Exploring the Effect of Group Dynamics on the Development of Socio-Affective Vs. Cognitive Strategies of Listening Skills in Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine if group dynamics affect Iranian EFL learners' socio-affective and cognitive strategies of listening skills. Participants were a sample of 90 students from the population of Iranian EFL learners studying English in the Sadat Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. The experiment was conducted in 8 weeks. In the first week, students took a pre-test and randomized in the control and experimental group based on their scores. They underwent the treatment for a period of six weeks. Both groups practiced the listening exercises once a week (45 minutes) for a period of six weeks. The experimental group received instructions on how to employ socio affective and cognitive strategies for listening tasks. They were asked to reflect their feelings and worries either by writing or talking about them. They were encouraged communicating with their peers and the researcher. The control group, on the other hand, did not receive any explicit instruction from the researcher. The results revealed learners' socio-affective and cognitive strategies of listening skills were significantly affected by group dynamics. The product of this study can help curriculum designers; language instructors and practitioners appreciate the importance of group dynamics.

Keywords: "EFL learners", "group dynamics", "listening skills", "socio-affective and cognitive strategies"

Introduction

It can be advisable to regard listening as an integrated part of language classes because enhancing different modalities of skills like listening can allocate language learning experiences for learners. Otherwise, low listening proficiency may discourage learners to actively participate in oral discussions. Learning shall be enhanced through understanding the intended meaning according to the researchers that emphasize the important role of listening (Alalou & Chamberlain, 1999).

In the same vein, learning strategies are divided into three main categories: metacognitive, cognitive and socio affective (O'Malley&Chamot, 1990). While learners use cognitive strategies to achieve a particular goal, say, understanding a text, metacognitive strategies are used to ensure that the reader has successfully done the activity after it is completed. Socio affective strategies, On the other hand, deal with learners' interactions with others (Brown, 2000). Unlike self-efficacy, learning strategies, generally, and listening strategies, particularly, have been the focus of a wealth of studies. Listening strategies were defined as "deliberate, conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension" (Sheory& Mokhtari, 2001, p.433).

Social affective strategy means, learning by interacting with others, such as working with fellow students or asking the teacher's help. The powerful social and affective strategies are found less often in L2 research. This is, perhaps, because L2 researchers do not study these behaviors frequently, and because learners are not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process (Oxford, 1990). As to the socio/affective strategies, it can be stated that they are related with social-mediating activity and transacting with others. Cooperation and question for clarification are the main social /affective strategies. Affective strategies, such as identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk, have been shown to be significantly related to L2 proficiency in research by (Magno, 2008). Encourage learners is rather difficult still to involve themselves in listening process as the result of either medium or context. To support the learning processes, one might refer to different types of theories at hand. To mention the one, as the focal pillar of this study, Group Dynamics Theory (GDT) deals with the processes that occur between members of a group in a learning situation. In fact, GDT deals with situations that are capable of creating motivation for learners to experience enhanced learning. Moreover, it casts light on learners' behavior in a social system. Therefore, this study was going to explore the effect of group dynamics on the development of Iranian EFL learners' socio-affective and cognitive strategies of listening skills.

Research Purpose

The main locus of group dynamics is on pair-work and group-work rather than learning things individually. The theory itself has some major components including the cohesiveness of the group, the norms established for the group, the group leadership style, and the size of the group. Group Cohesiveness is necessary for the development of group dynamics. "Cohesiveness refers to the reasonable connection between the members of a group (Hinger, 2006, p. 25)."

The members of a cohesive group are interdependent and they mutually accept each other. These positive feelings play a motivating role in the group success and they encourage the members to actively get involved in group activities. Not only does cohesiveness affect the members' performance and their level of motivation, but also it prolongs the life of the group. This means that group members who understand and accept each other tend to save their group (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

In the same vein, the purpose of this study was to help instructors to introduce group dynamics to students to expand their listening performance on tasks of language systematically because in EFL contexts, learners often are encountered with problems in listening. Therefore, this study was going to explore the effect of group dynamics on the development of socio-affective and cognitive strategies of listening skills in Iranian EFL learners.

Method

Participants were a sample of 90 students from the population of Iranian EFL learners studying English in the Sadat Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. This study was conducted with Iranian male learners only whose age range was from 18 to 30. Their average age was 24 years and their proficiency level was pre-intermediate. The researcher selected participants based on non-random convenience sampling. They participated in a homogeneity test adapted from *PET test* and 60 participants whose scores were one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean selected. From the 60 participants that were selected as the result of homogeneity test, 30 randomly assigned to the control group and 30 served as the experimental group.

Two sample IELTS listening section served as pre and post test, and six sample listening exercises. Students practiced the tasks every week for 45 minutes during six weeks of treatment. Sitting it, the students were required to answer 122 multiple-choice items comprising listening section with 50 items, use of English with 26 items and reading comprehension with 46 items .This test was used to assess both language and listening proficiency level of the learners. Posttest was the next instrument that was used to measure the subjects' achievement after the treatment. In order to probe whether or not there was any change in the listening skill of the learners, a standardized listening test was used. The listening part of the IELTS test, which was used as the pretest and comprises 50 items was administered again to both groups. In this study, the researcher employed *Inventory of Socioaffective and Cognitive Strategies* which was designed by Teng (1997). This questionnaire subsumed five options in the form of five columns which is called Likert scale and these options included the choices as strongly disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, strongly agree, and neutral. This questionnaire enjoyed reliability and validity. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability for Inventory of Socioaffective and Cognitive Strategies comprising 8 items turned out to be 0.80.

The experiment was conducted in 8 weeks. In the first week, students took a pre-test and randomized in the control and experimental group based on their scores. They underwent the treatment for a period of six weeks. Both groups practiced the listening exercises once a week (45 minutes) for a period of six weeks. The experimental group received instructions on how to employ socio affective and cognitive strategies for listening tasks. They were asked to reflect their feelings and worries either by writing or

talking about them. They were encouraged communicating with their peers and the researcher. The control group, on the other hand, did not receive any explicit instruction from the researcher. The instruction in the syllabus was designed based on Anderson's (2005) model of L2 listening strategies as shown in Table 1. Finally, on week 8, both groups had taken the post-test, which was another sample IELTS listening comprehension. The scores of students in the control and experimental groups were compared in pre and post tests within and between groups to see their progress before and after treatment, and also to check if any group had a significant achievement. The teacher's instruction was different from week to week, based on the type of the task. Basically, the researcher focused on using the techniques as presented in "Table 1".

Table 1- the stages of strategy training in experimental group

Inside Class	**Pre listening**	**Writing about feelings** **Talking about feelings to peers** **Lowering anxiety, Pre listening relaxation, deep breathing, and Stretching** **Repeating positive statements**
Inside Class	While listening	Explanation of the task While listening Asking for clarification Helping peers to do the task Exchanging ideas Group and pair work
Inside Class	Post listening	Checking the answers within groups Self reward and encouragement Commenting on the task getting feedback from teacher and peers
Out of Class	Before and after night sleep	Repeating positive statements every night and morning

Note: Anderson's (٢٠٠٥) Model of L2 Listening Strategies

Results Discussion

The first research question of this study aimed at seeing if group dynamics affects socio-affective of listening skill in Iranian EFL learners. In order to investigate this research question, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted "Table 2".

Table 2- One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for Socio-Affective of Listening Skill Scores

Test	Group	*N*	Kolmogorov-Smirnov *Z*	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	Experimental	30	.690	.728
	Control	30	.698	.714
Post-test	Experimental	30	.505	.943
	Control	30	.692	.724

"Table 2" notifies that the two socio-affective of listening skill pre-test scores for both experimental group (p = .72, p > .05) and control group (p = .71, p > .05) are normally distributed. Besides, as observable in the table, the socio-affective of listening skill post-test scores for both experimental group (p = .94, p > .05) and control group (p = .72, p > .05) have normal distribution. Hence, were legitimized to utilize independent samples *t*-test and paired samples *t*-test as two parametric statistical tests.

"Table 3" is a display of the mean and standard deviation of the experimental ($\bar{x}$ = 13.03, *SD* = 1.80) and control ($\bar{x}$ = 12.65, *SD* = 1.46) groups on pre-test of socio-affective of listening skill.

Table 3- Descriptive Statistics of Two Group's Scores on the Socio-Affective of Listening Pre-test

Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	13.033	1.804	.329
Control	30	12.650	1.468	.268

"Table 4" reflects the mean and standard deviation of the experimental ($\bar{x}$ = 14.66, *SD* = 1.42) and control ($\bar{x}$ = 13.48, *SD* = 1.49) groups on post-test of socio-affective of listening skill.

Table 4- Descriptive Statistics of Two Group's Scores on the Socio-Affective of Listening Post-test

Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Std. Error Mean

Experimental	30	14.667	1.428	.260
Control	30	13.483	1.499	.273

The results of independent *t*-test that was performed to compare experimental and control groups' socio-affective of listening skill scores on the post-test are set forth in "Table 5".

Table 5- Independent Samples Test for Two Groups' Scores on Socio-Affective of Listening Post-test

Levene's Test for Variances			T-test for Means			
Factor	*F*	Sig.	*T*	*Df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Equal variances assumed	.006	.939	3.129	58	.003	1.183
Equal variances not assumed			3.129	57.862	.003	1.183

A cursory look at "Table 5" indicates that the assumption of equal of variances is met ($p = .93$, $p > .05$). Additionally, independent *t*-test found a statistically significant difference (t (58) = 3.12, $p = .003$, $p < .05$) in socio-affective of listening skill measures for the experimental group ($\bar{x} = 14.66$) and control group ($\bar{x} = 13.48$). Also, the *t*-observed was below the *t*-critical of 2.00.Accordingly, the researcher rejected the first null hypothesis that states, "Group dynamics have no significant effect on enhancing socio-affective of listening skill in Iranian EFL learners" and claimed that Group dynamics enhances Iranian EFL learners' socio-affective of listening skill. The purpose of the second research question was to find out if group dynamics develops cognitive strategies of listening skill in Iranian EFL learners. The researcher ran independent sample *t*-test for investigating this research question. The related descriptive statistics were prepared ("Table 6, Table 7") before discussing the results of *t*-test.

Table 6- Descriptive Statistics of Two Group's Inventory Scores (Pretest)

Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	2.664	.323	.059
Control	30	2.594	.295	.053

Table 7- Descriptive Statistics of Two Group's Inventory Scores (Posttest)

Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Std. Error Mean
Experimental	30	2.833	.215	.039
Control	30	2.643	.268	.049

According to "Table 8" below, the significance level (.29) associated with Leven's test is less than.05, so the assumption of equal of variances is met.

Table 8- Independent Samples T-test for Inventory (Post-test)

	Levene's Test for Variances		*T*-test for Means			
Factor	*F*	*Sig.*	*T*	*Df*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.
Equal variances assumed	1.125	.293	3.035	58	.004	.19067
Equal variances not assumed			3.035	55.399	.004	.19067

As seen in "Table 8" above, independent *t*-test found a statistically significant difference (t (58) = 3.03, p = .004, p < .05) in inventory scores for experimental ($\bar{x}$ = 2.83) and control ($\bar{x}$ = 2.64) groups on the post-test, in which the *t*-value of 3.03 is below the *t*-critical of 2.00. Subsequently, the second null hypothesis of the study that says "Group dynamics have no significant effect on enhancing cognitive strategies of listening skill in Iranian EFL learners" was rejected, and therefore the researcher could claim that Group dynamics influences cognitive strategies of listening skill in Iranian EFL learners.

The findings of the present study indicated a significant difference between control and experimental groups' level of socioaffective and cognitive strategies of listening skill. This suggests that group dynamics, explicit intervention in the classroom and categorization of the manner in which strategy use is orchestrated while listening (Veenma & Spaans, 2005). Considering the context of group dynamics, inconclusive results have also been reached. While group dynamics research has a history of more than two decades in the ESL context with abundant evidence (e.g. O'Malley et al., 1989; Bacon, 1992; Cross, 2009), it has only been recently that a few scholars started to undertake empirical studies in this regard in the EFL setting (e.g. Coskun& Daloglu 2010; Chen & Huang, 2011).

The findings of some of these studies show a positive effect of group dynamics on listening proficiency and comprehending oral texts while in some of them non-significant improvement of students' listening performance after instruction is reported (Chen & Huang, 2011). This result can be attributed to factors such as text and task type, the listener characteristics (e.g. background schemata, learning styles) (Chen & Huang, 2011), the amount of exposure to oral text, and the nature of the input (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal, & Tafaghodtari, 2006). While inferential statistics revealed a non-significant difference between the two groups' listening comprehension after the treatment, we cannot overlook the fact that group dynamics has actually improved participants' listening comprehension ability from pretest to posttest. What can be concluded from this is that controlling the factors discussed earlier may guarantee a significant impact of strategy instruction on listening skill and therefore, replication of this study in other EFL contexts is recommended.

Conclusions

The current study proposes that group dynamics on the development of socio-affective and cognitive strategies of listening skills can lead to better comprehension, test familiarity, risk taking, self confidence, peer learning, more interaction and consequently better results in listening tests. Students should be exposed to explicit strategy instruction which results to transfer, and should be taught how to listen effectively to different listening tasks. Students may employ fewer or more socio-affective and cognitive strategies for specific tasks. The teachers should be aware of the nature of the task, and other strategies that are more likely to be more helpful for specific tasks. Students' internal traits such as proficiency, intelligence, attitude, motivation, etc, should be considered before judging upon their strategy use.

The focus of this study was on socio-affective and cognitive strategies, only. Thus, the results interpreted here may have other explanations which are far beyond the scope of this study. It is recommended that group dynamics can be investigated further to see whether it affects using other strategies or if the control group employs other strategies (memory, cognitive, metacognitive, and compensation), without being trained.

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