Effects of Cultural Knowledge and Language Proficiency on Listening Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

Nasrin Pashayi

Department of English Language, Ardabil Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

Asgar Mahmoudi [*]

Department of English Language, Ardabil Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

Abstract

The present study tried to find solutions for some of the problems EFL listeners encounter in listening comprehension. The 37 participants of this study came from two classes in one of the language institutes in Ardabil, Iran and according to the officials of the institute were at the intermediate level. However, to divide the students in each class to two groups of high and low, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was given to them. After that, they were exposed to two audio files one about mosques and the other about cathedrals. The presentation orders of the audio files in the classes were not the same, that is, in one class the audio about mosques was played first, while in the other it was played last. After listening to each audio, the participants answered the listening comprehension questions that followed. The collected data were finally fed into the SPSS program and the two hypotheses of the study were examined. The first hypothesis was accepted. It meant that topic familiarity does not have any significant effect on the listening comprehension of the low-level learners. The second hypothesis was rejected. This meant that language proficiency can override topic unfamiliarity in listening comprehension of the high-level students.

Keywords: topic familiarity, language proficiency, listening comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Comprehension is vitally significant for learners in learning foreign and second languages. Listening comprehension, as one of the four major skills, has always been one of the most challenging parts of standardized tests. Listening is a substantial skill for language learning since it is the most widely exploited skill in the daily life for L1 learners. Listening comprehension skill, as an input skill, is also one of the most important skills for second language learners and takes a great position in learning. Nunan (1998) counts listening as the most basic skill in teaching and learning and contends that without listening, learners will never learn to communicate effectively. According to Nunan, 50% of the time that students spend functioning in a foreign language will be devoted to listening. However, in spite of the importance that listening possesses, teachers usually

ignore the process of teaching listening since it is one of the most difficult skills to teach and learn (Vandergrift, 2004). Most of the time teachers give too much attention to language forms and syntax which leads to the overlook of listening skill.

There are two important reasons why listening comprehension is a challenging activity. The first reason is that it requires a relatively high language proficiency to listen effectively. The second is that EFL or ESL learners usually have limited or insufficient background knowledge or cultural schema of the target language. Background knowledge or cultural schema plays a significant role in EFL learners' comprehension of the target language. But, whether cultural background plays the same role for both low-level and high-level students in facilitating listening comprehension is a moot point. More to the point, topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge are more essential than syntactic knowledge in listening comprehension but how much and by what mechanisms these factors affect listening comprehension are issues which have not been answered precisely yet.

Comprehending oral English texts has always been difficult for Iranian EFL students, especially the low-proficiency ones, for two major reasons. First, their vocabulary knowledge or language proficiency is not so high as to let them overcome unknown concepts. Second, most of the original English excerpts contain western values and traditions with which Iranian EFL students are not very familiar. Another issue that may affect listening comprehension of EFL learners is the generality and specificity of the selected texts. Very specific texts are usually more difficult to understand.

All these issues, in addition to the fact that listening scores of non-native students in almost all general proficiency tests are the lowest among the four skills, imply that this area needs further investigation. The purpose of this study was to clarify the effect of culturally familiar and unfamiliar audio texts on low-level and high-level EFL students' listening comprehension to help teachers and program developers present and develop listening materials that are more appropriate to the learners of English as a foreign language.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The present study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. Can topic familiarity in EFL listening compensate for the lack of language proficiency?

2. Can language proficiency in EFL listening compensate for the lack of topic familiarity?

The following null hypotheses were extracted from the above research questions.

H0$_1$: Topic familiarity cannot compensate for the lack of language proficiency in EFL listening.

H0$_2$: Language proficiency cannot compensate for the lack of topic familiarity in EFL listening.

It is important to note that the first research question implies conducting statistical analysis on the low-level and high-level students' scores on the familiar topic. In contrast, the second research question necessitates analyzing the high-level students' scores on the familiar and unfamiliar topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is one of the most important skills in the foreign language learning process since one needs to fully comprehend what he hears and then provide an appropriate response to it. Listening is the most important and most frequent skill which we use in our daily lives. However, when it comes to teaching language skills it is not considered as important as other skills. Teachers do not usually pay enough attention to listening skill since teaching listening skill is partly difficult and challenging (Chastain, 1998).

Comprehension difficulties in listening skill sometimes occur because of students' insufficient background knowledge. Also, students with low proficiency are not usually able to distinguish familiar vocabulary in connected speech or in the given context. The problem becomes worse when the contexts and cultures are unfamiliar.

EFL Learners' Problems in Listening Comprehension

Down through the years, researchers have been in search of solutions for the problems associated with foreign language listening. The major solutions suggested incorporate syntactic and semantic simplification. Some other researchers have proposed activities that are believed to develop learners' knowledge of vocabulary.

Since listening is one of the most difficult skills in second language learning, most of the EFL students face different problems in learning this skill. Khanh (2006, as cited in Mia, et al., 2014) believes that "listening has always been presumed to be the most difficult skill to learn" (p. 51). This may partly be due to the fact that, usually in the listening process, background knowledge of the listeners is ignored. Or it may be that the students have not reached the proficiency level that is required for comprehension to occur.

Listening comprehension needs both bottom-up and top-down processes. Some students use listening strategies to promote their listening comprehension but others prefer to use bottom-up processes (part to whole process) for understanding listening audios (Hulstijn, 2003;; Field, 2008; Lynch, 2006). In other words, there are two kinds of modes which listeners use in the process of listening comprehension: bottom-up and top-down. The bottom-up process is a gradual process, a process which is from the part to the whole. In bottom-up processing, listeners begin with the most basic language knowledge. Top-down process is from the whole to the part. Goodman (1975) claims that listeners utilize prior knowledge to expound the discourse as well as create possible expectations of what they would hear in top-down processing. In the listening process, students should use both of the modes simultaneously.

Learners' Language Proficiency

Some researchers believe that language proficiency is the most important factor in reading comprehension. According to Hudson (1988), for example, background knowledge is not as important as language proficiency in comprehending texts. Low-proficiency students cannot comprehend texts even with background knowledge about those texts (Pulido, 2004). Pulido (2004), however, believes that background knowledge may facilitate comprehension just for low-proficiency students.

Impact of Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge of EFL learners facilitates not only reading comprehension but also listening comprehension. According to Mahmoudi and Mahmoudi (2017), students with high proficiency comprehend both familiar and unfamiliar passages better than students with low proficiency. In other words, the more vocabulary the students know, the better they comprehend the passages.

Vocabulary knowledge and topic familiarity play a significant role in listening skill. Strother and Ulijn (1987, as cited in Ma and Lin, 2015), believe that in successful listening comprehension, listener's content familiarity of a text is more important than their ability to syntactically analyze a text.

Background Knowledge

Background knowledge is the active or passive knowledge that one already has about a topic. The role which background knowledge plays in comprehension has been defined in 'Schema Theory'. The notion of schema was first introduced in 1920s by British psychologist Frederic Bartlett. But it was noted in the 1970s because of the new insights in both cognitive psychology and cognitive science (Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017). Zhou (2002) states that Bartlett's conceptualization of schema was that it is background knowledge and background information. The notion got popular after fifty years because in the 1920s cognitive psychology and cognitive science were not acknowledged much (Bilokcuoglu, 2014).

Bilokcuoglu (2014) believes that listening is an active, selective, and interpretive process controlled by a listener via auditory clues so that what the speaker is struggling to express is recovered. Listening is active receiving, meaning constructing, and responding to verbal and non-verbal messages (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). Due to the fact that this skill is not considered so important, David Nunan (1997) claimed that listening is the 'Cinderella skill'. In the past, listening skill was considered as a passive skill, but now everybody knows that listening comprehension is the outcome of interaction between listeners' linguistic knowledge or language proficiency and background knowledge on the one hand and the content of the text on the other. The two former ones put the top-down and the latter one the bottom-up processes in action.

Steinburg (2007), highlighting that listening is not just hearing, has categorized listening as follows: sensing and attending, understanding and interpreting, remembering, and

responding. Listening skill, which was considered as a passive skill in the past, is considered as an active skill now (Mai, & et al, 2014). Listening comprehension skill is an active process and it happens between the listeners existing background knowledge and the listening material; so, for perfect comprehension, we need to enrich background knowledge (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). Listening skill is an extremely complex problem-solving activity in which background knowledge plays a significant role (Brown, 2000).

Successful listening will occur, when listeners can associate the new listening texts with prior knowledge in their mind (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). If students do not have related knowledge about different topics in their mind, they will not comprehend the new listening passage well (Bilokcuoglu, 2014; Meinhof, 1998).

Having insufficient background knowledge leads to misunderstanding, so teachers should help students to build up new background knowledge and help them activate their existing background knowledge (Bilokcuoglu, 2014).

Effects of background knowledge on reading comprehension

Since reading like listening is a receptive skill, getting familiar with findings in this area would not be out of place here. In reading comprehension skill, background knowledge is one of the most prominent factors. It plays a significant role in improving reading skill (Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017). Having a high level of vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge leads to effective reading. (Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017). In reading, readers should link new information about the topic to the background knowledge about that topic they have in their mind (Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017). Also, it is revealed that students with low proficiency usually depend more on their background knowledge to overcome reading complexities compared to students with high proficiency that can easily comprehend familiar and unfamiliar texts regardless of the status of their prior knowledge (Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi, 2017).

Background knowledge can enhance learners reading skill. Background knowledge or schema in reading refers to the information about a topic that readers have in their mind (Chou, 2011). Reading comprehension is an inferential process, so schema can help for better understanding of a text. There are three types of schema: formal schema, content schema and linguistic schema. Comprehension in reading skill happens when the reader can link new information to the previous data in their mind (Koda, 2005).

According to Al-Shumaimeri (2006) limited background knowledge in reading skill, can effect on the comprehension of the low-level students. But Nassaji (2002) believes that, in reading comprehension students should rely more on their linguistic knowledge than their background knowledge about the text. He believes that high level students can overcome the difficulties of the reading comprehension without linking new information to the previous information about the text.

In support of the impact of background knowledge

Language of a nation is a reflection of its culture and traditions. Therefore, when one uses a language s/he reflects the culture he comes from (Hao, 2000, as cited in Hayati, 2009). Many scholars believe that performing in a language is performing a cultural act. In the same vein, Kramsch (1993) has mentioned that a cultural act is performed as soon as a person speaks.

Failure in listening comprehension might be due to lack of enough cultural schema than deficiency in a foreign language (Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Othman & Vanathas, 2004). When cultural instructions integrate with language instruction, students' language proficiency also improves and they become more and more interested in the target language (Tsou, 2005). Hayati (2009) considers cultural knowledge of students as a basis for learning a language. He maintains that a language is only professionally learned when students obtain enough cultural knowledge of the target language.

Background knowledge has great impact on listening and plays a significant role in increasing listening comprehension ability (Bilokcuoglu, 2014). Listeners are more successful in remembering passages which are related to their background knowledge (Markham & Latham, 1987). These authors also conclude that schema influence listening comprehension. The excerpts they used were about the prayer rituals of Islam and Christianity. The participants of this study did best on the excerpts related to their own religion or cultural schema. Therefore, it can be said that background knowledge overrides language proficiency in both listening and reading comprehension (Roller & Matambo, 1992). Anderson and Lynch (2000) also conclude that successful listening comprehension is bound to efficient schematic knowledge.

Oller (1995) mentioned that readers associate information they come across in the text with their personal experience and this helps them infer the meaning that is implicated. Erten and Razi (2009) refer to the different expectations that listeners may have from culturally different texts. Turkish and British students in their study, for example, expected to hear different things about breakfast in an audio file with the former listeners expecting tea, cheese, and olive, and the latter expecting coffee, cereal, and bacon.

Chang and Read (2006), introduce four important elements supporting EFL listening comprehension. These elements include previewing the test questions, repetition of the input, providing background knowledge about the topic, and vocabulary instruction. Their data analysis revealed that providing background knowledge in the form of a treatment was the most helpful element. They also found that the listeners' language proficiency played a very significant role, while vocabulary instruction had the least impact.

One of the problems most of the EFL listeners encounter in listening tests is that they usually do not have any idea about the topic of the listening test they are going to take. The test administrator plays a listening file only once or twice without any supporting information in advance (Chang & Read, 2006). Providing relevant information and

previewing the questions before the listening comprehension tests are said to be important in listeners' performance.

There are two distinct views toward the impact of previewing the questions on listening comprehension tests. Advocates of previewing the questions (e.g., Buck, 1991; Cohen, 1984; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991) believe that previewing questions orient the listeners' attention to a direction in which listeners better understand the passages they are listening to, whereas this view's opponents (e.g., Ur, 1984; Weir, 1993) believe that previewing the questions disturb the listeners' concentration and result in their confusion and misunderstanding.

Comprehension difficulties in listening skill occur because of students' insufficient background knowledge; they are unable to distinguishing familiar vocabulary in connected speech or in the given context, and have no chance for discussion about unfamiliar context and different cultures (Meinhof, 1998). Listening comprehension is an active process, in which listeners try to get the exact meaning of what the speakers said. To attain this purpose, listeners should use related clues and they should have background knowledge about different topics (Liyan, et.al, 2014).

Background knowledge is the most prominent factor which increases listeners listening comprehension skills (Liyan, et.al, 2014). Listeners can make predictions of words, phrases, and texts according to their schema (Liyan, et.al, 2014). Due to the fact that listening involves interaction and negotiation with a speaker, it needs prior experience (Tuan & Loan, 2010).

The area of the listeners' schema depends on the listener's age, sex, race, religion, nationality, and occupation (Tuan & Loan, 2010). Inferencing is the best strategy for understanding passages for whom the readers have prior knowledge (O' Malley & Chamot, 1990).

There are three types of schema: linguistic schema, content schema, and formal schema. Linguistic schema is the most basic element in listening skill which, according to many researchers, refers to linguistic knowledge. Content schema refers to listeners' knowledge about the world and different topics. Formal schema refers to background knowledge of the listeners about differences among rhetorical structures, such as genre (Liyan, et.al, 2014). In English listening, teachers need to activate listeners' content knowledge for them to access their prior knowledge (Tuan & Loan, 2010). A reader's background knowledge which consists of content schema, linguistic schema, and formal schema plays a significant role in how well that reader understands the texts (Alimohamadi & Poordaryiaenejad, 2015).

Learners' interactive listening ability plays an important role in enhancing their listening comprehension abilities (Yeldham & Gruba, 2013). Proficient listeners use both of the modes (bottom-up and top-down) simultaneously (Vandergrift, 2004). Vandergrift (2004) believes that the top-down process plays a greater role in understanding new things by using background knowledge. If students use the top-down process for listening skill, their listening learning will increase (Hoang Mia, et al, 2014).

Unfamiliar proper names also hinder EFL listeners listening comprehension performance (Kobeleva, 2012). Kobeleva adds that unfamiliar proper names may decrease EFL listeners' chance of understanding spoken English to the same extent as unknown vocabularies do. Low-level students do use some strategies such as inferencing to overcome comprehension difficulties (Graham, et al, 2011).

Against the impact of background knowledge

Studies ruling out the influence of background knowledge are rare. A notorious one is Long (1990) who in a study obtained similar results with familiar and unfamiliar texts. The subjects of his exploratory study listened to two passages one of which was familiar and the other unfamiliar. The data revealed that there was a not significant difference in the students' performance on the familiar passage. This lack of a significant result might be attributable to the advanced level of the participants in his study.

Ervin (1992, as cited in Hayati, 2009), also, conducted a study to see whether students perform better in listening comprehension test related to their own culture. The subjects of this study were 8–10 year-old Scottish and Texan-American students who listened to a same-culture and a different-culture passages. T-tests showed no significant difference between same-culture and other-culture test scores for the Texan group, but the Scottish group scored significantly higher on the same-culture test than other culture test.

METHOD

Design

This study enjoyed an ex-post-facto design because no variable was manipulated and the only thing done was to give the participants a proficiency test followed by two listening comprehension tests. No treatment, no control group, and no random assignment were involved but the supposedly intermediate students were divided into two proficiency groups of high and low in each class based on their performance on OPT. OPT measures students' grammatical, vocabulary, reading and writing abilities.

Participants

The participants of this study were all Muslim Iranian EFL learners in one English language institute in Ardabil city in the northwest of Iran. Obviously, all of the participants had firsthand experience of mosques as Muslims living in an Islamic state. All of the participants had at least one year of English language learning experience. So, they were familiar with the placement and listening comprehension tests. All of the students were teenagers between 13 and 16 years old and were assigned to intermediate classes by the institute. The proportions of male and female students were almost the same with twenty students in one class and twenty in the other. But, since three of the respondents had answered only a few questions, they were excluded from the study and the number reduced to 37. The participants' mother tongue was either Azeri Turkish or Persian.

Even though according to the institute officials the participants were at the intermediate level, they were given a proficiency test to divide them into two groups of low-proficiency and high-proficiency based on their performance on this test. That is, the test was not given to see if they qualified for the level or not rather to divide them into two groups. The cut-point was decided on so that the students could be divided into two almost equal groups in each class. The results of the proficiency test were taken to be generalizable to the students' listening comprehension ability as well because grammar and vocabulary are considered to contribute to listening comprehension. Giving a listening test would not serve the purposes of the study because it was not necessary to have homogeneous classes. Also, because of the narrow range of scores on listening tests in EFL classes and the close to zero variance the normality assumption usually is not met. This happens because the distribution becomes either positively or negatively skewed or highly picked.

Instruments

There were three types of instruments in this study. The first instrument was the Oxford Placement Test or OPT. Another type of instrument used in the study was two listening comprehension audio files, one about Mosques and the other about Cathedrals. The answer sheets constituted the last instrument.

Procedure

The obtained results from the OPT were used to divide the participants into the two groups of high- and low-proficiency. After determining the students' proficiency levels, they were exposed to two recorded texts which were prepared about two topics one culturally familiar to them and the other culturally unfamiliar. The first and the second files were both retrieved from a website offering different levels of English texts for learners along with a number of questions following each of them to check the users' comprehension. The played recordings in the classes were prepared by having the Adobe Reader program's Read Out Loud facility, which is available through the View menu in this program and reads out Microsoft word files loud, after they are converted to pdf files. After retrieving the texts from the site, the difficulty of each text was measured using the two scales of Flesch Reading Ease and Gunning Fog Tests. In both of these tests the larger the number is the easier the text is supposed to be. The texts proved to be similar in their difficulty and appropriate for the intermediate level. The number of questions following each text was 8 each having the value of one point. The students in both classes listened to these two texts and then answered the listening comprehension questions that followed them.

RESULTS

This section presents the statistical procedures used to analyze the data and the results that were obtained. The testing of each null hypothesis is presented using a different subtitle. At the beginning of each subsection a reformulation of the hypothesis and the justification for the statistical procedures are provided.

Examining the First Null Hypothesis

The first null hypothesis was: topic familiarity cannot compensate for the lack of language proficiency in EFL listening. To test this hypothesis we needed to compare high-proficiency and low-proficiency students' listening scores on the familiar topic and to see if they were different or not. In case a significant difference was found in favor of the more proficient group, the null hypothesis would be accepted. If no significant difference was identified, the hypothesis would be rejected. That is, we could claim that topic familiarity can make up for the inadequacy in language proficiency.

Since two sets of scores coming from two different groups of students were to be compared with each other, there were two statistical procedures that could be used depending on their appropriateness. These two statistical procedures were the parametric Independent-samples T-test and its non-parametric alternative the Mann Whitney U test. To use the parametric alternative the assumptions of this test should have been tested. One pivotal assumption of this test is the normality of the distributions of scores. Of course, in SPSS these two sets of scores are entered in just one column and constitute a single variable. If the normality assumption is not met, we have to resort to the non-parametric alternative, that is, the Mann-Whitney U test. Table 1 shows the result of the 1-sample KS test which was used to test the normality of the scores' distribution.

Table 1. Normality of the Scores on the Familiar Text

	scores on familiar text
N	34
Test Statistic	.164
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.021c

The *Sig* value in Table 1 shows that the *P* value has been smaller than .05 (P = .02 < .05) and therefore the normality assumption was not met. This made it necessary for us to run the Mann-Whitney U test the results of which are given below.

Table 2. Mann Whitney U Run on the Students' Scores on the Familiar Topic

	scores on familiar text
Mann-Whitney U	81.000
Wilcoxon W	252.000
Z	-2.197
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.028

There are two important values in this table. The first value is the Z value, which is a correction for ties when the sample size is smaller than 30 and it should not be significant. Since our sample size was larger than 30, this value should not concern us. The second value is the *Sig* value, which shows whether the difference has been significant or not. The significant (< .05) value in Table 2 points to the fact that there has indeed been a significant difference between the two groups' listening scores on the familiar topic. This finding compelled us to accept our first null hypothesis. However, to know which group performed better we had to look at the Ranks Table and specifically the values under Mean Rank column. These values indicate that the high proficiency group has

outperformed the low proficiency group in listening to the familiar topic with the mean rank of 21.44 compared to the mean rank of the low proficiency group that is equal to 14.00.

Table 3. Mean Ranks of the Low-proficiency and High-proficiency Groups

	Level	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
scores on familiar text	Low	18	14.00	252.00
	High	16	21.44	343.00
	Total	34		

Pallant (2013) suggests that the median values also be reported. These values are generated in the Report Table by SPSS. It is shown in Table 4 that the median of the high-proficiency group has been twice as big as the low-proficiency group. This is another proof for accepting our first hypothesis.

Table 4. Medians of the Low- and high-proficiency Groups

level	scores on familiar text
low	2.5000
high	5.0000
Total	4.0000

Examining the Second Null Hypothesis

The second null hypothesis stated that language proficiency cannot compensate for the lack of topic familiarity in EFL listening. To examine this hypothesis we needed to compare high-proficiency students' listening scores on the familiar and unfamiliar topics. If there were no significant difference between these two sets of scores from the same group or the difference were to the advantage of the unfamiliar topic (the less likely scenario), the hypothesis would be rejected. That is, we would be able to claim that in EFL listening language proficiency can make up for the lack of topic familiarity. But, if there were a significant difference to the advantage of the familiar topic, the hypothesis would be accepted.

To carry out this test we needed to exclude the low-proficiency students from the analysis and perform the test with only high-proficiency students. To do this the Select Cases option in the Edit menu in SPSS was used and low proficiency students were filtered. Also, because of the lack of normality in one set of the scores, the non-parametric alternative of Paired-samples T-test, that is, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was used. The lack of normality in the scores of high-proficiency students on the familiar listening is given below. As can be seen in Table 5 the P value for this set of scores is less than .05.

Table 5. Normality Tests of High-proficiency Students' Scores on Familiar and Unfamiliar Texts

		scores on familiar text	scores on unfamiliar text
N		16	16
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	4.4375	5.6875
	Std. Deviation	1.99896	2.38659
Test Statistic		.226	.209
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.028[c]	.060[c]

The main table in Wilcoxon-signed Rank test is the Test Statistics table that is given below (Table 6). In this table the value of *Sig* is less than .05 which means that we have to reject our second null hypothesis. But we do not know yet how to interpret the difference between these two sets of scores because its direction is unclear to us. This information is given in Table 7.

Table 6. Wilcoxon Signed-rank Test Comparing High-proficiency Students' Scores on Familiar and Unfamiliar Texts

	scores on unfamiliar text - scores on familiar text
Z	-2.035[b]
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.042

Table 7. Mean Ranks of More Proficient Students' Scores on Familiar and Unfamiliar Texts

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
scores on unfamiliar text - scores on familiar text	Negative Ranks	3[a]	8.17	24.50
	Positive Ranks	12[b]	7.96	95.50
	Ties	1[c]		
	Total	16		

As stated, to know about the direction of the difference, we have to look at the Ranks table. The interesting thing in this table is that the mean rank of the high-proficiency students on the unfamiliar task is higher than their mean rank on the familiar task. This is the scenario that we called the less likely scenario. Table 7 shows that the mean rank of the high-proficiency students on the unfamiliar topic has been 8.17 while their mean rank on the familiar topic has been 7.96. Of course, these values are very close to each other and again, following Pallant's (2013) recommendation, we would be better off to look at the scores' medians.

Table 8. Medians of the High-proficiency Students' Scores on Familiar and Unfamiliar Texts

Level	scores on familiar text	scores on unfamiliar text
High	5.0000	6.5000
Total	5.0000	6.5000

Table 8 is the Report table that shows the medians of the two sets of scores. In this table the difference between the medians of scores of the more proficient students on the familiar listening and unfamiliar listening tasks is even larger and amounts to 1.5. Therefore, we can confidently reject the second null hypothesis and claim that language proficiency can compensate for the lack of schema or unfamiliarity of the topic.

DISCUSSION

This study found that topic familiarity cannot compensate for the lack of language proficiency in EFL listening. Some researchers believe that topic familiarity is not an adequate factor for listening comprehension of low-level students. Hudson (1988), for example, believes that listeners' language proficiency level is the most significant factor in comprehending texts and passages. In other words, language proficiency is more important than topic familiarity in listening comprehension. Topic familiarity cannot have any significant effect on low-level students' listening comprehension. Even in a skill such as reading, background knowledge or topic familiarity is inadequate for understanding when the student's level is low (Pulido, 2004). These statements are in line with the findings of this study. As the examination of the first research hypothesis revealed, in this study too, topic familiarity was not enough to bring about a significant change in low-level students' performance.

There are counterarguments however. Failure in listening comprehension might be due to the lack of enough cultural schemata than deficiency in a foreign language (Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Othman & Vanathas, 2004). According to Strother and Ulijn (1987, as cited in Ma & Lin, 2015), in successful listening comprehension, listener's content familiarity of a text is more important than their ability to syntactically analyze a text. Brown (2000), likewise, believes that listening is an extremely complex problem-solving activity in which background knowledge plays a significant role.

Also, this study investigated if language proficiency can compensate for the lack of topic familiarity in EFL listening. Based on this perspective, language proficiency is the most vital factor in the listening comprehension of EFL learners. High-level students can understand listening audio files perfectly most of the times without having any background knowledge about it. This perspective is in line with the findings of this study, especially the result obtained during the testing of the second research hypothesis. This finding is supported by so many other studies. In a study done by Long (1990), different results were obtained. The subjects of his exploratory study listened to two passages one of which was familiar and the other unfamiliar. The data revealed that there was no significant difference in the proficient students' performance on the familiar and unfamiliar passages. According to Hudson (1988), too, background knowledge is not as important as language proficiency in comprehending texts. Low-proficiency students cannot comprehend texts even with background knowledge about those texts (Pulido, 2004). According to Mahmoudi and Mahmoudi (2017), who investigated less and more proficient students' performance on familiar and unfamiliar readings, students with higher proficiency comprehend both familiar and unfamiliar passages better than students with low proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that background knowledge does not play a pivotal role in listening comprehension neither for the high-level nor for the low-level students. According to Hudson (1988) and Long (1990), language proficiency can override background knowledge in listening comprehension. The advocators of this view believe that high-proficiency is enough for listening comprehension skill and listeners do not need to have a schema about the topic. But, this conclusion is less than conclusive because it is conceivable that prior knowledge of a topic would facilitate our understanding as shown by many other studies. It may also be that there is a trade-off between the proficiency level and the amount of available prior information.

As stated, many researchers believe that background knowledge is the most important factor in listening comprehension. According to Hayati (2009), cultural knowledge of students is the basis for learning a language. He maintains that a language is only professionally learned when students obtain enough cultural knowledge of the target language. Supporters of the background knowledge believe that activating background knowledge and linking new information to the old information can lead to enhanced comprehension. If students do not have related knowledge about different topics in their mind, they will not comprehend the new listening passage well (Bilokcuoglu, 2014; Meinhof, 1998).

Brown (2000) has contended that listening is an extremely complex problem-solving activity in which background knowledge plays a significant role. Anderson and Lynch (2000) also have concluded that successful listening comprehension is bound to efficient schematic knowledge. In a similar vein, Bilokcuoglu (2014) and Meinhof (1998) have emphasized that having background knowledge and activating it in the listening process especially in low-level students can improve their listening comprehension.

Evidence in favor of the background or schematic knowledge and the role that it plays in listening comprehension is so widespread that the findings of this research should be taken cautiously. None of the two conditions lent support to the importance of the background knowledge, giving support to the primacy of language proficiency. But, this may be a problem arising from the design of the research and the result of collecting data from intermediate or lower level students. The topic choice might also have had an influence on the results. If the topics had been more divergent, another conclusion might have reached.

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