension and also to give learners the chance to express themselves freely. The advantage of open-ended questions is that they do not limit learners' thinking to specific answers to choose from like in multiple choice questions. For instance, learners may have other answers in mind which are different from those provided by limited choices. This is why it was believed that it would be better to let them answer the way they like.

3.3.2.3 Feedback questionnaire:

This instrument was used to collect further information about students' reactions to the listening task. It was administered for the purpose of discovering the difficulties that students faced while listening, to have an idea about the degree of their familiarity with the content, and also to get some suggestions from students that could help enhance listening comprehension.

All the questions were open ended except for one that was a multiple choice question, but students were asked to justify their answers.

Here again students were not limited to particular answers but were given the chance to express themselves freely the way they like.

3.4 Scoring:

Scoring the recall protocols was based on the number and types of idea units recalled. So the number of idea units provided by the students was scored against 125 idea units of the original script. The type of idea units (cultural or others) was also considered. The number of cultural idea units was scored against 64 CIU while the number of other idea units was scored against 61 OIU. Error analysis focused on three types: distortions, elaborations, and other types.

4. Discussion

In the literature there is evidence of the relationship between listening comprehension and cultural background knowledge (e.g. Cook, 2003; Markham and Latham, 1987). Other studies found that providing students with background knowledge related to the topic before listening enhances students' listening comprehension (Othman and Vanathas, 2004).

The present study also investigates the effect of cultural knowledge on Moroccan students' listening comprehension. It attempts first to find out whether unfamiliarity with the cultural content of the listening material hinders Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension. Second, it attempts to find out whether prior cultural instruction helps Moroccan EFL students better understand the listening text. Discussing the findings yielded by the different instruments used in data collection will concern what follows.

4.1 Discussion of the results yielded by the recall protocol

4.1.1 Appropriately recalled idea units

The experimental group recalled more idea units and more cultural idea units than did the control group. The control group shows a poor recall in terms of both the total number of idea units and cultural idea units because the subjects of this group do not have enough knowledge about the American political system in the United States.

It seems thus that unfamiliarity with British or American culture hinders Moroccan EFL University students' listening comprehension.

The fact that the experimental groups in both the pilot and main studies recalled more idea units and also more cultural idea units than did the control group supports the idea that the prior

cultural instruction the experimental groups benefited from has a positive impact on their listening comprehension. This finding answers one of the main research questions of this study.

Another result is that both experimental and control groups recalled the same number of idea units not related to culture (OIU). This finding may be due to the fact that these other idea units do not need cultural awareness, and since the linguistic proficiency of the two types of groups may be assumed to be more or less similar, it seems somewhat logical that they recall approximately the same number of these other idea units.

To sum up, the findings of this study show that the absence of cultural background knowledge affects negatively Moroccan EFL University students' listening comprehension, and that explicit teaching of cultural knowledge before a listening task can help students to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know. Therefore, the results of this study support the findings of previous experimental studies (Cook, 2003; Markham and latham, 1987; Othman and Vanathas, 2004).

4.1.2 Distortions and elaborations:

The recall protocols of both groups were full of distortions and elaborations. Distortions occur when: "there is a lack of correspondence between the schemata embodied in the text and the schemata by which the reader assimilated the text" (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Goetz, 1977: 377). As for elaborations, they are considered as extensions to the information of the text, in that the listener adds some information which is not included in the listening text.

The findings of the present study show that the experimental group made less distortions and less elaborations and this is due to the cultural instruction that the group benefited from before listening to the lecture. The control group, on the other hand, did not perform well and made more distortions and elaborations than did the experimental group most probably because the group lacked cultural knowledge about the American political system.

The discussion of errors research questions 1 and 2 investigated by this study (1) whether unfamiliarity with American or British culture affects negatively Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension; and (2) whether prior cultural instruction affects positively Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension.

4.2 Discussion of the results yielded by the comprehension questions and the feedback questionnaire:

The majority of the experimental group's answers to comprehension questions was positive as they provided more correct answers than did the control group. So this shows that the experimental group benefited positively from the cultural prior instruction.

The results of the feedback questionnaire, on the other hand, show that the experimental group found the lecture interesting, familiar, and easier than the control group did. And this, in turn, supports that prior instruction has a positive impact on Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension.

The fifth question of the feedback questionnaire tries to illustrate the different strategies used by Moroccan EFL students to overcome the difficulties they encounter while listening. Most students from both groups show that they use the same strategies to overcome the difficulties they face. They said that they concentrate on the context to understand because it's difficult to get everything while listening. Other students from the experimental group said that they concentrate on main points and they try to relate them to what they discussed before listening. Thus, the experimental group benefited from the prior instruction, in that they concentrated on main ideas and thus made less errors, as opposed to the control group who made more distortions and elaborations. Thus even though most members of this group said in the questionnaire that they relate what they listened to with what they know about the world, they produced many errors apparently because their knowledge of the topic is not enough to understand the text they listened to.

5. Conclusion

The present study tried to investigate the effect of cultural background knowledge on Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension. It also attempted to find out whether prior cultural instruction helps Moroccan EFL university students develop their ability for listening comprehension. For this reason, the study designed three different instruments (recall protocol, comprehension questions, and a feedback questionnaire) and tested listening comprehension of two groups from the same class (Third year EFL university students): a control group and an experimental group. The latter benefited from prior cultural instruction.

The control group performed less than the experimental group in all the instruments used in this study. Thus, cultural unfamiliarity with the topic hinders Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension. This in turn means that prior cultural instruction helped students of the experimental group to develop their proficiency in listening comprehension.

Findings show no difference between the control group and the experimental group in terms of the strategies used while listening because both of them rely on the context and relate what they listen to their background knowledge. The difference is just in the result of using these strategies. Students of the experimental group related the listening to the discussion and the prior instruction they benefited from in that they could understand the listening text while students of the control group related the listening text to inappropriate background knowledge and consequently misunderstood the listening text and made more distortions and elaborations.

The main pedagogical implication of this study is that pre-listening activities such as teaching vocabulary, discussion, semantic mapping, etc. enhance Moroccan EFL university students' listening comprehension.

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