

The effect of listening to self audio-taped journals on Iranian EFL learners' grammar knowledge

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Abstract-Audio taped journals have been employed in the development of various language skills and components since 1990s. A thorough review of the literature revealed that the effect of audio-taped journals on the EFL learners' grammar knowledge, especially in the Iranian context, is poor. 40 intermediate level foreign language learners of English took part in the study forming the experimental and control groups. The experimental group received 10 sessions of audio taped journals while the control group received the conventional method of teaching grammar, which mostly relied on implicit grammar teaching. Pursuing the treatment both groups sat for the posttest of grammar. The results of the study revealed that audio taped journals highly affected the learners' grammatical development. The findings of the present study could, hopefully, contribute to materials development, curriculum design, and classroom techniques in the domain of SLA and ELT.

Key words: Audio taped journals; language skills; grammar knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

Audio-taped journals (Reed, 1982), have been employed to improve various language skills and components. These journals or as Winter and Conner (1989) puts it, "dialogue journals" are on the one hand in close connection with listening comprehension and on the other hand with the component under investigation. Listening comprehension as a prime source of language input has been under investigation since 1980s (Krashen, 1981; Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Doughty, 2003; Ellis, 2008). The effect of this active skill on the development of the second language also has been investigated (Nunan, 1997) and various aspects of "grammar" as a language component have been the home of choice for the methodologists and SLA researchers. The emergence of "output" theory since 1990s also has energized research on the domain of second language development, in particular (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). On the other hand, "conscious learning" and "focus on forms" learning underlined by Schmidt's (2000) "noticing theory" have been taken into consideration as the supporting vehicles of second language development. One classroom method which may help the EFL learners to improve their abilities is the use of audio-taped dialogue journals. Audio-taped journals, which are the recorded performances of the learners, could be effective sources of

information and output leading to the conscious development of the second language.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister- speaking. For most people, being able to claim knowledge of a second language means being able to speak and write in that language. As Nunan (1997) argues, "Listening and reading are therefore secondary skills- means to other ends, rather than ends in themselves" (p.48). During the 1980s, the proponents of listening in a second language were also encouraged by work in first language field. Here, people such as Brown (1990) were able to demonstrate the importance of developing oracy (the ability to listen and speak) as well as literacy in a school. Prior to this, it was taken for granted that first language speaker needed instruction in how to read and write, but not in how to listen and speak, because these skills were automatically bequeathed to them as native speakers (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012). Knowledge of the grammatical system of the language, it was argued, was but one of the many components which underlay the notion of communicative competence. However, to be considered a competent user of language, one needs to know not only the rules of grammar, but also how the rules are used in real communication (Zhang, Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011). During

this period grammar teaching became less prominent, and in some cases, was abandoned (Richards & Renandya, 2006).

Krashen's model views acquisition in a linear perspective which not only establishes a cause and effect relationship between input and acquisition but also states that the grammatical structure is acquired in predictable order. Krashen (2004) concludes that, learning grammar through explicit instruction cannot beat the natural process of acquiring grammar through comprehensible input. Acquired, as opposed to learned, grammar will enable learners to apply it intuitively in the actual performance without paying conscious attention to forms (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012). Therefore, learners need to spend a great deal of time in listening and reading rather than spending more time on learning explicit rules of grammar (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). Learners can acquire the knowledge of grammar through comprehensible input.

A number of studies have been undertaken to investigate the efficacy of grammar consciousness-raising. Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared the effects of direct consciousness-raising by means of grammar explanation and of indirect consciousness-raising by means of a task on Japanese learner's ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences involving dative alteration. They found that both methods of consciousness-raising resulted in significant gains in understanding the target structure.

Fotos (1993) conducted an experimental research to investigate the amount of learner noticing produced by two types of grammar consciousness-raising treatments: teacher-fronted grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks (Zhang & Wu, 2011a, 2011b). Involving 160 Japanese college students of English, Fotos designed her research by dividing the subjects into three different treatment groups, which were taught indirect object placement, adverb placement, and relative clause usage in communicative input. The findings revealed that the two types of grammar consciousness-raising are effective in promoting significant level of noticing the target language structures in subsequent communicative input. The present study aimed at studying the effect of audio-taped journals on the Iranian EFL learners' grammar knowledge and thus finds a convincing answer to the following research question: Do audio-taped journals affect the development of grammar knowledge of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate level?

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 40 intermediate level female students who were selected from among a total number of 55 students who were studying in a language school in Khoramabad, Iran. They were all native speakers of Persian and university graduates or university students with different majors. The learners were selected after

running a pretest and were randomly divided into two groups: 20 students formed the experimental group and the other 20 ones the control group.

3.2. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in the process of data collection: (1) A language proficiency test (PET) to homogenize the prospective students for the study, (2) A teacher-made grammar test was used both as the pre and posttests. After the construction, the test was examined by three experts for its content validity.

3.3. Procedure

In the first step, a language proficiency test (PET) consisting of 25 listening comprehension items, 35 reading comprehension, and 2 types of writing was administered for the purpose of standardization. Fifty five female EFL learners at intermediate level received the test and according to the results of the test 40 learners whose scores fell within one standard deviation below and above the mean were selected to be divided into two groups for the purpose of the study. Then a teacher-made grammar test with 40 items was administered as the pretest. Nevertheless, the two groups were statistically compared via the results of the grammar pretest to make sure if they were eligible to take part in this study and if there was any difference in their Language proficiency level. The pretest checked the participants' knowledge of grammar in both groups with respect to the grammatical points which were going to be presented in 10 sessions of the classroom. The significance of the difference between the obtained means of the two groups in the pretest was determined through a t-test. The learners in both groups received the same materials and time of teaching each session of the classroom except that the students in the experimental group worked with audio-taped journal each and every session of the classroom.

The experimental group received the audio taped journals as follows: (a) the teacher provided CDs for learners and codified them; (b) the learners were informed of the way their voices were going to be recorded when they were exchanging information with the teacher; (c) the learners were trained how to use a voice recording software (e.g. Nero software, version 10), which was suitable for multisession recordings; (d) the learners were trained to respond to the teacher by recording their voices using voice recorder while they were dealing with the tasks and drills which followed the lesson and the grammatical form taught. Based on the topic of the session, the recording could be between two to five minutes per session. The recorded conversations and discussions between the teacher and the learners were thematically related to the grammatical topics selected and taught each session and were in line with the units of their lessons from the book. (e) The recorded CDs were collected and the teacher presented each and every learner with the feedback required via employing recast, correction, restatement, and the like to emphasize learner's miss-production. (f) The

recorded voices individually and distinctly were secluded and sent to the learners via email or on a CD for the learners who did not have the voice recorder with them. The learners in the experimental group were trained to listen to their own recorded voices when they were at home; they were encouraged to listen to the recorded material and pay attention to the teacher's comments concerning each person's mis-productions. The teacher provided them with new comments, in turn. This gradually helped the learners to collect their own audio taped portfolio including various journals.

The control group, on the other hand, was engaged in the ordinary program of the classroom. The grammar issues were implicitly taught throughout the course book and explicit grammar experiences were rarely touched upon in the lessons presented. Both the control and experimental groups listened to the conversations, worked with dialogues, covered the short texts given in the book, discussed the new points in the class, took part in the Question and Answer activities, individual and group writing development, and developed conversations based on the new topics given in each section of the course book. Students in both groups worked on grammar exercises in

their course book as well. The instructional hours consisted of 10 sessions spread out over five weeks. Each class session was 90 minutes held two times a week. The participants in both groups were taught by the same instructor (the researcher herself). Following 10 sessions of treatment via employing audio taped journals, the posttest was administered. The results of both pre and post tests were analyzed and compared through SPSS version 19.

4. RESULTS

Based on the mean score (40.72) and standard deviation (5.25) on the PET, 40 learners were selected whose scores lay one standard deviation below and above the mean. In order to run a parametric test four assumptions must be met, that is, interval data, independence, normality of the distributions, and homogeneity of the variances. The dependent variables, in this study, were measured on an interval data and the participants were independent; that is to say none of them participated in more than one group. Descriptive Statistics and normality tests are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the PET

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
PET	55	40.7273	5.25799

Table 2. Normality Test

	N		Skewness			Kurtosis		
			Statistics	Std. Error Test	Normality	Statistics	Std. Error Test	Normality
PRE-TEST	40	-.323	.374	-.86	-.733	.733	-1	
POST-TEST	40	-.080	.374	-.21	-1.401	.733	1.91	
PET	40	-.080	.374	.21	-.951	.733	-1.29	

Based on the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors, the ranges of -1.96 and +1.96 it could be concluded that the distribution of the scores on the PET was normal. An Independent Samples *t*-test was run to compare the mean scores of the audio-taped journals and

conventional groups on the pre-test of grammar in order to check whether they were at the same level of grammatical knowledge prior to the main study. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Pre-test on Grammar

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Audio-Journal	20	34.1000	3.95900	.88526
Conventional	20	32.0000	4.71280	1.05382

Independent Samples *t*-test showed that the *t*-observed value of (1.52 (38), $P = .135 > .05$; $r = .23$) indicated that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the pre-test of grammar. That is to say, the Audio-Journal and Conventional groups enjoyed the same level of grammatical knowledge prior to the main study.

An independent *t*-test was run to compare the mean scores of the Audio-Journal and Conventional groups on the posttest of grammar in order to probe the effect of audio-taped journals on the improvement of the

grammatical knowledge of the Iranian EFL learners. The *t*-observed value of (3.87 (38), $P = .000 < .05$; $r = .53$) indicates that there existed a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the posttest of grammar. Thus it can be concluded that the null-hypothesis as audio-taped journal does not have any significant effect on the improvement of the grammatical knowledge of the Iranian EFL learners was rejected. As displayed in Table 4, the Audio-taped Journal group with a mean score of 35.90 outperformed the Conventional group on the posttest of grammar.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the Post-test of Grammar

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Audio-Journal	20	35.9000	3.32297	.74304
Conventional	20	31.3500	4.06882	.90981

The Pearson correlation coefficients between the pretest and post-test of grammar with the PET test are employed as the empirical validity indices of the former two tests. As displayed in Table 5 the pretest ($r = .64$, $P = .000 < .05$) and

posttest ($r = .50$, $P = .000 < .05$) of grammar both enjoy statistically significant correlations with the PET test as it is indicated in Table 5.

Table 5. Empirical Validity Indices

		PRE-TEST	POST-TEST
PET	Pearson Correlation	.641**	.504**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001
	N	40	40

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study revealed that Audio-taped Journals could prove effective in the development of grammar of the EFL students at the intermediate level. This is in line with findings of other researchers: Reed (1982) employed Audi-taped Journals to improve various language skills and components and he came up with rewarding results. Winter and Conner (1989) proved the effectiveness of dialogue journals in the improvement of learners' listening comprehension. Brown (1990) considered Audio-taped Dialogue Journals as a classroom method which might help the learners develop their second language and consciously try to solve their problems. Murphy and Hastings (2006) considered Audio-taped journals as a vehicle servicing conscious learning of grammar rules. Egbert (1992) argued that "teachers and students [using audio-taped dialogue journal] in speaking classes derive language and affective benefits similar to those from written journals" (p.91). In addition, Winter and Conner (1989) proposed that the use of audio-taped dialogue journals also provide good listening and speaking practice for the student, individual coaching on grammar and pronunciation errors, opportunity to discuss cross-cultural issues, and a record of student progress. Peyton (1986) implied that employing Audio-taped Journals could be employed to correct the learners' errors. This could be done via using the correct grammatical forms and structures modeled in the course of the interaction (Zhang & Wu, 2008).

Concerning the practical measures in close connection with audio taped journal in order to energize the current concepts in the classrooms, one could refer to the impact of audio journals in the development of language skills and components reported in the literature such as improvement of writing skill (Marefat, 2001), development of speaking (Egbert, 1992; Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2008), improvement of overall communication (Brown, 1990), betterment of reading comprehension (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987), improvement of listening comprehension (Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Winter & Conner, 1989),

creating active learners and professional development, development of communicative competence among EFL learners (Sutudena & Ramazanzadeh, 2011), and enrichment of critical pedagogy (Mirhosseini, 2003).

The statistical analysis revealed that the null-hypothesis was rejected. That is to say, audio-taped journals surely had significant effects on the improvement of the grammatical knowledge of the Iranian EFL learners. The null hypothesis was rejected on the ground that following an Independent Samples *t*-test run to compare the mean scores of the Audio-taped Journal and Conventional groups on the posttest of grammar, the *t*-observed value was (3.87 (38), $P = .000 < .05$). This indicated that there existed a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups on the post-test of grammar. Though the main focus of the present study was on the intermediate learners, it seems that the upper intermediate and advanced learners who have developed better language abilities and enjoy more advanced language skills could better benefit from using Audio-taped journals in their classes.

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