
To Prompt it: How Does self-confidence Affect Listening Skill?

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Abstract – This study aimed at investigating the effect of self-confidence on listening skill and to find the relationship between them in language learning process. As listening skill is comparatively ignored skill, it should receive much attention. Considering the purpose of the study, a descriptive approach was used. The participants in the study were 30 intermediate female EFL learners in a language institute in Zanjan, Iran. The subjects had nearly the same experience in English language learning and their average age was 18-20. Researcher-made questionnaire which was piloted earlier was distributed immediately after listening exam. The 30 questionnaires generated 45 responses addressing sources of low self-confidence, and 25 suggestions on ways to promote self-confidence. In analyzing students' responses about the sources of low self-confidence the following four general resources determined: (1) characteristics of FL input; (2) processing-related aspects of FL; (3) instructional factors; (4) attributes of the teacher or learner. The results showed that there's a significant relationship between the students' level of self-confidence and their success in listening skill. This study suggests that foreign language teachers should recognize the sources influencing self-confidence and try to promote the level of the students' self-confidence through creating non-threatening classroom atmosphere, providing comprehensible listening input, increasing student's awareness by teaching listening strategies explicitly and asking the learners to verbalize the strategies they use in listening, and by reacting to the students' performance properly.

Keywords – Listening Skill, Self-Confidence, Anxiety, Listening Strategies, Comprehensible Input.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, finding factors that affect language learning have caused many scholars to try to seek for psychological factors that can help students to facilitate their language learning. Among so many features that can affect language learning, specially listening skill, it seems that self-confidence can have an important role. Because of this issue, researchers did many studies to find that if there is any relationship between self-confidence and language learning. Many studies believed that self-confidence has a positive effect on language learning. The results of these studies showed that language teachers should try to increase students' self confidence in the classroom in order to increase their achievements. Self- confidence is described as 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' [5]. The more confident is the learner about his/her abilities and competence, the more successful he/she is in language learning. The learner's anxiety has also a very close relationship with the learner's self-confidence. Fear and anxiety are the cornerstones of low self-confidence. Those who suffer from low self-confidence experience extreme fear and anxiety frequently. Foreign language anxiety can be distinguished from other types of anxiety and that it can have a negative effect on language learners' self-confidence and language learning process. Yet another important insight to be applied to our understanding of anxiety lies in the distinction between debilitating and facilitative anxiety [17]. In this article, I use the word anxiety to refer to the kind of anxiety, which is negative and harmful for the learner's self-confidence and whereby language-learning process. Considering this distinction, I want to investigate the relationship between the learner's self-confidence and

his/her listening skill in language learning process. For the most EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, listening is the most difficult one among the four skills. Self-confidence is crucial to the development of effective listening skills, and that listening strategy instruction has the potential to boost self-confidence. The degree of control over the process of listening that learners can gain through listening strategy instruction is an important factor in this process.

II. LITERATURE

Of the four major language skills involved in language learning, the so-called receptive skill of listening is often the most daunting for students. Teaching listening skills effectively in foreign language classrooms and offering suggestions for doing so is important. Compared with other skills in TEFL, listening has not received much attention during the past years. Buck notes, “listening is an important skill but due to the practical complexities of providing spoken texts, it is neglected in many language learning situations” [4]. Listening should not be viewed as an ad hoc addition to EFL classroom teaching methodology, but as an important means of providing students with comprehensible input, an essential component of the whole language learning process. Although often linked to reading as a ‘receptive skill’, listening can prove to be far more intimidating for students in a foreign language classroom. A reader usually has the opportunity to refer back to a text to clarify understanding, something which a listener in most listening contexts (TV programs, meetings, discussions, lectures, and to a lesser extent, conversation) cannot. While the written word stays on the page and can be looked at more than once, the spoken word, unless recorded on tape or record cannot be repeated.

According to Gilakjani and Sabouri, when teachers are aware of students’ learning difficulties they can help them develop effective listening strategies and finally solve their difficulties in listening and improve their listening comprehension abilities [7]. Aisyah believes that the students had to pay attention in their self-esteem but still improve their speaking ability, so the students could have fluency and accuracy in speaking [1].

Krashen advises that acquisition proceeds best when the acquirer’s level of anxiety is low and self-confidence is high [12]. For acquisition to take place, the learner has to be able to absorb the appropriate parts of the input. A mental block can prevent acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition [12]. This block, called “the affective filter”, might be because “the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious” [12]. The affective filter hypothesis ascribes variation between learners to their psychological states. If the filter is ‘up’, comprehensible input cannot get through; if it is “down”, they can make effective use of it. In particular, the reason why younger learners are better at L2 acquisition over the long term is that “the affective filter gains dramatically in strength at around puberty” [12]. Older learners are cut off from proper access to comprehensible input by the increased strength of the filter. In Krashen’s words, “comprehensible input and the strength of the filter are the true causes of foreign language acquisition” [11], one positively, one negatively.

According to Scarcella and Oxford, listening anxiety occurs when students feel they are faced with a task that is too difficult or unfamiliar to them [15]. The low self-confidence raised out of this anxiety is exacerbated if the listeners are under the false impression that they must understand every word they hear. Many learners believe that in order to be “good at a language they need perfect pronunciation, massive amounts of vocabulary, extensive grammar knowledge, overseas experience, and a natural aptitude for language before they even open their mouths [9]. As a result, the anxiety that arises during the listening process often springs from what joiner c-

-alls a negative “listening self-concept,” that is, a low level of self-confidence in the area of listening [10].

Listening is thus principally a test of comprehension, typically based on an exercise from a textbook, focusing on the understanding of specific details rather than on the global sense of the text. Sheerin asserts that instruction in listening has too often been associated with testing, focusing on the product of listening [18]. This constitutes what Field calls the ‘Comprehension Approach’ and which, he argues, does little to develop effective listening skills [6]. It is also unlikely to develop self-confidence for listening, through its over-emphasis on ‘testing’ and lack of insight fostered among learners into how to bring about improvement.

According to Rubin, et al., there is a correlation between foreign language learning and classroom atmosphere [14]. Foreign language learning classrooms must promote self-confidence. Therefore, creating an environment in which each student will feel self-confident can be considered important. The classroom environments in which students can answer questions without hesitation express themselves without any fear or anxiety of making a mistake or being humiliated by their teacher even if they make a mistake will promote their self-confidence. Therefore, teachers’ behavior, feedbacks, and questions they ask to students, and the language teaching activities they are required to take part in are directly correlated with their self-confidence. Encouraging students to act and speak correctly, giving them feedbacks-especially positive feedbacks- instantly, and offering them in-class activities they will enjoy can improve their self-confidence.

Vygotsky believed that learning was ahead of development and for development to occur; interaction with adults or peers who are more knowledgeable is needed. This has been termed the ‘zone of proximal development’. Vygotsky’s ZPD theory extended by defining the role of the more knowledgeable ‘other’ as someone who is actively involved in the learning processes by closing the gap between what has been partially and fully understood [19]. This has been termed ‘scaffolding’. It is important to note that several studies have indicated that self-confidence for listening, as well as listening performance is amenable to development, through the explicit teaching of listening strategies, within the model of strategy instruction, which has a strong emphasis on scaffolding of learning and learner’s reflection. Such strategy instruction aims at increasing learners’ sense of control and expectations of success, by, in addition to teaching strategies, also offering scaffolding in the form of feedback on strategy use and drawing learners’ attention to the link between the strategies used and the outcome achieved. Instruction within this model is also based on learners’ needs in terms of where their difficulties lie, so that they can select strategies that are appropriate types of tasks and certain situations, again enhancing their sense of personal control.

Findings by Listyani, & Tananuraksakul, N. showed that students from countries of Indonesia and Thai were very much influenced by parental factors for in case of motivation and self-confidence and anxiety [13]. Self-confidence is believed to be a psychological factor which has a considerable influence on students’ speaking skills [2].

The findings of a research indicated that the group performed significantly better in the listening achievement test after learning to use a concept-mapping strategy. Likewise, their perceived self-efficacy in accomplishing listening tasks improved after the intervention period in this study [3].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The participants in the study were 30 intermediate female EFL learners in a language institute in Zanjan, Iran. The subjects had nearly same experience in English foreign language learning. The average age of the subjects was 18-20.

The Study

The purpose of the study was to report descriptive research, rather than inferential or quantitative research; therefore, the questionnaire was distributed immediately after the listening exam, so that the likelihood of the students experiencing low self-confidence was high, and there was a 100 percent return of responses. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix A) that elicited the following information: (1) whether they were experiencing low self-confidence in doing listening tasks or not; (2) if they did, what made them feel low self-confident when participating in a listening task; and (3) what types of settings, exercises, or activities helped to promote their self-confidence. Of the 30 participants, only ten percent reported that they did not experience low self-confidence in doing listening tasks. The size of this number emphasizes the need to address directly the low self- confidence experienced by the other 90 percent of the students. The 30 questionnaires generated 45 responses addressing sources of low self-confidence (see Table 1), and 25 suggestions on ways to promote self-confidence (See table 2). The analysis of the questionnaire consisted of two parts: (1) analysis of students’ responses about sources of low self-confidence and (2) examination of suggestions for promoting self-confidence. In determining sources of low self-confidence, students’ comments clustered around the following four general categories:

- a) Low self-confidence associated with characteristics of FL input;
- b) Low self-confidence associated with processing-related aspects of FL;
- c) Low self-confidence associated with instructional factors; and
- d) Low self-confidence associated with attributes of the teacher or learner.

Within each of the categories above, student responses fell into several subcategories. These responses were summarized by percentages under each category (see Table 1 and Table 2 for these summaries). Appendix B documents a sample of comments students made about each of the reported sources of low self-confidence. Selection of the sample comments was made by the author and was based on the author’s subjective opinion of which comments would be most informative to the foreign language teacher.

Results

The results of the study will be discussed by first presenting the sources of low self-confidence reported by the students, based on the four major categories and the subcategories. The students’ suggestions for promoting self-confidence are presented in conjunction with the reported source of low self-confidence. The final section consists of a brief discussion of the pedagogical implications based on the results of the study.

Table 1. Students’ reported sources of low self-confidence (N = 45) category.

	Sources	% of responses
Input	Nature of the speech	27%
	Level of difficulty	10%

Input	Sources	% of responses
	Lack of clarity	6%
	Lack of visual support	3%
	Repetition of input	2%
	Total	48%
	Inappropriate strategies	23%
Process	Lack of time to process	2%
	Can't "study" for listening	2%
	Can't check answers	2%
	Total	29%
	Instructional Factors	Lack of listening practice
"The test thing"		3%
Uncomfortable environment		2%
Total		8%
Personal Factors	Fear of failure	9%
	Nervous	5%
	Instructor's personality	1%
	Total	15%

Table 2. Students' suggestions for promoting listening self-confidence (N = 25) category.

	Suggestion	% of Responses
Input	Make input comprehensible	17%
	Use variety of input	7%
	Structure tasks	6%
	Total	30%
	Process	Focus on strategies needed
Notetaking / use of Chinese		2%
Total		4%
Instructional Factors	Increase class time for Listening	40%
	Combine Listening with other skills	15%
	Provide regular feedback	3%
	Create out-of-class opportunities	3%
	Total	61%

Input	Suggestion	% of Responses
Personal Factors	Experience small successes	3%
	Meditation / breathing, etc.	2%
	Total	5%

Low Self-confidence Associated with Characteristics of Input. Forty-eight percent of the students' responses focused on some characteristic of input as being a source of low self-confidence.

Nature of the Speech

Of the 27 percent that reported the nature of speech as a source of low self-confidence, 22 percent reported that speech that was too fast created the most anxiety and caused to feel the lowest self-confidence. The other five percent claimed poor pronunciation, different accents, and teachers, which spoke too softly as sources of low self-confidence.

Level of Difficulty

Students expressed anxiety and frustration with listening exercises that were too difficult. Students associated the level of difficulty of input in terms of the use of vocabulary that was unfamiliar or beyond the level of the student, the use of complicated syntax, and the use of texts based on unfamiliar topics.

Lack of Clarity

The students reported feeling low self-confidence when they did not know what kind of text they were listening to, why they were listening to it, what they were supposed to be listening for, and what they were supposed to do once they were through listening. Sometimes poor audio quality compounds this problem.

Lack of Visual Support

Although mentioned as a source of low self-confidence by only a small number of students, some learners felt as if they lacked the footing necessary to even make an educated guess without some type of visual input.

Lack of Repetition

Students expressed demotivation toward the traditional approach to listening practice where input is presented only twice. With one typical participant commenting that she only sometimes made an effort in listening but '...then I just give up because I can't, usually they play it twice, that isn't enough for me'.

Suggestions for promoting Self-confidence Associated with Input Characteristics. Thirty percent of student's suggestions for reducing anxiety and promoting self-confidence focused on input-related variables.

Make Input Comprehensible

Some students (17 percent) felt that input would be more comprehensible to them if it were based on familiar, meaningful topics and vocabulary.

Use Variety of Input

Numerous students suggested incorporating games and other fun activities into the classroom as the vehicle f-

-or listening activities. Their suggestions for activities included the following:

- (a) “Use smaller group activities and less formalized English on topics more exciting to students”;
- (b) “Have English-speaking people, other than our own instructor, occasionally speaking English to the class”;
- (c) “Practice with listening without watching, such as hearing music in English from a tape or the radio”.

Structure Tasks

The students in this study wanted to know what they were doing. They felt that clear instructions, advanced organizers, and structured tasks would increase the learners’ self-confidence because they would know where to begin and in what direction to go. A few students offered possible ways of structuring listening activities:

- (a) “Have a person speaking in English while the class writes down in Persian and in English what the person said. Then review the different responses”.
- (b) “Have students to transcribe the listening tasks of the textbook, and then check them in class with their instructor.
- (c) “Repeat the passage, repeat the passage, and repeat the passage.”

In sum, for these students, low self-confidence stemmed from certain characteristics of the input (unfamiliar or difficult text, unclear directions, no visual support) and specific features of the delivery of the input (too fast, poor pronunciation, lack of time or repetitions to process information, minimal practice and feedback). To minimize listening anxiety associated with input, students suggested, in essence, making input comprehensible using a variety of input for listening activities, structuring the listening tasks with clear instructions, and offering a specific purpose for the task.

Low Self-confidence Associated with Process-Related Aspects of Listening Tasks. Twenty-nine percent of students’ responses commented on process-related aspects of FL learning as a source of low self-confidence.

Inappropriate Strategies

A review of students’ comments indicates that many saw comprehension as the process of understanding or translating every word, as opposed to understanding the message. Students reported feeling low self-confidence when they try to translate one part of what they hear and then miss the next part. If students perceive listening tasks as word-for-word decoding, frustration and anxiety become a regular part of the listening process and students will always experience low self-confidence in doing listening tasks.

Some students feared that they would not “understand” contextually what they were listening to, or that they would miss key words. Other students feared they would hear the “wrong thing” and assume that the text was about one topic when it is actually about something else. Others mentioned having weak spelling and retention skills.

Lack of Processing Time

Some students reported feeling low self-confidence when asked to respond immediately to the listening text and the teacher did not allow them enough time to process the information in the text or the questions about the text.

Cannot Study Listening Tasks

Several students stated that, unlike a test on grammar, it was difficult to study for a listening test. They expressed having low self-confidence at not knowing exactly what or how to prepare.

Cannot Check Answers

Students reported feeling low self-confidence about listening tasks because, unlike reading comprehension, listening task is a “one-shot deal”.

Suggestions for promoting Self-confidence Associated with Processing-related Aspects of FL.

The low percentage (four percent) of suggestions under this category indicates that perhaps students are not sure of how to increase their self-confidence in these instances. In other words, perhaps they are unsure of what it means to be a strategic listener.

Focus on the Strategies Needed

At least some of the students in this study knew that knowledge about effective strategies could increase their listening abilities and increase their self-confidence. They suggested that the teacher “help the students to be able to be aware of their skills.”

Notetaking / Use of Persian

Many students felt that they end up being evaluated on “the language they produced in the answer rather than their comprehension” of the text. Taking notes while listening was considered effective for some, while others felt that being able to answer questions in Persian would counterbalance the anxiety they experienced when they lacked adequate target language to express what they actually comprehended.

In sum, students reported low self-confidence associated with this category as not having enough time to process input, not using appropriate listening strategies to understand input, not knowing how to prepare for a listening test, and not knowing how to confirm whether what they understood was accurate or not.

In terms of suggestions, students reported that their listening self-confidence would increase if the teacher would train them to use listening strategies, if they could take notes during a listening task, and if their listening skills were evaluated, based on their native language, not the FL.

Listening Low Self-Confidence Associated with Instructional Factors

This category surfaced as the least-reported source of anxiety (8 percent), but paradoxically was the category that comprised 61 percent of the students’ suggestions for promoting self-confidence.

Lack of Listening Practice

Students reported feeling low self-confidence when little or no class time had been devoted specifically to listening practice, which left them “feeling incompetent and unprepared.”

The Test Thing

Some students reported becoming less self-confident just because it is a test, rather than an activity-perhaps because under test conditions, they cannot replay the listening passage as many times as they need.

Uncomfortable Environment

Students reported that their physical surroundings, such as a room being too hot or too cold, were important and often interfered with listening task. Others reported losing their self-confidence if the room is too noisy, lacks oxygen, or is small and cramped.

Suggestions for Promoting Self-Confidence Associated with Instructional Factors

A majority (61 percent) of the suggestions students offered focused on instructional factors.

Increase Class Time for Listening Practice

To develop the listening skill, many students stated that there must be “more class activities focusing specifically on the listening skill.”

Receive Regular Feedback

The students in this study expressed a need to know if they understood correctly or not. Most agreed that the more immediate the feedback, the better.

Combine Listening with Other Skills

Students referred specifically to combining listening with reading that is, combining auditory input with written input. Some of the students expressed practicing reading out aloud in class would help their pronunciation and listening skill.

Create Out-of-Class Opportunities

Having informal, social interactions with native speakers was reported as a way in which students could experiment with the language in a non-threatening situation. They suggested bringing native speakers into the classroom so they could feel more confident about approaching native speakers outside the classroom.

In sum, students associated low self-confidence with a lack of listening practice, listening tests, and lack of a comfortable physical environment. To increase their self-confidence, they suggested having more listening practice in class, receiving feedback about their listening skills regularly, combining listening with other skills, and having opportunities to listen to native speakers and not just their FL teachers.

Low Self-confidence Associated with Personal Attributes of Teacher and Learner. Fifteen percent of the students' comments focused on personal and interpersonal attributes as sources of low self-confidence.

Fear of Failure / Nerves

Many students walk into a FL classroom feeling nervous and fearing failure. This emotional state of mind might stem from a negative past experience or from the belief that they lack the prerequisites to be a “good” language learner.

Instructor's Personality

Although few, the responses in this category were insightful. They reported experiencing low self-confidence when teachers had unrealistic expectations, that is, when they expected everything to be perfect and were critical when students did not answer correctly. Teachers that were inaccessible and “Do not show any reaction to your

performance” also decreased self-confidence in their students.

Suggestions for promoting self-confidence Associated with Personal Attributes of teacher and learners. Only five percent of the responses fell within this category.

Experience Small Successes

One student reported being able to “develop language confidence” in listening by experiencing small successes. Another stated, “The more I understand, the more confident I am.”

Using Self-Confidence Evoking Techniques

Many students reported using meditation, breathing exercises, or “self-affirmations” to increase their self-confidence. Others found that “thinking about something less stressful was useful.” Three student reported resorting to “prayer.”

In sum, students reported listening low self-confidence due to variables like learner’s anxiety and instructor’s “harsh” teaching manners. To increase listening self-confidence, they suggest developing language confidence through small successes and through using anxiety-reducing techniques.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Make Input Comprehensible

Comprehensible input is language input that can be understood by listeners despite them not understanding all the words and structures in it. It is described as one level above that of the learners if it can only just be understood. According to Krashen's theory of language acquisition, giving learners this kind of input helps them acquire language naturally, rather than learn it consciously. A listener who has experienced success in simple comprehension tasks is more likely to have the necessary self-confidence to adopt these active listening tactics. Effective listeners seemed to be aware when they stopped attending and made an effort to redirect their attention to the task and ineffective listeners, when faced with loss of comprehension, they usually just stopped listening or failed to be aware of their inattention. The relationship between self-confidence and performance is also reflected in the results of a study by Fujita (1984) who found that self-confidence was considered as one of the major factors affecting the LC ability of successful students.

Select Material of Appropriate Interest Level

Using interesting materials like jokes, personal anecdotes, interesting stories, material containing some puzzle to be solved and serialized stories are suggested.

Use your Prior Knowledge of the Material to Guide the Listeners

This may be done in two ways:

- a) You can introduce the topic with a short discussion.
- b) You can help students to be selective by giving them a purpose for listening.

Help students identify the listening goal: to obtain specific information; to decide whether to continue listening; to understand most or all of the message and help them identify key words/phrases to listen for.

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- Select material at an appropriate level of linguistic difficulty regarding to syntax and vocabulary.
 - Control the length of the material.
 - Control the speed of delivery and clarity of diction.
 - Help them develop a set of listening strategies and match appropriate strategies to each listening situation.

Encourage students to try different strategies, to see the relationship between those strategies and to complete their listening tasks. Goh and Taib (2006) reported that strategy instruction that involved learners in reflecting on and discussing strategy use led not just to improved listening and strategic knowledge, but also to greater reported confidence in listening. In a study by Schunk and Rice (1983,1984), the researchers found that verbalization of listening strategies after modeling by a teacher helped strengthen learners' self-confidence and performance. Thus, the teacher modeled the strategies, voiced them out loud and children repeated them verbally before applying them to a task, e.g. 'I'll look at each picture carefully to see if it matches the story I heard' (Schunk & Rice, 1983: 8). Verbalization helps learners to attend more fully to strategies and aids their 'encoding'. If verbalization matches what the teacher has modeled, they continue, and then self-confidence is likely to be further increased as it strengthens the learners' sense of control and implies they can succeed if they want to.

Create a Relaxed Classroom Atmosphere and be Understanding and Sensitive to Student Feelings

The climate of the classroom is directly related to the attitudes, expectations, and physical presence of the instructor, which, in turn, determine the way in which the instructor and students interact. Self-confident teachers feel comfortable in classroom, and can convey their messages to students without disturbing them. Their calm and confident nature and actions can promote students' self-confidence (MacIntyre and Clement 1977). Self-confidence may help foreign language teachers communicate with their students, and promote their students' self-confidence. Studies researching self-confidence (and self-competence) demonstrated that self-confident teachers could have an effect on their students' achievements and motivations. Self-confident teachers who are not complex in nature, can create a relaxed classroom atmosphere for their students, entertain them while teaching a lesson, teach a foreign language without boring them, act carefully not to lower their students' self-confidence while correcting their mistakes, and keep students away from anxieties in classroom, because they do not demand any performance beyond their students' capacities.

V. CONCLUSION

Self-confidence is the important factor that affects the listening ability of the students. The teachers should provide an environment to improve the students' self-confidence by decreasing the anxiety in the FL classroom. When the teachers and students shift from listening for correctness to listening for meaning, the motivation to understand increases and the fear of being "wrong" decreases. Learners that are motivated to listen and learn will have positive attitudes toward the target language learning and its speakers. Instructors can promote the students' listening self-confidence by applying the widely accepted model of strategy instruction including consciousness-raising, modeling, practice, evaluation and action-planning. Levels of self-confidence seem to be increased by activities that allow students to verbalize and discuss their strategy use.

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