



The Impacts of Integral Teaching of the Listening and Speaking Skills on EFL Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The listening and speaking skills are connected in real life and complement each other as input and output of language. However, in the Iraqi context, these two skills are taught in isolation; not taught in an integrated manner, thus, the result is poor performance of the students. This study investigated the impacts of integrating the listening and speaking skills in an English class and how it enhances English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' communicative competence. A mixed-methods research design was employed to gather the necessary data through a one group pre-posttest and interviews. The participants were 51 university students at Charmo University, North of Iraq. In analyzing the quantitative data, a paired samples t-test was run to find answers to the research questions posed. The results indicated that the participants' communicative competence had statistically improved as there was a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores. In addition, the analysis of the semi-structured interviews which were carried out among the participants, revealed that they had positive attitudes towards the semester and felt it was a success. This study is concurrent with the previous literature and highlights the importance of integrating the language skills to teach the English language effectively.

Keywords: *listening skill, speaking skill, English as a foreign language (EFL), communicative competence*

Introduction

Listening and speaking are two skills which are connected to each other and occur together in real-life conversations; the former as input and the latter as output. In traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodologies and classes, listening and speaking were not emphasized (for example, grammar-translation method). Tavit (2010) believes that "when people learn a foreign language, they usually want to make use of that language to communicate with people who speak the same language" (p.765). Hamad et al. (2019) argue that one of the most important skills which creates effective communication is speaking. However, it has only been two decades since speaking has appeared as a part in EFL classes.

Studies show that human beings adopt their mother tongue through listening. O'Connor (1980) states that "language starts with the ear" (p.1). Babies listen to the sounds which are made around them and then start imitating these sounds (O'Connor, 1980). This also applies to second/foreign language acquisition. According to Barani (2011), the listening skill "is the first and the most important prerequisite for speaking skill" (p.4059). Similarly, Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2006) found that improving learners' communicative competence can be achieved through emphasizing the listening skill (as cited in Gonzalez et al. 2015). Despite

all the studies which have been conducted in this area, these two skills remain challenging for EFL learners (Oradee, 2012 as cited in Gonzalez et al. 2015).

In the area where this study was conducted, North of Iraq, students study English through primary to high school. The curriculum which is taught throughout school years follows the coursebook *Sunrise*, which is designed communicatively. All the four skills are integrated in the coursebook. Nevertheless, inside class, the skills are not efficiently taught. Listening and speaking get the least attention, teachers mostly do not use the CDs inside class and do not carry out their classes in the target language. As a result, students' speaking proficiency is very low when they enter university and even those who can speak English, do not sound authentic. Ahmed (2008) has found in his study that "Kurdish learners have difficulty in carrying out speech acts that look natural English" (p.1). This could be due to the fact that they do not get enough exposure to authentic English.

Most Kurdish EFL students enter university with a very low English proficiency level. Although some exceptions can be made which include those students who have studied in English-medium schools, or those who were eager to learn the language by watching English movies or playing video games. This is due to the fact that all the skills of the language do not get equal attention from English teachers. Although the coursebook (*Sunrise*) is designed based on Communicative Language Teaching, the communicative activities are mostly neglected and students learn about the language rather than using it. Put another way, the students learn a number of grammatical rules and lots of vocabulary items but cannot create a sound sentence in the target language, which justifies their poor listening and speaking performance. The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of teaching the listening and speaking skills in an integrated manner in classes, and how this helps in acquiring EFL better than when they are taught separately. This goal will be accomplished through studying the case of Charmo University which is currently employing combining the two skills in EFL teaching.

To be able to reach the aim, the following research questions will guide this study:

1.How does merging listening and speaking skills in EFL classes improve learners' communicative competence?

2.What are the attitudes of the EFL students with regards to the integration of the two skills: listening and speaking?

Literature Review

Listening and speaking skills which are the focus of the current study are defined in different ways. Underwood (1989) defines listening as "the activity of paying attention to and trying to get meaning from something we hear" (p. 1). While speaking is defined according to Harwood (2010) as "a unique form of communication which is the basis of all human relationships and the primary channel for the projection and development of individual identity" (p.208).

Celce-Murcia (2001) defines language teaching methods as "a set of procedures or overall plan for systemic presentation to teach second or foreign language" (as cited in Natsir & Sanjaya, 2014, p.58). According to Larsen-Freeman (2004), however, they are "a coherent set of links between

actions and thoughts in language teaching” (p. 1). As the field witnessed improvement, the needs of learners have also changed which has resulted in the appearance of different methods.

Grammar-translation was one of the most eminent approaches of foreign language teaching in the nineteenth century. This method was also called the 'Classical Method' as it was used in teaching the 'classical languages' (Larsen-Freeman, 2004, p.11). This method aimed at teaching grammar and rules of the foreign language and using native language in carrying out the lesson. It is stated in Richards and Rodgers (1986) that learners are enabled to know everything about the language except the language itself. When this method is incorporated in class, the opportunity to practice and produce the target language is not granted to students since there is very little attention on listening and speaking skills (Kartal & Özbek, 2017; Natsir & Sanjaya 2014).

The audiolingual method then emerged at the time of World War II when the US army started employing multilingual employees in the army, and so the method was also called the army method. This method “strives at developing listening and speaking skills first as the basis for establishing the reading and writing skills” (Zillo, 1973, p.1). According to Zillo (1973), learning a language can be accomplished within a short period of time through integrating this approach in teaching. The listening and speaking skills are more emphasized than reading and writing in this method.

Another traditional approach, which is referred to as either Suggestopedia or Desuggestopedia, aims at discarding learning obstacles by minimizing the feeling of being an unsuccessful language learner. Arulselvi (2017) characterizes Desuggestopedia with incorporation of amusement, stress diminishing, and making learners feel unrestrained. Moreover, Larsen-Freeman (2004) mentions some of the principles and techniques of the method which include; “bright and cheerful classroom environment”, “peripheral learning”, “positive suggestion”, “role play”, “active and passive concert”, and “creative adaptation” (pp. 84-85). In this approach, speaking skill and oral production is emphasized.

Total physical response is defined as a “method of teaching a foreign language involving the giving of commands and the students reacting with gestures or the performing of an action” (Omari, 2001, p. 1). In this method, listening and motion are integrated. Thus, Castro (2010) reported in his thesis that “TPR emphasizes verbal commands accompanied by corresponding actions” (p. 11). The method, in Naeine and Shahrokhi's (2016) opinion, creates an environment which is delightful and tension-free. Listening is prior to speaking and are both prior to reading and writing skills in this approach.

Later, in the 1970s, Communicative Language Teaching became prominent and was incorporated by teachers who aimed at qualifying learners to use the target language and improving their communicative competence (Farooq, 2015; Natsir & Sanjaya, 2014). All the four skills of the target language are worked on through the most important features of the method which include games, foreplays, authentic materials, group activities and the target language employment in class (Freeman and Anderson, 2011 as cited in Natsir & Sanjaya, 2014).

In the modern EFL teaching methods, techniques and principles of different methods are incorporated in the teaching and justified according to the class. In two studies, Mondal (2012) and Chang (2011) investigated mixing GTM and CLT and concluded that better learning will be achieved through integrating these two methods as they cover each other's shortcomings (as cited in Aqel,

2013). Moreover, better learning outcomes can be achieved with the integration of technology into EFL classes.

The term 'Communicative Competence' was introduced by Hymes in 1966 which was a response to Chomsky's 'Linguistics Competence' (Armostis, 2013). In Hymes' point of view (1972), a child learns a language through learning what to say, when to say it, to whom to say it to and the right way of saying it (as cited in Armostis, 2013). Furthermore, according to Widdowson (1983), teaching competency is not an easy goal to accomplish and requires hard work (as cited in Luo, 2013; Farooq, 2015). While Savignon (1972) defines it as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (p.8).

Methodology

Research Design and Procedures

In this empirical study, a mixed-method approach was adopted to effectively answer the research questions posed. In mixed-method studies "both qualitative and quantitative data are simultaneously collected, analyzed and interpreted" (Zohrabi, 2013, p.254). A one-group pre-posttest experimental design was employed to investigate the effects of integrating listening and speaking skills on improving EFL students' communicative competence. Miller (1984) describes experiment as indicating how a variable effects another through gathering some proof. On the other hand, Nesselrode and Cattell (2013) define experiment as "a recording of observations, quantitative or qualitative, made by defined and recorded operations and in defined conditions, followed by examination of the data, by appropriate statistical and mathematical rules, for the existence of significant relations" (p.22 as cited in Cash et al., 2016, p.5). The participants' listening and speaking skills were measured before starting the semester (which lasted three months) and after finishing it to check their progress. For the listening pre-posttest, four authorized audios accompanied by their worksheets were adopted from the British Council, which is a digital library where many digital resources can be accessed for free. Nevertheless, the speaking was designed similar to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In other words, the format of the pre-post speaking test was similar to IELTS but no specific IELTS test was adopted. In order to test the research hypothesis, the pre-test was conducted at the beginning of the semester. Then, the participants were taught both (listening and speaking) skills integrally during the semester as a part of their curriculum. At the end of the semester, a post-test of the same design was carried out. In addition to tests, interviews were also conducted among the participants who showed willingness to participate for qualitative data.

The participants studied the two skills in an integrated manner for one semester at Charmo University, where the data was collected. A normal semester of Charmo University consists of sixteen weeks, where six hour classes (a class of forty-five minutes) are conducted each week. These are divided into three sessions where each session consists of two consecutive lessons (90 minutes). However, due to the pandemic (Covid19), the semester started later than planned and ended earlier as well. Consequently, the materials could not all be covered. Another issue of the time was public's strike for their salary and banning the roads which caused missing one week of class as well.

North Star 1, Listening and Speaking, third edition (Merdinger, P. and Barton, L.), was used in the class where this research was conducted. Regarding the course assessment,

participants were assessed based on their participation in class, mid-term exam, oral assignments, test and final exam.

Participants and Sampling

Fifty-one freshmen university students of the English Department constituted the participants of this study. The study was carried out in the fall semester of the academic year 2020-2021. Thirty-eight of the participants were female and thirteen were male. Convenience sampling, was employed. According to Etikan et al. (2016) when employing convenience sampling, the participants are close to the place where the researcher is conducting the study that is why it could be called 'accidental'.

Data Collection and Analysis

Pre-posttests

The pre-tests were conducted at the beginning of the semester and the post-tests were administered at the end (before and after the three months treatment). In both tests, the participants' listening and speaking skills were evaluated. In the listening pre-posttests, four authorized audios were used. So, the test was divided to four parts, where in each part they had to finish two tasks. Clear instructions were provided on the test papers and also reinforced verbally. Participants were informed that each recording would be played twice and they would be given five minutes after each section to complete and arrange their answers. Moreover, they were told that there were fifty items to be answered, and each correct answer would receive two marks which makes a total of a hundred.

The speaking pre-posttests were designed similar to the IELTS speaking test as previously mentioned. Participants were informed that their voices would be recorded which was necessary to be done for enabling the second rater to evaluate them later. The participants were tested one by one. They were asked about their identities first. Then, they were addressed some questions on common topics like (hometown, study, family, daily routine). After that, they were shown a picture and given some time to talk about it. Finally, they were asked some questions regarding the pictures which were also on the above mentioned common topics. The speaking tests were evaluated based on these criteria; fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, communicative strategies, organization of speech, relevance and adequacy of content. For each criteria, five marks were allocated which in total makes thirty-five marks. The listening tests were all checked and graded by the researcher while the speaking tests were graded by the researcher along with a second rater to ensure rater reliability.

The quantitative data which was collected through these tests was analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS) software program version 23.0. A Paired Samples t-tests was employed which is used "when we are interested in the difference between two variables for the same subject. Often the two variables are separated by time" (Paired t-test, 2016). Through this test, it was made possible to determine whether there was an improvement in participants' performance or not and how significant the difference was.

Interviews

To gather qualitative data for the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted among the participants who showed willingness to participate at the end of the treatment

phase. Adams (2015) describes semi-structured interviews as a tool which is “conducted conversationally with one respondent at a time” and it is usually followed by ‘why or how questions’ (p.493). In the interviews, the participants were asked about their opinions on studying the two skills in an integrated manner, how it has affected their performance and whether more exposure to the language can help improve their speaking abilities or not. Each interview lasted about five to seven minutes which approximately makes a total of two hours (120 minutes). The participants were asked the following questions:

1. What curriculum did you follow this semester? Describe it.
2. How would you evaluate it?
3. How did the teaching and learning process take place? How were the activities practiced?
4. Describe the difference between the English you studied this semester and the one you have studied throughout school.
5. Which one do you find more useful for enhancing listening and speaking skills? Why?
6. Have your listening and speaking skills improved? If yes, to what extent?
7. How did you feel this semester? – Motivated, bored

After finishing the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and later analyzed using thematic content analysis which is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting on thematic patterns within data” (Borrell, 2008, p.197). In this study, the interviews were recorded while conducting and later transcribed by the researcher. Then, the transcriptions were examined for the emerging codes and themes. After that, the interviews were compared to find similar and contrastive themes which were later grouped accordingly. Finally, interpretations were made and conclusions were reached.

Validity and Reliability

To avoid bias in scoring, obtain reliable results and maintain validity of the speaking pre-posttests, the researcher (lecturer of the class) along with another EFL teacher from the English department, graded the participants’ speaking tests. So, the tests were scored twice by two different raters by following the same criteria (fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, communicative strategies, organization of speech, relevance and adequacy of content). According to the obtained data, the correlation between the grades of the two raters was 0.73 which implies a consistency across raters as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Inter-Item Reliability Test for 1st and 2nd Rater.

	Posttest	Pretest
Posttest	1.00	0.73
Pretest	0.73	1.00

Ethical Consideration

Prior to conducting the study, ethical approval was requested and obtained from the Near East University's ethics committee in North Cyprus. In addition to the Near East University, approval was also granted from the chairman of the English department, Charmo University, where the study was carried out, and they showed willingness to assist the researcher in every aspect. The participants were informed about the aims and objectives of the research. Those who participated in the interviews were given a consent form to sign where they were ensured of their confidentiality. Moreover, participants were assigned a pseudonym in the interview transcripts to keep their identities anonymous.

Permission was also sought and obtained from the British Council which is the database where the audios for the listening tests had been downloaded from

Findings and Discussion

Merging Listening and Speaking

A paired samples t-test was conducted in order to examine the differences of the mean score of the pre-posttests (see Table 2). The results of the mean value between the listening skill pretest and the posttest was 62.7 (pretest) and 78.0 (posttest) respectively, which indicates that there is a major difference. The results also show a statistically significant gain ($t=8.62$, $n=51$, $p=.000$). Coe (2002) mentions that "if $p < 0.05$ (i.e. below 5%), the difference is taken to be large enough to be 'significant'; if not, then it is 'not significant'". This proves that the p-value which is 0.000 in the study, is highly significant. On the other hand, Cohen (1969) describes an effect size of 0.2 as 'small', 0.5 as 'medium' and 'large enough to be visible to the naked eye', and 0.8 as 'grossly perceptible and therefor large' (as cited in Coe, 2002). The effect size of this study is 0.73 which is close to 0.8 and is therefore considered large/high.

Table 2.

Listening Pre-post Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences							
		M	SD	SED	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	S
						Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Listening Pretest – Listening Posttest	-15.333	12.702	1.778	-18.905	-11.760	-8.621	50	.000

*Key: M: Mean
S: Significance*

SD: Standard Deviation

SED: Standard Error Mean

To indicate the differences of the mean score of the pre-posttests, a paired samples t-test for the speaking tests was also conducted (see Table 3). The results of the mean value between the listening skill pretest and the posttest were 15.92 (pretest) and 24.20 (posttest) respectively, which indicates that there is a major difference. The results also show a statistically significant gain ($t=14.57$, $n=102$, $p=.000$). Since $p < 0.05$, it means there is a highly significant difference between the tests.

Table 3.*Speaking Pre-post Paired Samples Test*

		Paired Differences							
		M	SD	SED	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	S
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Speaking Pretest – Speaking Posttest	-8.284	5.740	0.568	-9.411	-7.156	-14.574	101	.000

Key: M: Mean SD: Standard Deviation SED: Standard Error Mean

The results of the pre-posttests reveal that learners' communicative competence can be improved through combining the two skills in teaching. These results are in accordance with Taviş's (2010), who emphasized that "teachers should teach these two skills in an interacted way" (p.766). As a result, he concluded that learners are more successful when skills are integrated than when they are taught in isolation. However, Celik and Yavuz (2015) studied the relationship between listening and speaking grades of EFL Turkish students and found that there is little relationship between the grades of these two skills. This is due to some factors that affect the scores of speaking skill such as anxiety, the fact that speaking is the last phase of the learning process when compared to listening and that speaking is a "completely active action that needs a linguistic background as well as communicative and social abilities" (p.2140).

One of the factors that affected the improvement of students' communicative competence was the employment of cooperative activities in the teaching. Kartal and Özbek (2017) also found in their study that students' attitudes had changed a lot in the experimental group where cooperative activities were incorporated. They concluded that students became 'less anxious', 'less bored' and more 'interested' (p.819). This was clearly felt in the class where this study was undertaken as well. The participants were very stressed at the beginning of the semester when working with their peers/groups or during the class discussions. Nonetheless, at the end of the semester, the participants were much more relaxed and eager to take part in the activities. According to another study in a similar context, students believed that group work is very motivating and creates more opportunity for target language practice and speaking time (Koç, 2018). Li and Mu (2014) have also reached the same results regarding the employment of group work activities and reported that students preferred group-based learning to traditional instructor-led format.

In line with the findings of the current paper is a study by Rost (1994) on the relationship between listening and speaking skills. He found that speaking is a tool for interaction, authentic language is challenging to understand and new forms of language can be taught through listening (as cited in Bozorgian, 2012).

Improvement of the students was also evident in the interviews carried out in which the majority of the participants eagerly talked about how they could speak English now. They indicated an improvement worthy of mentioning. They were very pleased and satisfied with the progress they have made. Sophia pointed out that "my skills has got better, I'm trying and I think I'm learning so much words and that's new for me".

Attitudes

Out of the twenty participants that volunteered for the interviews, fourteen of them believed the book that was used during the semester was good or very good. One student, William, described the book as “it was good, like kind of perfect, nothing is perfect but it was kind of perfect, the textbook”. All of the students also mentioned that the level of the coursebook fitted their English level. Charalambous (2011) mentions the positive effects of coursebooks in the teaching/learning process in EFL classes. He believes that there are a lot of advantages of using a course book and that “most teachers consider course books to be valuable aids that offer useful material and support” (p.3).

Working with their peers and groups were the participants’ favorite activities that were performed throughout the semester. When Rose was asked to describe the activities, she said that they were “so good especially when we spoke with each other in the class, we practiced with partners, I could learn from that”. It is also confirmed by Johnson and Johnson (1999) that group work improves "student motivation, school achievement, oracy development, and critical and analytical skills" (as cited in Koç, 2018, p.584).

Moreover, when the participants were asked to describe the difference between the English they had studied at school and the English they studied throughout this semester, they all mentioned that English at school was all about grammar and grammar rules. This can explicitly be detected in the responses of the participants. Liam stated “of course it’s better here, because at school, we just studied grammar and learned grammar”. Mary, who was also of the same opinion mentioned “at school we study just grammar and not using language practically”. They also reported the employment of their native language, Kurdish language, in class and no practical use of English language. Natsir and Sanjaya (2014) relate the usage of mother tongue to grammar-translation method which is considered as one of the traditional teaching methods and its employment is no longer recommended.

Another interesting point worth mentioning is the fact that eight participants out of the twenty mentioned that they had felt shy before taking the course to use the language while they felt much more confident after the course. This was vividly felt in Brian’s response who mentioned that “before I was shy, I was ashamed of speaking the language”. Brown (2007) also encourages the incorporation of pair work, group work and role-plays in EFL classrooms as they facilitate in enabling the shy students to converse with their classmates and initiate discussions (as cited in Alharbi, 2015). Castro (2010) has reached the same point as he mentions in his master thesis that “a participant was glad that being in front of the class acting out a dialogue helped him overcome shyness about speaking in public” (p.43).

Conclusion

The findings of the study provide clear answers to the research questions and reveal that learners’ communicative competence can be improved through combining listening and speaking skills in teaching. The participants’ listening and speaking skills witnessed a major improvement at the end of the semester (three months period). In addition, exposure to the target language has a positive strong correlation with improving students' speaking performance.

Moreover, students had positive attitudes towards merging the two skills in teaching which was reinforced in their responses.

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