Perspectives on Study abroad Students through Passing FCE Test: Listening Problems

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Abstract: The recent globalization processes have created the new opportunities for young people's international mobility making educational migration the major trend of our time. One common way to confirm an English-level qualification is to obtain a certificate in an international examination, e.g. Cambridge ESOL exams, which are intended to test comprehensively all language skills. One aspect that due to its complexity and even ambiguity deserves to become an object of thorough consideration and detailed analysis is the problem of reaching desired level of student's proficiency in foreign language listening. This article presents a research that offers perspective on the problems of developing students' listening. Thus, the purpose of the article is to research the interaction between the improvement of students' listening comprehension skills in comparison with the advance of other academic competences and to offer the ways of the intensification of listening ability development. Among the research methods, following have been used: the students' progress in developing five language competences (Listening, Writing, Speaking, Reading and Use of English) was measured by testing (oral and written), observation, discussion; statistical methods (Student's t-test) helped to evaluate the results of the experiment. In total, 90 University students in 2017/19 took part in this study. As our experiment has demonstrated, listening competence is less ready to progress compared with other component of the English language competence (Speaking, Reading and Use of English) surpassed only by Writing. It is found that the present investigation opens the perspectives for further researches.

Keywords: *language skills; language competence; listening comprehension; Cambridge ESOL exams; students.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Competence in English as a necessary requirement for students' mobility

The reality of modern globalized world is that more and more young people tend to take advantage of participation in various international educational programmes, employment or study prospects, which in most cases require profound knowledge of a foreign language.

After English became the acknowledged 'first-choice foreign language' to master (Lo Bianco, 2014), the attitudes towards its teaching and instructional technologies have also transformed 'from teaching a single variety of English to teaching intercultural communication and English language variation' (Marlina & Giri, 2014). The researchers highlight the role of English in the world and summarize 'the (positive and negative) effects of globalization on English language teaching' (Alfehaid, 2014). The questions of 'increasing the multilingualism of individuals' as an ostensible purpose of the European Union have been also discussed, and the fact that 'the labour market will give increasing importance to the ability to communicate and work in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity' is predicted (Fürstenau, 2005).

Ch. Tribble contemplating about the role of English in today's world points to the respond to social demands: "governments and educational authorities around the world have, in recent decades, made serious efforts to improve the teaching and learning of English in their schools, universities, and communities ... they can, taken together, provide us with a substantial body of experience and knowledge about the best way to conceive, design, and implement English language projects" (Tribble, 2012).

Large-scale migration, immigration and multilingualism raise issues of 'grappling, theoretically and practically, with volatile linguistic and cultural difference' (Collins, 2007). There are different thoughts about the empirical, ideological and methodological dimensions of the globalization, pluralization, localization of English. Some of them are that 'migration-based language pluralism and globalized forms of identity conflict pose challenges for both ethnographic educational research and linguistic anthropology' (Collins, 2007); considering whether 'students from immigrant minority' can benefit from acquiring multilingual skills (Fürstenau, 2005); or how much and in which way teaching English has been influenced by globalization (Alfehaid, 2014).

In order to study abroad the majority (66%) of the Ukrainians give preference to English among the other European languages (according to

the survey of Analytical Center RATING Pro). Other surveys held by the British Council in 2016 (the year announced to be the year of the English language in Ukraine), identified such perspective factors and advantages of learning English relevant for most Ukrainians as the opportunity to study in another country, to meet employer's demands, to read academic / professional books / journals, to pass professional exams, to follow university lectures/classes, to write university papers / essays, to take part in tutorials / discussions etc.

The problems of students, who study abroad, as well as the issues of international student mobility (ISM) are very urgent especially in terms of higher education. They reflect the researchers' growing interest towards various aspects of student mobility. Thus, A. Wells underlines that it is necessary 'to raise academic awareness about new ideas associated with the topic, to share new, successful approaches to researching ISM and to suggest the nature of implications that ISM research findings may offer to the academic community' (2014).

However, for most academic and career objectives the language skills are considered to be insufficient, many educationalists and employers want a reliable confirmation of fluency in a foreign language. Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) exams are accepted by lots of European Universities as well as employers, thus they are the goal for the persons whose ambitions are studying or working in the European Union. The training for the mentioned exams (Holubnycha et al., 2019) usually involves the development of certain practical language competences. They demonstrate a person's ability to apply English in order to feel free in the foreign language environment and be able to solve the problems that appear in this environment. The practical skill that is vital for those students aimed at studying abroad is developing the excellence in Listening.

1.2. The importance of Listening for successful communication

Listening is considered to be a communicative basis. Moreover, it serves for getting, identifying and recognizing any information. It is important in the process of learning as well. So, it is no wonder that researchers pay special attention to the problem of listening behaviour. J. Morley claims that "we … listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read and five times more than we write" (1991); besides L. Vandergrift supposes listening to be, on the one hand, the most commonly applied linguistic skill, on the other hand, the most difficult for teaching and learning (2004). Taking into account all abovementioned, effective listening skills development can be considered extremely relevant.

1.3. Complexity of Listening Comprehension

Mastering the ability to listen and comprehend effectively as well as to do Listening tasks accurately is a complex, challenging, dynamic process that requires integration of appropriate listening attitudes, knowledge, behaviours in order to get the advance in this field. Such low advance in listening comprehension can be attributed to the variety of different factors and individual peculiarities of foreign speech recognition and processing.

1.4. The purpose of the research

So, the purpose of the paper is to research the correlation between the improvements of students' listening comprehension skills and other language competences development. The tasks are 1) to determine the developing the students' Listening competence at the beginning and at the end of the experiment; 2) to offer some in-class and after-class extracurricular activities of intensification of listening ability development; 3) to verify statistically the students' progress in listening.

1.5. Listening in the academic practice

Considering listening in teaching practice, we support J. Flowerdew (1994), J. Flowerdew and L. Miller (1997), who claim developing listening ability to be a central condition for acquisition linguistic competences. Nevertheless, developing listening comprehension stays an arguable issue as well as many other aspects of a foreign language teaching (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991; Taylor, Geranpayeh, 2011; Lynch, 2011). Many researchers face an important and difficult question if listening skills should be taught separately from other learning activities or in conjunction with them. (Buck, 2001; Marx, Heppt & Henschel, 2017). According to G. Ling-hui, the complexity of the process of developing listening skills is that there are a number of other abilities closely related to listening comprehension. They are recognizing lexical units, dividing speech into components and processing the text on the basis of structure, logic and applicable core schemes, let alone social and background skills (Ling-hui, 2007; Selamat & Sidhu, 2013).

Usually speaking about comprehension we mean the process of understanding. However, in the case of a foreign language it is not completely the same. Agreeing with M. Rost's definition, 'comprehension is the process of relating language to concepts in one's memory and to references in the real world. Comprehension is the sense of understanding what the language used and refers to personal experience or outside world'

(Rost, 2011: 59), we would like to note that students learning English are supposed to be ready not only to listen to the essence but also they have to recognize separate pieces of information. Moreover, according to J. Harmer, the students should 'let the whole tape 'wash over them' first, thus achieving general comprehension before returning to listen for specific detail' (Harmer, 1998: 98).

Although the analysis of listening activity in the context of the acquisition of knowledge through study is not a new focus for scholars, the investigation of the progress in listening comprehension compared with the progress in improving the other academic skills has never been carried out and statistically validated.

To emphasize our own contribution to the field of listening skills improvement we definitely agree with the previous researchers talking about the importance of listening and the complexity of it. But in our experimental research we analyze the progress in listening comprehension compared with the progress in other academic skills. Moreover, we stress the mean of the experimental data of listening comprehension in our own academic practice, as previous researchers stress only the difficulty of it. We do believe that our experimental data allow us to analyze the difficulty, help us to solve listening comprehension problem, offer in-class and after-class extracurricular activities for listening comprehension, and, finally, let us to get the progress in the academic practice.

2. Method

2.1. Research methodology

According to the purpose and the tasks of the study the following research methods were applied:

• general theoretical methods (analysis and synthesis of scientific literature in linguistics, pedagogy and psychology) were used to examine and characterize the processes of listening and its skills, to explain comprehension, to clear up methodology of developing listening competence, to find out approaches to teaching the mentioned skill, to discuss the problem;

• empirical methods (discussion, observation, oral and written testing, an experiment) were used to analyse the results of developing listening comprehension competence;

• statistics methods (Student's t-test) were necessary to estimate the results of the experiment.

2.2. Participants of the experiment

The pedagogical experiment was carried out in Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University and H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, in 2017/19. The participants were students of an additional course directed at preparing for FCE (Cambridge English: First) exam. All the student (90 persons) were practically of the same age (20-21 years old), nearly equal level of English fluency, moreover, they were highly motivated to get a B2 level that would give them the opportunity to study for their Master Degree (or other courses) in English. The experiment lasted for two academic years (The ALTE, 2002).

Today in many educational researches the authors use a quasi-experiment. As we know, a quasi-experiment is carried out without a control group and it is based on a state comparison of controlled and dependent variables before and after the experimental research. In other words, before the experiment start, all control, factor and neutral object characteristics are mentioned clearly. After that, the factor group characteristics (or the conditions of their functioning) are changed, and after the experiment the object state is measured again by the characteristics.

As we had only students of the *additional* course preparing for FCE we had only the experimental group, without control one. The differences in students' listening comprehension were identified inside the experimental group by the specific characteristics mentioned later.

2.3. Instruments and Procedure

While the primary goal of the course was getting FCE certificate with B2 level on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that means the ability to demonstrate real-life language competencies determined by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) (The ALTE, 2002), the purpose of the experiment was to check how the improvements of students' listening comprehension skills influence other language competences development.

As all the foreign language competences are typically divided into four practical skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and the fifth, Use of English, so, in order to provide the credibility of the results, the placement test series were offered before and after the experiment, as written as oral ones. It helped us to find out students' level of practical skills in English according to the CEFR scale.

As it is known CEFR scale is international, universal and convenient. So, after one academic year the students were given a midterm (mock) test

for checking different competences such as Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Use of English to analyze the data. The average scores (means) after the experiment were compared.

2.4. Statistical analysis

The statistical data analysis let us claim that results are statistically highly significant (at the ≤ 1% level' or 'P ≤ 0.01'), which proves the statistical importance of the results obtained. Table 1 shows the results.

3. Results

Table 1. Students' Testing Results at the First Stage of the Experiment

Competences	Placement Test	End-of-the-year Test	Average Progress (%)	t	p
	Mean ± SD	Mean ± SD			
Reading Comprehension	163.3 ± 3.9	168.5 ± 4.9	3.2	3.2	≤ 0.01
Listening Comprehension	162.7 ± 3.16	166.8 ± 3.25	2.5	4.09	≤ 0.001
Academic Writing	162.3 ± 3.46	166.5 ± 2.7	2.6	3.1	≤ 0.01
Speaking	164.1 ± 3.8	170.9 ± 5.08	4.1	4.7	≤ 0.001

Having tested the students' performance at the end of the academic year and having compared them with the results in other competences, we discovered that the lowest progress was in Listening Comprehension (2,5%) which can be explained both by the variety of psycholinguistic factors previously described in this article and the lack of authentic listening environment necessary for appropriate listening skills development.

Thus, so that solving listening comprehension problem being behind the other English language skills, several additional both in-class and after-class extracurricular activities were offered to the students of the experimental group.

3.1. Audiobooks after-class listening

The students were supposed to choose an audiobook in English according to their liking and the level of English (the last criterion advised

and checked by the teacher). It was recommended that the students should listen to the book individually, on a regular basis, preferably daily, for at least 30 minutes and longer. They would later on report in class about that activity touching on the following questions:

•	why they chose that book; what it was about; what they liked most about it;

•	if they had read this book in any language before or watched a movie based on this book;

•	if they had to use the script for this audiobook or stop the recording and listen again to understand the details;

•	if they found it challenging to understand the audio, and if they feel more comfortable reading a book rather than listening to it;

•	if listening had become 'natural' learning behaviour for them with time.

Interestingly, answering the last question, the students mentioned the total involvement into this activity just after a short period of time (on average, after two or three days) embracing that new artificial, yet authentic, language environment with ease and excitement.

3.2. Song based exercises

Taking into account the appeal of music to youth, presenting rhyme, new vocabulary or grammar phenomena was supported by analyzing similar language occurrences in popular songs. Being a class activity, song analysis was held once three or four weeks and required special preparation by the teacher – both in choice of the material and in handouts design. Nevertheless, this task has proven to be successful in terms of understanding via hearing as well as in increasing students' general interest and motivation towards learning English. Definitely, songs are contributed to learning listening comprehension. We highlight the following benefits of learning listening comprehension with songs: rhyme; new vocabulary; grammar.

So, a rhyme facilitates greatly listening comprehension with songs that is very effective. The repetitive elements as refrains are the basic song characteristics. Repetitive elements help to understand the song content better. In a refrain, as a rule, a song main idea is highlighted; it summarizes and generalizes the verse content. As for listening comprehension, a refrain is the easiest and most understandable song element.

As for vocabulary, songs are the excellent source for presenting and introducing new lexical units, these are new words and expressions. Besides, this activity allowed introducing students with some idioms, colloquial words

and phrasal verbs that serve as a distinguishing feature of the language of songs. Songs also may represent the well-known vocabulary in a new context that helps to activate the well-known vocabulary too. There are sometimes proper names, geographical names, country realities, poetic words in songs. They help to contribute developing students' language guesses, language acquisition etc.

As well as grammar constructions are engaged and activated in songs better. Some songs have the most common grammatical constructions. They are written in a modern rhythm. It is very convenient for listening comprehension. A teacher, no doubt, can add to songs some explanatory comments, as well as tasks, activities, assignments to check song understanding and discuss song contents.

3.3. Movies and TV series watching and analyzing

This activity took place in two steps. The first one was a kind of class collaborative work that included a movie scene introduction, language analysis and follow-up discussion, while the second one was supposed to be a home assignment based on the tasks performed in class, yet extended further – being the impetus for the students to watch the whole movie or TV series episode immersing themselves into the atmosphere of authentic English surrounding.

The research was supported by the use of sound, video, animation, and games of the authentic target language (Kostikova et al., 2019). The abovementioned provided the students with the powerful visual effect as well as forced them to become more entirely caught up in the authentic English environment (Miasoiedova, 2016).

The course was finished with FCE exam. University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) assessed several English language practical skills, namely Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Use of English, which allowed to compare the progress in Listening after Listening Comprehension was given special consideration and students' listening behaviour was corrected.

The average results of the assessment are revealed in Table 2 with Mean standing for average scores for sample population of 24 students (two groups 12 students each).

Table 2. The Results of Students' Academic Performance in FCE Listening at the Different Stages of the Course

Test	Results (Mean ± SD)	Average Progress (%)
Placement Test Data	162.3 ± 3.46	2.6
Mid-term Test Data	166.5 ± 2.7	
Mid-term Test Data	166.5 ± 2.7	7.1
Final Test Data	178.4 ± 1.9	
Placement Test Data	162.3 ± 3.46	9.9
Final Test Data	178.4 ± 1.9	

4. Discussion

The researchers, who investigated the problem of foreign speech perception from the perspective of a language teaching, confirm the difficulties of forming listening skills (Rahimi & Katal, 2012; Gulec & Durmus, 2015; BaŁatur, 2016; Zarei & Parhizkari, 2017; Lee & Cha, 2017) and say in similar experiments that 'empirical results provide preliminary evidence that academic listening forms a separate facet of listening comprehension' (Marx, Heppt & Henschel, 2017). O. Lesnov investigates 'how audio-only and video-enhanced delivery formats of listening passages compared in terms of difficulty for English as a second language (ESL) students'. His findings are 'discussed in terms of their practical significance for ESL teachers as well as theoretical implications for the field of ESL listening assessment' (Lesnov, 2017). J. Safranj describes advancing listening comprehension through movies and its difficulties (2015).

Although the role of a teacher in listening is said to be limited by the task giving and listening material representing, yet the stage of results checking and feedback providing offers wide possibilities for encouraging students' self-esteem and their involvement through addressing them to evaluate the efficiency of the methods applied. Students' involvement may also be encouraged by group discussions devoted to the individual approaches leading to success; for instance, deduction of a particular word meaning or modification of a certain strategy (Vandergrift, 2002) thus stimulating independent learning.

One of the main standpoints in this research is that it is necessary to distinguish 'hearing' from 'listening comprehension': whereas the process of hearing is connected with hearing of the sounds, listening comprehension is much more complicated; it engages different aspects: firstly, focusing, concentration, understanding and, finally, comprehension. So, it is necessary

not only to pay attention to the text, but also apply all available language tools as well as voice, intonation, stress etc.

It is also important to point out some fundamental principles of teaching listening which were applied during the course. The listening materials chosen were diverse and represented the variety of accents reflecting a speaker's manner, style, gender, age, place of origin etc. Moreover, the teacher tried to maximize the use of the authentic language as well as of the patterns, topics and situations relevant to developing students' real life skills. Although the 'prediction' technique was regularly applied, the text that was going to be presented for teaching listening comprehension (listening script) was not ever proposed at the beginning of listening activity. The students were always to be informed about purposes of a particular listening exercise and had to be prepared to demonstrate their awareness of the task.

Listening comprehension should be first and foremost taught and then tested. Attitude like pass or fail, when mistakes are only corrected, is wrongful. Moreover, students must listen actively that is be involved in the listening process, give the immediate feedback that facilitates keeping attention, concernment and motivation. It is significant to consider that classes training listening comprehension need to be planned thoroughly step by step. They are supposed to have definite aims which are set consciously. The aims must correspond to the program purposes, and all participants of the teaching process ought to be aware of the aims. Students have to understand the tasks and instructions and to be provided with the clear guidance as to how to perform the exercises. Pre-listening tasks including prediction, vocabulary presentation and topic introduction should be the integral part of any listening activity.

In the discussion section we would like to mention that our experimental research and all the procedures performed in studies in 2017/19 involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University and H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, which is based on the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. All participants have given consent for their data to be used in this research.

5. Conclusions

The study showed that mastering the ability to listen and comprehend effectively and to speak fluently and accurately is a complex, challenging, dynamic process that requires integration of appropriate

listening attitudes, knowledge, behaviours in order to get the advance in this field. As our experiment has demonstrated, in favourable conditions listening competence demonstrates no less progress than other language competences. Thus, the range of extracurricular methods implemented during the second academic year contributed significantly in students' fast progress in this challenging skill.

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