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Research Article

The Effect of Using Discourse Topic and Gender on Listening Comprehension of Iranian Advanced EFL Learners

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Abstract

Having been aware of the difficulties second language learners experience with Listening tasks and its important effect on language learning, the researchers of the present study decided to see whether the presence or absence of discourse topic prior to the spoken texts and gender have any role in EFL learners' listening comprehension. To gain these ends, two questions were posed: 1) does discourse topic affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners? And 2) does gender affects the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners. To answer these questions, the quasi-experimental method and a Two-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data and examine the null-hypotheses. Sixty-one male and 61 female EFL learners, among 191 students, were selected from a Foreign Language Institute in Iran, Tehran. The aforementioned participants were then split into two intact groups: control and target. The target group took the listening tests containing discourse topic, while the students in control group took the same listening tests without discourse topic. After the results and scores of the two groups were carefully dissected regarding their gender, it was found that those learners who had access to the discourse topic outperformed those who didn't, and there was no significant difference in the listening performance of male and female participants. So based on the gathered data the results of this study made this researcher to claim that using the appropriate discourse topic for text in listening tasks make them easier and more satisfying to comprehend. The learners can predict the incoming discourse and guess the message of the whole text beforehand. Furthermore, they get interested in the content of the text via hearing the topic and look forward to knowing the message of the text.

Key words: discourse, discourse topic, gender, listening comprehension, listening strategies, thematization, top-down processing

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1. Introduction

Studies have shown that presenting a topic prior to listening to a text seems to reduce, organize and categorize the semantic information of a sequence as a whole. The topic can activate the listeners' background knowledge and help them use the top-down and holistic approach to comprehend the text. Van Dijk (1977) remarks that the topic can be expressed as a complex proposition which is entailed by the joint set of propositions expressed by the sequence of sentences in the text and this constrains the listener or reader's interpretation. Van Dijk (1977) further maintains that "The semantic representation of a text is its macro-structure which defines 'the meaning of parts of a discourse and of the whole discourse on the basis of the meaning of the individual sentences'" (p. 6). Different studies also have shown that L1 listeners, who have well-developed conceptual knowledge on the topic of a text, will understand and remember its information better than those who do not (Garner, 1987).

Teachers should prepare students to listen by setting-up a context within which the speech sample takes place. This will help students to listen expecting to hear language that is appropriate to that context, resulting in a more complete understanding. Furthermore, research concludes that the act of comprehending is essentially meaning-driven, holistic, top-down behavior that is highly selective in the features it incorporates. The implications are that listeners listen for meaning rather than for language (Byrnes, 1984). Likewise, Chastain (1988) reports that the listener's approach is to listen to the whole message rather than to individual linguistic components of the message. The present study is an attempt to see whether using a topic prior to presenting a piece of spoken discourse can affect the amount of comprehension of EFL learners.

1.1. What is Listening Comprehension?

Brown (1994) defines listening comprehension as not only the process of sending and receiving sounds, but also as the interactive and conscious process to send and transmit the message to the brain which will influence in the process of communication. Furthermore, Byrne (1984) defines listening as the basic mechanism through which the main rules of the language are acquired. It is also the means to acquire the cultural information the listener needs. Bulletin (1952) also classifies listening as one of the fundamental abilities of the language that allows all users of the language to get not only information, but also instruction and comprehension in general.

The term listening is used in language teaching to refer to a complex process that allows to understand spoken language. Listening, the most widely used language skill, is often used in conjunction with the other skills of speaking, reading and writing. Listening is not only a skill area in language performance, but it is also a critical means of acquiring a second language. Listening is the channel in which we process language in real time-employing pacing, units of encoding and pausing that are unique to spoken language.

1.2 . The Importance of Listening Comprehension

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The importance of listening in language learning can hardly be overestimated. Through reception, we internalize linguistic information without which we could not produce language. In classrooms, students always do more listening than speaking. Listening competence is universally “larger” than speaking competence.

Listening comprehension has not always drawn the attention of educators to the extent that it now has. Perhaps human beings have a natural tendency to look at speaking as the major index of language proficiency. The focus on speech was given a boost in the 1930s and 1940s when anthropologists began to study and describe the world’s spoken language Influenced by this anthropological movement. Bloomfield (1942) declared that “One learns to understand and speak a language primarily by hearing and imitating native speakers”.

Listening as a major component in language learning and teaching first hit the spotlight in the late 1970s with Asher's work on Total Physical Response. In TPR the role of comprehension was given prominence as learners were given great quantities of language to listen to before they were encouraged to respond orally (Asher, 1977). Similarly, the natural approach recommended a “silent period” during which learners were allowed the security of listening without being forced to go through the anxiety of speaking before they were “ready” to do so (Krashen,1982).

Second language listening comprehension is a complex and crucial process in the development of second language competence; yet, the importance of listening in language learning has relatively been recognized recently (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Since the role of listening comprehension in language learning was either overlooked or undervalued, it merited little research and pedagogical attention in the past. But at present, some researchers have devoted their time to listening and believe it to be an important skill in teaching and learning. For instance, Nunan (1998) believes that "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... (p. 1).

1.2.Strategies of Listening Comprehension

O'Malley & Chamot, 1990 argue that listening strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. Listening strategies can be classified by how the listener processes the input. Top-down strategies are listener based; the listener taps into background knowledge of the topic, the situation or context, the type of text, and the language. This background knowledge activates a set of expectations that help the listener to interpret what is heard and anticipate what will come next. Top-down strategies include: a) listening for the main idea; b) predicting; c) drawing inferences; and d) summarizing. Bottom-up strategies are text based in which the listener relies on the language in the message, that is, the combination of sounds, words, and grammar that creates meaning. Bottom-up strategies include: a) listening for specific details; b) recognizing cognates; and c) recognizing word-order patterns.

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Listening comprehension tends to be an interactive, interpretive process in which listeners use prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages. Listeners use meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective. Meta-cognitive strategies are important because they regulate and direct the language learning process. Research shows that skilled listeners use more meta-cognitive strategies than their less-skilled counterparts (ibid). The use of cognitive strategies helps students to manipulate learning materials and apply specific techniques to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding or to lower anxiety.

By raising students' awareness of listening as a skill that requires active engagement, and by explicitly teaching listening strategies, teachers help their students develop both the ability and the confidence to handle communication situations they may encounter beyond the classroom. In this way they give their students the foundation for communicative competence in the new language.

There are many types of listening strategies (predicting, summarizing, distinguishing fact from opinion, interpreting tone, drawing inferences, etc.). Brown (1994) quite appropriately compares strategies to "battle plans": Strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. They are contextualized "battle plans" that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year. "With some exceptions, strategies themselves are not inherently good or bad, but have the potential to be used effectively" (Cohen, 1998, p. 8). Underwood (1989) said, "it is unfair to plunge students into the listening text, even when testing rather than teaching listening comprehension, as this makes it extremely difficult for them to use the natural listening skills (which we all use in our native language) of matching what they hear with what they expect to hear and using their previous knowledge to make sense of it".

Chastain (1988) suggests that a series of expectations, predictions and verifications are used to create meaning from the sounds until the entire message is understood. Furthermore, Goodman (1973) points out that a listener predicts structures check them against the semantic context which he builds up from the situation and the ongoing discourse, and subsequently verifies them as he processes further language. He maintains that the third step in comprehension is to predict the general content of the message. Proficient listening requires that listeners look ahead in anticipation of what is coming. Otherwise they will be unable to focus their attention and to manage the flow of material. In this sense they are checking the incoming material as opposed to trying to make an unanticipated and instantaneous interpretation. Nunan (2001) argues that "predicting, or looking ahead, helps the learners to anticipate what is to come. This results in more effective learning, because the learners are adequately prepared for new material."

2. What is Discourse Topic?

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The concept of discourse topic is elusive; different scholars use it to refer to different phenomena, from a constituent of a clause to propositions of a text. Nunan (1993) defines topic in this way, "Topic is the subject matter of a text" (p. 125). Brown & Yule (1989) define discourse topic in this way: "There must be, for any fragment of conversational discourse, a single proposition (expressed as a phrase or sentence) which represents the discourse topic of the whole of the fragment" (p. 71).

In this regard Keenan and Schieffelin (1976) emphasize that discourse topic is not a simple NP, but a proposition. Furthermore, Brown & Yule (1983) comment on this notion: "Discourse topic is composed of the most important elements of the discourse content. If the representation of discourse content can be expressed as a hierarchy of elements in the discourse, then the top most elements are natural candidates for treatment as the 'most important' elements of the discourse topic. Katz (1980) states "The notion of a discourse topic is that of the common theme of the previous sentences in the discourse, the top carried from sentence to sentence as the subject of their predication" (p. 26).

According to much work on this subject, discourse topic, there is a specific connection between 'discourse topic' and 'discourse content'. In the recent years many psychologists have been engaged in producing representation of the semantic content. The notion of proposition is common to many of these attempts. "Proposition is the context-independent, invariant meaning expressed in a sentence (statement)" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 107).

2.1. The Role of Discourse Topic in Comprehension

Several studies have discussed the positive effects of the discourse topics in texts (Bransford & Franks, (1971), Bransford & Johnson (1973), Kintsch (1974), Keenan & Schieffelin (1976), Van Dijk (1977), Katz (1980), Brown and Yule (1983). Van Dijk (1977), for example, claims that discourse topic seem to reduce, organize and categorize semantic information of sequences as wholes. He sets out to present an explicit formal account of the concept 'topic of discourse' and its considerable function in comprehending a text. In his analysis, he proposes that the topic can be expressed as a complex proposition which is composed of the linked set of propositions presented by the order of sentences in the text. It should be emphasized that Van Dijk's analysis is based on an underlying semantic representation of the text rather than the sequence of sentences which constitute the text. The semantic representation of a text is its macro-structure which defines the meaning of parts of a discourse and of the whole discourse on the basis of the meanings of the individual sentences.

Among others, Widdowson (2007) reports that what is mentioned at the start of a passage will be kept in mind and serve as a context for what follows. Context is what occurs before and/ or after a word, a phrase or even a longer utterance or a text. The context often helps in understanding the

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particular meaning of the word, phrase or utterance. Brown and Yule (1983) claim that “For any text, there is a single correct expression which is the topic and it facilitates comprehension” (p. 72). Chastain (1988) also remarks that language does not occur in a vacuum. Communication arises from a need in a particular set of circumstances. Therefore, teachers should prepare students to listen by establishing a context within which the speech sample takes place. This will enable students to listen expecting to hear language that is appropriate to that context, resulting in a more complete understanding.

We may assume that the intuitive notion of a discourse topic may theoretically be made explicit in terms of semantic macro-structures. Such macro-structures are not only theoretical constructs, but are assumed also to have a psychological correlate, a cognitive schema, which determines the planning, execution, understanding, storage and reproduction of the discourse. Apparently, they operate on the lexical structure of the meanings of the concepts of the respective sentences. In order to be able to construct a macro-proposition, we must call on our knowledge of the world, as it is cognitively organized in frames. Experiments have shown that the top-levels of this macro-structural hierarchy of the discourse are recalled best and most permanently. In fact, the topic of discourse, i.e. the macro-structure formed on the basis of conventional world knowledge (frames), allows that much information is not explicitly expressed in the discourse. Thus, semantically, topics are assigned to parts of the semantic representation of sentences relative to the interpretation of previous sentences, as a general rule to co-referential expressions in the sense of entailed or frame-induced information inferable from given information.

According to many cognitive psychologists who make text-content analysis, the propositions are treated as what speakers have in their mind after they have read or listened to a piece of text. These propositions are treated as conceptual structures. Van Dijk (1977) demonstrates that a proposition represents a concept or conceptual structure, and in the strong view, the propositional form is the representation in which all knowledge is used and stored, and the discourse analyst must be capable of providing, not just an analysis of a piece of text, but an analysis of the mental representation of that text. "The amount of time which is required for reading and remembering a paragraph, should be propositional to the number of propositions in its base" (Kintsch, 1974, p. 135).

There is a relationship between propositions expressed in a text. To support this idea, Brown & Yule (1983) claim that the representation of a text cannot be treated as only a list of propositions, but must indicate that some propositions are subordinate to others. In another study in which the examinees were asked to recall what they had read, they recalled propositions higher up the hierarchy more easily than those in subordinate places.

What the speaker or writer puts first will affect the interpretation of everything that follows. Therefore, a title will influence the interpretation of the text that follows it. The first sentence of the first paragraph constrains the interpretation of not only the paragraph but also of the rest of the

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text. That is we suppose that every sentence forms part of a developing, cumulative instruction which tells us how to build a coherent representation (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Brown and Yule (1983) point out that "the notion of topic is clearly an intuitively satisfactory way of describing the unifying principle which makes one stretch of discourse 'about' something and the next stretch about something else" (p. 70). They also asserts that "For any text, there is a single correct phrase which is the topic, and titles are a number of different ways of expressing the topic" (ibid, p. 73). Related to this issue, Tyler (1978) also declares that there are many possible titles for any text. The topic can only be one possible paraphrase of a series of utterances.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of, discourse topic and gender on listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners. In fact, this study strives to answer the following research questions specifically:

1. Does discourse topic affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners?
2. Does gender affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners?

The participants comprising the population of this study were 69 male and 61 female EFL learners from Iran Zaban Foreign Language Institute in Tehran. All the participants came from the same institute. They were between 21 and 28 years old. Two sets of tests have been administered to the participants respectively. The Nelson Placement Test (1978), and Listening Comprehension Test selected from The Test of English as a Foreign Language (ARCO-TOEFL, 1995). The Nelson Placement Test was used for the purpose of measuring the participants' level of proficiency. The Nelson Test consists of 50 multiple-choice items with the reliability of .92, estimated through KR-21 formula in a pilot study done by 35 students who had the same characteristics as the main participants. Although the questions are not separated to different parts, they measure the examinees' general knowledge on grammar and structure as well as vocabulary and meaning.

To investigate the role of the topic in listening comprehension, two versions of the listening texts (three conversations and four lectures) were produced: one with topic and the other without any topic. A multiple choice test of listening checking both global and local understanding was designed and administered to both control and target groups. The texts were followed by 30 multiple choice questions which tapped into factual, inferential, and global understanding of the lectures. The listening test was piloted by 35 students and its reliability turned out to be .88 through Cronbach's Alpha method. Since the listening texts of TOEFL do not have any topic, the researcher had to select a topic for them. The content validity of the three sets of tests used in this study was also approved by four experienced EFL instructors.

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One hundred and thirty students whose Nelson score fell within one standard deviation, 7.01, below and above the mean of 34.48 were selected from among 191 students as advanced homogeneous participants for this study. The aforementioned participants were randomly split into two intact groups: A & B. Sixty-six students formed the control group and 64 students formed the target group. Next, the target group was asked to listen to the texts containing the discourse topic two times and then answer their questions, while the students in control group listened to the same texts without any discourse topic.

After the exam time (10 minutes for each text) expired (the time for both groups was fixed), a multiple choice test of listening comprehension which included 30 items was administered to both groups of participants. Finally the researcher dissected the scores in the two groups to see whether there was any difference among learners' listening comprehension of the texts with or without discourse topic. At the same time the listening comprehension scores of the male and female participants in the two groups were compared to determine if gender had anything to do with the listening comprehension of advanced learners when the discourse topic is presented or not.

The independent variables of this research are two between-subject variables named discourse topic and gender, and the dependent variable is listening comprehension. The design of this study is quasi-experimental since Hatch and Farhadi (1991) believe that quasi-experimental design is a type of research design which include experimental and control groups without random sampling and we are dealing with the most complicated of human behavior, language learning and language behavior.

4. Results

The first step to answer the research questions was to calculate the descriptive statistics, and the second step was to submit the data to Two-way ANOVA to determine whether the two between-subject variables, discourse topic and gender have any significant effect on listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners. We used Two-way ANOVA since Mackey and Gass (2332) believe that "Two-way ANOVA is used when there are two independent variables" (p. 275). The following represents the steps of screening the data against each null hypothesis. In order to test the null hypotheses, the performances of the participants in the two groups on listening TOEFL test regarding their gender were assessed. Table 1 presents the related descriptive statistics.

Results are reported in terms of number of the participants, mean score, median, mode, and standard deviation for the two groups and their gender. A cursory glance at the table hands on that the mean average score of male participants in control group was 17.00 with standard deviation of 4.39, and the mean average score of females was 16.40 with standard deviation of 3.46. These two mean scores and standard deviations are not far from each other. Furthermore, the mean score of male participants in target group was 21.80 with standard deviation of 3.56, and the mean average score of females was 21.26 with standard deviation of 3.79. These two mean scores and standard deviations are close to each other as well.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Control and Target Groups and Gender

Group	Gender	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Control	Male	34	17.00	17.00	17	4.390
	Female	30	16.40	17.00	18	3.460
	Total	64	16.72	17.00	17	3.96
Target	Male	35	21.80	22.00	23	3.563
	Female	31	21.26	22.00	22	3.794
	Total	66	21.55	22.00	22	3.65

However, the total mean average score of participants in control group was 16.72 with standard deviation of 3.96, but the total mean score in target group turned out to be 21.55 with standard deviation of 3.65. Although the standard deviations of the scores in the two groups are near each other, their mean scores are far from each other showing that the participants in the target group who listened to the passages containing discourse topic outperformed those in control group who listened to the passages without any discourse topic. Figure 1 below provides graphical demonstration of the results.

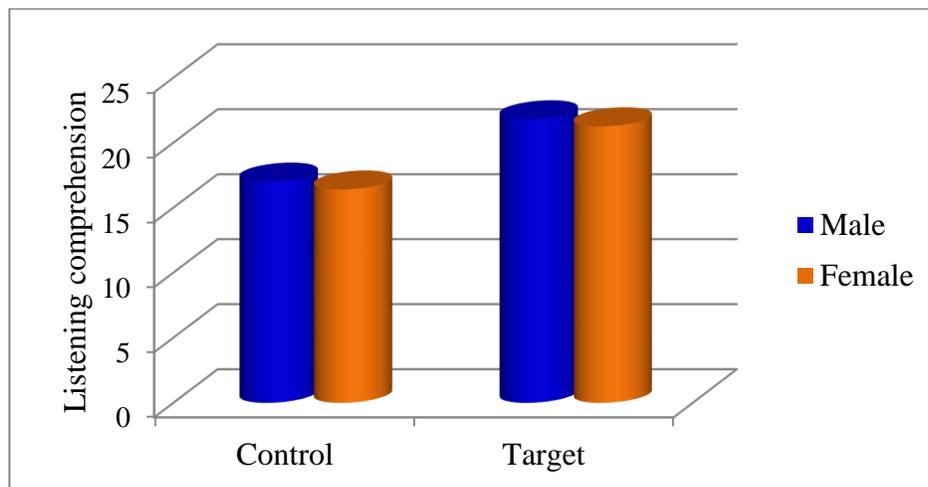


Figure 1. Listening means score of males and females in control and target groups

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used to test the normality distribution of the scores. Table 2 below displays the related results. One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test results revealed p value of .46, and .25 for control and target groups' listening scores, and .71, and .85 for

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males and females in control, and .67 and .71 for males and females in target group. The p values for all sets of scores are more than .05 ($p > \alpha$); consequently, we can conclude that all sets of scores have normal distribution. Thus parametric data analysis is used to analyze the data.

Table 2: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for the two Groups and Gender

Group	Gender	N	Mean	Sig.
Control	Male	34	17.00	.711
	Female	30	16.40	.850
	Total	64	16.72	.46
Experimental	Male	35	21.80	.671
	Female	31	21.26	.710
	Total	66	21.55	.25

One of the main assumptions of ANOVA is the equality of variances among the sets of scores. So the Levene's Test was utilized. Table 3 below represents the related results. The table shows that the assumption of equality of variances is met since the p value is lower than .05.

Table 3: Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.757	3	126	.520

The results of ANOVA for investigating the effect of the discourse topic and gender are manifested in Table 4 below. As obvious in the table, ANOVA detected statistically significant effect for group ($F = 51.50$, $p = .000$, $p < \alpha$), in which the F -observed value for the effect of discourse topic, 51.50, was much greater than the critical value of F at 1 and 126 degrees of freedom, 3.92, and the p value, .000 was well lower than the significance level, .05, leading to the conclusion that the first null hypothesis which predicted that discourse topic does not affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners was rejected. Besides the effect size for the effect of treatment was .30

ANOVA results (see Table 4) revealed no statistically significant effect for gender ($F = .72$, $p = .39$, $p > \alpha$), in which the F -observed value for the effect of gender, .72, was much less than the critical value of F at 1 and 126 degrees of freedom, 3.92, and also the p value, .39, was larger than the significance level, .05; as a result, the second null hypothesis which stated that gender does not affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners was not

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rejected. So with high degree of confidence, we can claim that gender does not affect the listening comprehension of Iranian advanced EFL learners.

Table 4: Two-way ANOVA on Listening Test by Discourse Topic and Gender

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	767.541	3	255.847	17.456	.000	.294
Intercept	47306.130	1	47306.130	3227.626	.000	.962
Group	754.833	1	754.833	51.501	.000	.301
Gender	10.552	1	10.552	.720	.398	.006
Group * Gender	.027	1	.027	.002	.947	.000
Error	1846.735	126	14.657			

Besides the interaction effect of the between-subject factors, discourse topic and gender was not significant ($F = .002$, $p = .94$, $p > \alpha$, Effect size = .000).

5. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to determine whether there is any significant difference between the of participants' rate of comprehensions in listening tasks with or without discourse topic considering the gender factor. In this regard, a Two-way ANOVA was used to compare the participants' listening scores of texts with or without discourse topic in relation to their gender. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the listening comprehension of participants in texts with or without discourse topic. Additionally, the statistical analysis performed indicated that the independent variable of gender has no significant effect on the two dependent variables of listening texts with or without discourse topic.

Listening comprehension is one of the most important skills in language learning that nobody can ignore its importance; however, it has not drawn the attention of many educators. In fact, both language teachers and students tend to overlook the importance of listening comprehension skills as a prerequisite to developing speaking skills. The listening comprehension process is internal and thus not subject to direct external observation. Therefore, language teachers and students tend to overlook its prerequisite importance in language learning process because there is no immediate observable output. In addition many teachers can correct students' errors only if they hear them say something. Tradition also contributes to slight attention paid to listening in many language classes. Teachers tend to expect the same types of classes they have learned to associate with language classes. Thus the term listening is used in language teaching to refer to a complex process

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that allows us to understand the spoken language, and in this regard we (as language teachers) should not ignore the importance of input in second language learning.

Also, here is an attempt to investigate one of the sources of difficulty in the process of comprehending an oral text. It has been tried to find out a relationship between the presence and absence of topic and listening comprehension ability of the participants. Accordingly, from the data recorded in chapter IV, it was concluded that the presence or absence of topic has determining roles in the EFL listening comprehension of the participants in this study, and sex has no impact on this study. In other words, no significant differences were observed among the male and female participants of the study and their listening comprehension ability. In this survey, no significant interactive effect was detected, which means that the difference observed, has been due to the main effect i.e. presence or absence of discourse topic. Obviously, more research is needed to explore the role of topic in listening comprehension from other perspectives.

The results of this study made this researcher to claim that using the appropriate discourse topic for text in listening tasks make them easier and more satisfying to comprehend. The learners can predict the incoming discourse and guess the message of the whole text beforehand. Furthermore, they get interested in the content of the text via hearing the topic and look forward to knowing the message of the text. In addition, the results of this study are in line with Byrnes' (1978) beliefs that the act of comprehending is essentially meaning-driven, holistic, top-down behavior that is highly selective in the features it incorporates. The implications are that listeners listen for meaning rather than for language. Besides, our study lends support to Chastain' (1988) idea that the listener' approach is to listen to the whole message rather than to the individual linguistic components of the message. The listeners will use the top-down view and holistic approach to comprehend the text by hearing the topic beforehand. The topic is the message the speaker attempts to transform to the listener.

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