

The Effects of Listening Comprehension on ESL Learners' English Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Literature on Second Language Acquisition indicates positive effects of listening comprehension on ESL learners' English language proficiency. This study is based on the point of view that listening comprehension is one of the most important, but neglected communicative componential requirement for second language acquisition. This mixed-methods cross-sectional study aims to gauge the effects of listening comprehension on ESL learners' English language proficiency, measured by pre-test, and post-test paired samples t-tests results obtained from the sample IELTS language proficiency tests. The results show statistical significant effects of listening comprehension skills on the other language skills: reading, writing, and listening. Although, the result also show that listening comprehension skills did not significantly improve the participants' speaking skills. The paired samples correlations show the highest correlation between pre-test and post-test scores for speaking skills. In order to understand the contributing factor, the participants' were observed. It was found that the participants cannot manage a constant flow of aural English language at a first encounter. The first linguistics features that made an impression on the participants were phonology, and the accents of the native speaker. The research findings confirmed the impact of listening comprehension on ESL learners' English language proficiency.

KEYWORDS: Second language acquisition, listening comprehension, rural secondary students

Introduction

It has been a common practice for ESL/EFL teachers to focus on learners' getting the right answers during listening exercises. Second/foreign language learners most often experience listening comprehension as a test (Usó-Juan, & Martínez-Flor, 2006), rather than a process of acquiring second language proficiency. A more systematic method of teaching second/foreign listening skills has long been advocated (Field, 2008) by ESL/EFL researchers. However, it remains an under developed area, because the second/foreign language listening process has been proven a difficult, and inaccessible one due to its implicit nature. Listening entails learners understanding aural messages, in addition to attempting to recognise human emotions that range from depression to frustration, from exhilaration to pride through intonation, pauses between words, emphasis, and rhythm. Teaching listening comprehension is therefore one of the most challenging tasks for second/foreign language teachers (Walker, 2014).

Problem Statement

Listening skills is an important language skill that requires more emphasis in the teaching and learning of English. Research has shown that we listen to twice as much language as we speak, four times as much time as we read, and five times as much time as we write (Celce-Murcia, & Olshtain, 2005). Nation, and Newton (2009) regard listening as the primary channel of learning a language. The acquisition of primary language skills precede secondary language skills: listening skills precedes speaking skills, and aural/oral language skills precede graphic/written language skills. The sequential acquisition process of the four language skills formed the circle of first language learning process (Bozorgian, 2012a).

The second language acquisition process may not follow the same sequence of development as the first language acquisition process. Nevertheless, there are three pre-requisite conditions that facilitate second language acquisition. First, a learner needs to realise the importance of learning a second language, and is motivated to do so (Csizér, & Dörnyei, 2005; Dailey, 2009; Ryan, & Deci, 2000). Second, the teachers, or parents who speak the target language proficiently provide support and guidance, such as using simplification, repetition, and feedback to negotiate second language learning with the learners (Cook, 2015; Pica, 1994; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Swain, 2000). Third, the social environment should provide the learners with comprehensible input, and sustained contact with native speakers, or proficient second language speakers that make second language learning feasible (Hasan, 2008; Krashen, 1982; Long, 1996). The difficulties in the effort of acquiring a second language are generally due to a lack in one or more of these factors (Rost, 2015).

In the Malaysian rural schools, English is learned as a second language. However, it is more of a foreign language to them, as they have limited exposure to English aural/oral language in their daily lives. As a result, their second language listening skills lags behind the other language skills. Unfortunately, teachers often are not aware of the problems learners face in acquiring the second language. The common practice in the classroom is

that teachers focus on learners' getting the right answers rather than teaching listening skills (Rezaei, & Hashim, 2013). In view of the importance of second language listening skills in second language acquisition, the present study set out to examine the statistical effects of listening skills on three other language skills, and overall second language proficiency.

Review of related literature

The purposes of listening

Wolvin, and Coakley (1988) propose five listening purposes: discriminative listening, comprehensive listening, critical listening, therapeutic listening, and appreciative listening. The listener's different purposes demonstrate that listening is an active process, rather than a passive product. Steven (1987) points out that many second/foreign listening studies focus on listening comprehension. Generally, in the ESL/EFL classroom, the purpose of listening is to make sense of aural/oral language. Thus, this study adopts the second purpose of listening as mentioned by Steven (1987), that is, to comprehend verbal messages as the research assumption.

The challenges of listening to a second/foreign language

The complex nature of listening process has made the teaching of such a skill a rather challenging task indeed. To understand the complexity involved, we should identify the learning problems faced by ESL and EFL learners. One obvious problem is the pronunciation of words which differ greatly from the way they appear in print (Bloomfield et al., 2010). Thus, the identification of the words in spoken discourse may prove problematic for learners. Likewise, listeners, unlike readers do not have the luxury of regular spacing that indicates the beginning, and ending of words as they do in print (Vandergrift, 2007). In addition to pronunciation, and the identification of sentence boundaries, prosodic characteristics of spoken discourse, such as where the stress falls, weak, and strong forms of words; the speaker's intonation and emotion also influence comprehension of the verbal messages. Furthermore, spoken discourse usually come in short phrases, or clusters loosely strung together (Osada, 2004), with mispronunciation, hesitations, rephrasing of utterances, repetition. Eventually, listeners may face the risks of losing track of what is being said (Field, 2008).

Learners' home language backgrounds, and their understanding of the foreign culture also affect their comprehension of the spoken discourse. Similarly, vocabulary related to foreign culture may also impede comprehension. Vocabulary and grammar in spoken discourse also tend to be more colloquial and less formal (Osada, 2004). Sometimes, listeners need to utilise culturally pragmatic knowledge to make inferences, and to determine the speaker's implied meaning (Vandergrift, 2007). In connection to native speakers, regional accents also affect listeners' comprehension of the spoken messages. These linguistic features should be taken into consideration when assessing the challenges of teaching second/foreign language listening.

The listening process

The issue that should be taken into consideration when assessing the listening process is that verbal messages require immediate attention. Floyed (1985) defines listening as a process which involves hearing, attending, comprehending, evaluating, and giving responses to verbal messages. When the listening process is over, only a faint mental impression remains in the learner's mind (Vandergrift, 2004). Unlike reading, listening requires instantaneous processing, with little or no chance to access the verbal language again, making listening more difficult to handle than reading. In most cases, language learners need to process the verbal message at a speed determined by the native speakers, which is generally quite fast (Osada, 2004).

The major differences between first and second language listening could be the native listeners are facing difficulties when they are distracted, disinterested, or responded to the verbal contents by thinking about something else. While the problems of the second/foreign language listeners arise due to insufficient linguistic knowledge, a lack of knowledge of the second language socio-cultural contents, or a lack of pragmatic schemata that assist them to infer meaning from the verbal messages. Therefore, the pressure of the second/foreign language learners to manage all the structural, and grammatical obstacles when listening to verbal messages, combined with the fact that language learners need to accomplish all this in real time makes listening comprehension complex, dynamic, and fragile (Walker, 2014).

The relationship between listening skill and the overall second language proficiency

Second language acquisition involves four fundamental and interactive language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language learners with good listening skills are able to participate effectively in communicative interaction, and they learn to speak, read, and write by listening to others (Brown, 2008; Lin, 2001). In the 1970s, the Communicative Language Teaching approach to language teaching was introduced to develop learners' second/foreign language fluency. Some prominent researchers begin to highlight the significant impact of listening pedagogy in the ESL/EFL classroom. Krashen (1992) argues that second/foreign language acquisition depends on the bottom-up decoding process of making sense of the incoming messages. Second language acquisition cannot occur without the learners' contact with comprehensible language (Rost, 1994). Hunsaker (1990) concludes that more than 80% of human learning transpires through listening.

Thus, it is on this basis that the present research emphasises the significant impact of listening skills on learners' second/foreign language proficiency. However, not many studies have focused on the effects of listening skills on second/foreign language proficiency. Among them, Merbaum (1998) uses listening skills to predict the acquisition of reading skills for first and second language child learners. However, as they progress, second language child learners generally fall behind in the areas of prosody and vocabulary. McCaulley (1992) shows that listening skills are moderately related to listening comprehension, but highly related to reading comprehension for elementary level children. Park (2006) found a positive correlation between listening and reading

proficiencies among ESL university students; and it was related to their overall English language proficiency. Bozorgian (2012a, 2012b) who examined the relationship of listening proficiency and overall language proficiency among EFL Iranian university students, found a moderate correlation between reading and writing proficiencies. He also found a high correlation between listening and reading proficiencies. Thus, based on previous research, it can be argued that there are limited literature on the effects of listening proficiency on the proficiencies of three other language skills, and the overall language proficiency, in first language research at large, and second/foreign language research in particular.

Research questions

The present research set out to answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: What are the statistical effects of listening comprehension on the overall performances of ESL learners' language proficiency measured by a sample IELTS language proficiency test?

Research Question 2: What are the correlations of the four language skills measured by a sample IELTS language proficiency test?

Research Question 3: How do rural secondary students perceive English language listening comprehension tasks?

Research methods

Participants

An intact class of students was selected based on purposive sampling procedures. The participants of this study were 26 male and female students from a Malaysian rural secondary school. They were 15-16 year old, Form 4 students from a rural town in Perak, Malaysia. They were chosen as the participants of this study, because most of them cannot comprehend aural/oral English, and they experience very limited English listening/speaking opportunities outside the classroom. The participants come from various first language backgrounds. They are pre-intermediate and intermediate English language proficiency levels learners.

Initially, these 26 participants took part in a focus group questionnaire survey. The survey findings showed that only 30% of the participants could afford to attend pre-schools, or kindergartens, and they started learning English at the age of four. 70% of the participants started learning English at the age of six from primary schools. About 96% of the participants reported that learning resources were provided by the teachers in the form of greetings, sample dialogues from text books, and nursery rhymes. Only 4% of the participants reported learning English from watching the television, listening to songs, or speaking to family members, and friends who are fluent English speakers.

Despite the fact that they started learning English early from formal educational settings, they are still lacking in English listening and speaking skills. The survey findings showed that except a few of them who have opportunities to learn English from watching television,

listening to songs, or speaking to family members and friends who are fluent English speakers, most of the participants do not have the opportunities to practice listening, and speaking skills, and to negotiate meaning from aural/oral messages. It also showed that listening is an active process that requires the participants' motivation, and engagement.

Materials

This study utilized ESL listening materials from the Learn English / British Council website (<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/listen-and-watch>). The ESL listening materials from this website are graded to A1/A2, B1/B2, and C1/C2 levels, according to Common European Framework Reference (CEFR). The ESL listening materials are designed with good sound tracks, and clear pronunciation. The listening passages included general interest topics that do not require specialised prior knowledge. They are designed with sound tracks, pre-listening, and post-listening activities.

Table 1. The ESL listening materials from Learn English / British Council website

No.	Titles	Audio Hyperlinks	Listening Activities
1	Scarlett	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-scarlett.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/LearnEnglish_story_Scarlett.pdf
2	Alberto's new neighbor	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-albertos-new-neighbours.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/learnenglish-stories-albertos-new-neighbours-support-pack.pdf
3	Coming back up	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-coming-back-up.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/Story-Comingbackup.pdf
4	Two peas in a pod	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-twins.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/learnenglish-stories-two-peas-in-a-pod-support-pack.pdf
5	April fool's Day	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-april-fools-day.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/learnenglish-stories-april-fool-support-pack_0.pdf
6	The comeback	http://c0953132.cdn.cloudfiles.rackspaceloud.com/stories-the-comeback.mp3	http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/sites/podcasts/files/LearnEnglish_story_TheComeback.pdf

The ESL listening materials utilized in this study are suitable for pre-intermediate, and intermediate English language proficiency levels learners. The intervention period took four weeks. The duration of the listening passages ranged from 5.30 to 13.35 minutes. Each listening lesson started with the pre-listening activity. The listening passage was played four times, followed by the post-listening activities that accompanied the ESL listening materials (Table 1.). Although the listening materials are not authentic materials, they resembled authentic materials in terms of the native speaker's presentation, and accents, such as pauses, hesitations, stresses, and redundancies. The listening passages included various sentence structures, dialogues, monologues, internal monologues, and narration to sustain learners' interests, and encourage effective listening.

Instruments

A quantitative instrument and two qualitative research techniques were utilised in this study. The quantitative instrument was two sets of sample IELTS language proficiency tests, the sample tests taken from IELTS website. Those two sets of sample IELTS language proficiency tests were first tested for parallel forms reliability. Parallel forms reliability test measures consistency between two sets of similar instruments. As shown in Table 2., two sets of sample IELTS language proficiency tests gave almost the same means (2.7167 and 2.7333), and variances (0.719 and 0.737) when administered to the same group of participants within a short interval of time (Davier, 2006).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics related to the administration of two IELTS tests to the same group

	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD	Variance
First test	26	1.0	4.5	2.7167	0.84775	0.719
Second test	26	1.0	4.5	2.7333	0.85836	0.737

The validity of the IELTS language proficiency test is determined by its high demand globally; and its high predictive validity on the test takers' academic performances. A study that investigated the relationship between IELTS listening test scores, and the test takers' academic performance found that there is a negligible correlation coefficient ($r=0.063$) between the overall IELTS band scores and the test takers' semester weighted average points (Ingram, & Bayliss, 2007). Also, we can gauge Malaysian students' English language proficiency to be on par with the standard of International English Language by using the IELTS language proficiency test.

Although, validity and reliability are important issues in quantitative research; qualitative research tends to reject validity and reliability measurements accepted by quantitative research as too rigid (Trochim, 2006). Stenbacka (2001) conceives that a valid qualitative research contains a thorough description of the research procedures. Golafshani (2003) posits that reliability in qualitative research is the trustworthiness, or the researcher's ability, and effort to produce rich and robust data (Jones et al., 2006).

Two qualitative research techniques utilised in this study were focus group questionnaires survey, and observation. The survey was conducted before the intervention. The questionnaire was a document containing open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth background information, and learning characteristics of the participants. In order to strengthen the quantitative findings, additional qualitative data about the participants' learning process were obtained to provide a more credible, and accurate reflection of the participants' performance by using observation technique.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected in a few stages. Prior to the intervention, the researcher conducted a focus group questionnaires survey. Subsequently, the first set of sample IELTS language proficiency test was verified with the second set to ensure reliability of the instruments (Table 2.). Then, the first set of sample IELTS language proficiency test was used for the pre-test, and the second set for post-test. During the one month intervention period, the

researcher chronologically observed, and kept notes of the participants' verbal, and physical responses during the listening exercises. In this study, the qualitative data collection procedures before, and after the intervention period were meant to explain, and support the quantitative findings.

The quantitative data were collected using the sample IELTS language proficiency tests which consisted of four sections: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. For the listening, and reading sections, each correct answer would be awarded one mark. The writing and speaking sections would be scored using the band descriptors. There are band descriptors for "Writing Task 1," "Writing Task 2," and "Speaking." The band performance descriptors described participants' performance in four categories: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range, and accuracy (IELTS, 2015). Then, the raw scores from four sections would be converted to an overall band score using the band score calculator (IELTS, 2016).

Results

To answer research questions 1 and 2, the quantitative data obtained from the pre-tests and post-tests were analysed, and tabulated using SPSS V.20; whereas to answer research question 3, the observation data were used to reveal salient features, and emerging themes. The results from the questionnaires were coded, and categorised to provide a description of the participants' background. The observation field notes were used to draw assumptions, and conclusions of the listening process.

Research question 1

In relation to the first research question, a paired-samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between the pre-test ($M=2.77$, $SD=0.91$), and post-test ($M=2.99$, $SD=1.61$), $t(25)=-0.31$, $p=0.05$. This result suggests that listening comprehension does have an effect on the participants' overall language proficiency.

A paired-samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between the pre-test of listening ($M=1.90$, $SD=0.88$), and post-test of listening ($M=2.19$, $SD=1.18$), $t(25)=-3.11$, $p=0.005$, $p<0.05$. This result suggests that listening comprehension does have an effect on the participants' listening proficiency.

A paired-samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between the pre-test of reading ($M=3.62$, $SD=1.03$), and post-test of reading ($M=3.90$, $SD=1.36$), $t(25)=-3.11$, $p=0.005$, $p<0.05$. This result suggests that listening comprehension does have an effect on the participants' reading proficiency.

A paired-samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between the pre-test of writing ($M=3.10$, $SD=0.89$), and post-test of writing ($M=3.33$, $SD=1.21$), $t(25)=-2.60$, $p=0.015$, $p<0.05$. This result suggests that listening comprehension does have an effect on the participants' writing proficiency.

A paired-samples t-test indicated that there were significant differences between the pre-test of writing (M=2.46, SD=0.98), and post-test of writing (M=2.50, SD=1.12), $t(25)=-0.81$, $p=0.425$, $p>0.05$. This result suggests that listening comprehension does not have an effect on the participants' speaking proficiency.

Table 3. Paired samples statistics of IELTS pre-tests and post-tests for listening, reading speaking and writing components

	N	M	SD	Std Error Mean	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Overall Performance							
Pre-test	26	2.7692	0.90808	0.17809	-0.3070	25	0.05
Post-test	26	2.9808	1.16173	0.22783			
Listening							
Pre-Test	26	1.9038	0.88339	0.17325	-3.112	25	0.005
Post-Test	26	2.1923	1.17539	0.23051			
Reading							
Pre-Test	26	3.6154	1.03255	0.20250	-3.112	25	0.005
Post-Test	26	3.9038	1.36396	0.26749			
Writing							
Pre-Test	26	3.0962	0.89464	0.17545	-2.601	25	0.015
Post-Test	26	3.3269	1.20783	0.23687			
Speaking							
Pre-Test	26	2.4615	0.97901	0.19200	-0.811	25	0.425
Post-Test	26	2.5000	1.12250	0.22014			

Research questions 2

In relation to the second research questions, a Person product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between pre-test scores, and post-test scores. There was a correlation between pre-test, and post-test scores of the overall language proficiency [$r(26)=0.972$, $p=0.05$]. There was a correlation between pre-test, and post-test scores of listening skills [$r(26)=0.933$, $p=0.005$]. There was a correlation between pre-test, and post-test scores of reading skills [$r(26)=0.960$, $p=0.005$]. There was a correlation between pre-test, and post-test scores of writing skills [$r(26)=0.951$, $p=0.015$]. There was a correlation between pre-test, and post-test scores of speaking [$r(26)=0.983$, $p=0.425$]. The Person product-moment correlation coefficient between the pre-test, and post-test scores of speaking skills was the highest among four language skills.

Table 4. Paired samples correlations of IELTS pre-test and post-test for listening, reading speaking and writing components

	N	M	SD	Std Error Mean	r	Sig(2-tailed)
Overall Achievement						
Pre-test	26	2.7692	0.90808	0.17809	0.972	0.000
Post-test	26	2.9808	1.16173	0.22783		
Listening						
Pre-Test	26	1.9038	0.88339	0.17325	0.933	0.000
Post-Test	26	2.1923	1.17539	0.23051		
Reading						
Pre-Test	26	3.6154	1.03255	0.20250	0.960	0.000
Post-Test	26	3.9038	1.36396	0.26749		
Writing						
Pre-Test	26	3.0962	0.89464	0.17545	0.951	0.000
Post-Test	26	3.3269	1.20783	0.23687		
Speaking						
Pre-Test	26	2.4615	0.97901	0.19200	0.983	0.000
Post-Test	26	2.5000	1.12250	0.22014		

Research question 3

At the same time, classroom observations of the participants' responses showed that they could not manage an instantaneous spoken discourse at the first encounter. When the audio materials were being played, the active and talkative participants would suddenly keep quiet until the end of the audio recordings. Many of them managed to comprehend the main messages after four times replays of the audio materials, but they still missed out on the details. They were seen counter-checking the details with one another after the listening tasks. However, no one was sure of the exact details transpired, because everyone seemed to pick up on different parts of the audio materials. One of the linguistic features that impressed on the participants might have been the pronunciation, and the accents of the native speakers. A few of the participants practised speaking new words they picked up from the audio materials, and started rehearse-speaking using native accents. Only a few of the advanced learners seemed to remember more details, such as grammatical aspects, and sentence structures of the audio materials (Doff et al., 2013).

At the pre-listening stage, the participants requested some help from the researcher to complete pre-listening task before the audio materials were played, and replayed four times. Surprisingly, the participants seemed able to complete the post-listening tasks easily on their own. During the while-listening stage, the audio materials might have negotiated the main ideas with the participants (King, 2016). None of the participants were seen checking their answers with one another, while completing the post-listening tasks. They were seen quite confident that they knew the right answers. The triangulated quantitative and qualitative results showed that listening comprehension improves the participants' overall language proficiency. The highest correlation between speaking pre-test, and post-

test scores, and the observation results of the participants' responses confirmed that listening comprehension had an effect on their speaking proficiency.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, listening comprehension tasks had improved listening proficiency of the participants. At the end of this study, the improved listening proficiency had proven to have a significant impact on their listening, reading, and writing proficiencies. Nevertheless, the effect of listening comprehension on speaking proficiency was not statistically significant, but speaking proficiency had the highest correlation between the pre-test and post-test scores.

Being a receptive skill, listening skills share some basic cognitive processes with reading skills. They occupy two disparate ends of the language input continuum (Hornberger, 2003). Listening, and reading skills, both involve phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic orchestration of linguistics knowledge (bottom-up process), and comprehension (top-down process) when receiving comprehensible language input (Sasson, 2014). In the contexts of the present study, the participants' reading skills are more amendable than their listening skills, the reason could be the participants lack adequate control over the speech trails which was quick and temporary; whereas in reading, the participants can always go back to difficult words, or phrases to assess understanding.

Regardless of language, the aural/oral language skills usually develop before the graphic/written language skills (Griffiths, 2008). Once children are ready to read, their aural/oral language are decoded phonologically, and they begin to establish the linguistics mapping among phonology, syntactic, and semantic in their minds that provides meaning for words (McCardle, & Chhabra, 2004). However, in the contexts of rural secondary school where English language is not usually heard of outside of the classroom, the participants learn to read and write without being properly equipped with English phonological knowledge. They read, and write words that they have not heard, and speak. They learn aural/oral language by encoding pronunciation to words, in this way, they reverse the sequence of how first language is being learned. They achieved higher performance in reading, and writing due to more emphasis of these skills over a long period of time in school (Baumann & Williams, 2010).

Shanahan (2006) argues that the learners' developed efficient writing skills depending on their acquired knowledge of phonological, syntactic structures, discourse organizations, and pragmatics of the language. Berninger, Abbott, and Jones (2006) point out that aural/oral language instruction improves the phonological-orthographic mapping underlying the English spelling system. Therefore, writing skills build upon the acquisition of aural/oral language skills. In the context of the present study, the participants write with a lacking of phonological-orthographic knowledge of the second language. They have to rely on their learned knowledge of the second language, and memorise words to perform writing tasks. As a result, their writing skills usually lack accuracy, and fluency.

The findings of the present study showed no significant effect of listening proficiency on the participants' speaking proficiency. Paired samples correlations showed the highest correlation between the pre-test and post-test scores of speaking skills, which indicates that the participants' speaking skills improved most when they were given listening practice. The listening comprehension tasks drew the participants' attention to the phonological-orthographic relationship during spoken discourse, and how aural/oral language should be presented. When cultural factors, such as speaking formalities, knowledge of the world, topics, and discourse patterns did not distract comprehension, the listening practices generally improved speaking proficiency (Vandergrift, 2007).

Speaking skills involve a repertoire of psychological and interpersonal features when it comes to learning initiatives, and language production. In the context of the present study, the participants experienced very few opportunities of practising speaking skills in their daily lives. Instead of learning speaking skills, participants could have been given a chance to learn listening to real time aural discourses, in order to build on their focused attention, and self-confidence in a new language (Edwards & Roger, 2015). Listening is considered the "offset hypothesis" of speaking. Participants will adapt to speaking a second language, when listening has improved their second language proficiency when they are becoming less vigilant about the difficulties involved in speaking a new language (James, 1985). Listening encourages negotiation of meaning, and autonomous learning. Therefore, listening skill should be prioritised when the participants' speaking skills is their lowest performing language skill.

Conclusion

The present study examined the statistical effects of listening comprehension on the overall second language proficiency of the participants in this study, and the relationships of listening proficiency with the acquisition of three other language skills, reading, speaking, and writing, by using sample IELTS language proficiency tests. The statistical effect of listening comprehension on their overall second language proficiency was significant, suggesting that listening skills matters in ESL/EFL curriculum. Before the participants are able to produce language either in oral or written form, the teachers should set a good model for them to follow, or provide authentic, and interesting listening materials in the classroom. Teachers should not focus on one of the four language skill at the sacrifice of the others. Instead, teachers should integrate four language skills in the classroom instructions from the very beginning. The present study also indicates that listening comprehension facilitated the development of speaking skills of the Malaysian rural secondary school students. The findings encourage further research in ESL/EFL listening syllabus design, ESL/EFL materials development, and classroom pedagogy.

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