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# The Effects of Receptive and Productive Task-based Listening Activities on the Listening Ability of Iranian EFL Learners at Different Proficiency Levels

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## ABSTRACT

As a demanding language skill, listening is frequently underestimated by students and educators in the field of second language learning because effective listening skills are developed over time with lots of practice but listening practices are limited and the activities are either decontextualised or inappropriate for students of a particular proficiency level. In an attempt to incorporate more communicative listening activities appropriate for different proficiency levels, this study integrated Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach to: 1) investigate the overall effect of task-based listening activities on Iranian EFL learners' listening ability, and 2) identify the extent to which receptive and productive listening task types correspond with a particular language proficiency level. The participants were 90 Iranian language learners in three intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels. Different receptive and productive task types were practiced in all the classes. Then, the learners were pre-tested and post-tested on a task-based test of listening comprehension. Descriptive statistics and several paired and independent t-tests were run to analyse the collected data. The findings of the study showed that students at all proficiency levels outperformed in their posttests compared to their pretests. Concerning the correspondence between the listening tasks and proficiency levels, students at all three levels of proficiency outperformed in their posttest compared to their pretest in both the receptive and productive listening tasks, except for the intermediate group whose improvement was not significant in the productive tasks. The study yielded some useful implications for language instructors,

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encouraging them to incorporate the TBLT in their classes and assign more appropriate task types for different proficiency levels.

*Keywords*: Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), listening comprehension, task types, proficiency level.

## INTRODUCTION

Many listening classes, particularly in Asian contexts, still heavily rely on de-contextualized listening activities which are not meaningful enough to motivate and enhance students' listening abilities. This reliance may stem from the fact that listening is considered a passive skill and it seems sufficient to expose learners to the spoken language to improve their listening skills (Carter & Nunan, 2001). This view has also resulted in incorporating mainly the receptive listening activities than the productive ones which are more communicative.

Besides, there are controversies about what listening activities should include. Some researchers (Dunkel, 1986) believe that listening activities should require learners to demonstrate their listening skills rather than reading, writing, or speaking, while others (Brown, 2011; Field, 2008) encourage an integrated approach which promotes simultaneous use of listening, speaking, reading and writing throughout the listening process. A main reason is the change of focus in teaching methodology. During the 1950s and 1960s, audiolingualism encouraged memorisation of new language concepts presented through scripted audio texts which prepared learners for lecture listening rather than spontaneous, real-life, interactive listening experiences. With the rise of more communicative approaches in 1970s and 1980s, the use of more authentic 'real life' contexts became popular. More recently, the use of only authentic materials was replaced with integrated models mainly as task-based instruction (Brown, 2011; Field, 2008).

Since the introduction of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), which is also known as task-based instruction (TBI), into the field of language teaching and learning by Prabhu (1987), listening is considered as an active skill and the listening activities have been modified and turned into more communicative and meaningful ones. TBLT is an approach to teaching which centres on the use of meaningful real-life tasks by means of the target language. In other words, unlike the traditional activities designed with the purpose of teaching a discrete pedagogical point and neglected the authenticity and real-life situations (Izadpanah, 2010), the use of language in the TBLT is the main reason for applying more communicative tasks in meaningful contexts, which consequently have a significant influence on learning outcomes (Prabhu, 1987; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

According to TBLT (Nunan, 2004), any task must involve three stages, which include: 1) pre-task stage (the introduction to the topic and to the task); 2) during the task stage (the completion of the task depending on the type of activity); and 3) language focus stage (reviewing the task and

highlighting relevant parts for the students to analyse). This is true for all language skills and, specifically, listening which is the focus of the present study because "full engagement in the listening process requires L2 listeners to activate their schema by setting a purpose or identifying specific tasks that will help them to maximise comprehension before, during, and after listening" (Schweppe, 2012, pp. 10-11).

It has been suggested that the IELTS listening activities are task-based and have most of the characteristics of real-life tasks, given the notion of 'task' explained above. Thus, in what follows, the IELTS listening task types which are both receptive and productive, as well as their underlying purposes are presented:

1. *Matching:* this listening task requires learners to listen to a text and then match a numbered list of items with a set of options.

   *Purpose*: to evaluate how well learners can listen to details.

2. *Labelling*: this listening task requires learners to select the labels from a list which best matches the blank parts of a visual task (Dunkel, 1986).

   *Purpose*: to assess students' ability to understand descriptions of a place which usually includes spatial- and direction-related expressions such as opposite to, in front of, etc.

3. *Form-filling*: this listening task requires learners to listen to a text and complete the information requested.

   *Purpose:* to evaluate a learners' ability to recognize relationships and details.

4. *Selecting (multiple choice)*: this listening task requires learners to listen to a text and answer some questions each with 3-4 choices.

   *Purpose:* to check learners' detailed or general understanding of the main points of the listening text and their ability to answer some questions.

5. *Sentence completion:* this listening task requires learners to listen to a set of sentences which summarise the key information of the text and complete a gap in each sentence using information from the listening text.

   P*urpose*: to gauge learners' ability to focus on the main points of the text.

6. *Summary completion:* this listening task requires learners to complete a summary which contains a number of gaps.

   *Purpose*: to evaluate learners' understanding of the overall meaning and main points of the section summarised.

7. *Short-answer questions:* this listening task requires learners to listen to a text and read a set of related questions to which they have to write a short answer.

   *Purpose*: to evaluate learners' ability to listen for concrete facts such as places or times.

Here, a distinction should be made between receptive and productive listening

activities. The first four task types are referred to as receptive because they assess understanding when one listens or reads. On the other hand, the next three question types are called productive skills and they assess students' understanding and interpretation and are, thus, more demanding.

Previous literature shows that a few studies have investigated the effects of task types on listening comprehension. It also indicates that most of the studies have centred too much on listening product but too little on listening process (Field, 1998). Some studies have concentrated on the skills and strategies involved in listening (Field, 1998). Others have paid attention to factors that lead to success in listening comprehension tasks. Nonetheless, the effects of learners' level of linguistic and lexical knowledge on listening comprehension achievement have also been studied (Anderson, 2009; Kurita, 2012; Stahr, 2009). In what follows, some of the main studies conducted in both Iranian and other educational contexts are reviewed.

Some studies have found that listening support in tasks can enhance learners' listening comprehension at different proficiency levels. Chang and Read (2006) investigated the effects of four types of listening support, i.e., previewing the test questions, repetition of the input, providing background knowledge about the topic, and vocabulary instruction, to reduce the demands of the task for students in a classroom-based experiment in Taiwan and found that providing information about the topic and repetition of the input as the most effective type of support, while vocabulary instruction was the least useful form of support. The learners' level of listening proficiency was found to have a significant interaction effect, particularly in the case of question preview.

Following her previous study (2008), Chang (2009) examined 75 Chinese EFL learners' test-taking strategies in different tasks and their relationship with listening performance. The results showed that all students, regardless of their listening proficiency, favoured particular strategies which differed little in the frequency but greatly in the preferential order, and how they were utilised. Also, they were able to adjust their strategy use according to the change in task conditions. However, as explained, students' strategy use in this study was affected not only by task type but also by test type, so the choice of strategy has a multidimensional facet and cannot merely be attributed to the task-based instruction, and this is one of the main difficulties of task-based strategy assessment.

A more related strand of study, closely associated with the aims of the present study, examines the impacts of task-based activities on listening ability. Bahrami (2010) investigated the influence of task-based activities including matching, form-filling, labelling and selecting on listening ability among EFL students to identify any possible correspondence between task type and students' language proficiency level. Based on the findings of the study, a significant relationship was observed between matching, labelling, and form-filling tasks and listening comprehension.

However, there was no relationship between selecting and listening comprehension because selecting task did not correspond with any of the language proficiency levels.

Nasirian (2012) conducted the same study using 45 EFL students but found somehow different results. There was a significant relationship between listening ability and all four listening tasks. In addition, it was found that learners with advanced and lower intermediate proficiency levels performed better in labelling, selection and matching tasks, whereas only learners with upper-intermediate proficiency level performed well on the matching task.

However, it is worth mentioning that both Bahrami's (2010) and Nasirian's (2012) studies were limited in scope and suffered from some limitations. Nasirian's (2012) study only examined the effects of task type on listening ability of the male language learners, thus conducting this experiment to females or mixed classes might lead to different results. Also, it used correlational analysis as the only method to analyse the data. More importantly, both Nasirian's and Bahrami's studies merely examined the receptive listening tasks such as labelling and left the productive listening tasks like sentence completion uninvestigated. Above all, although both studies had relatively the same underlying goals, they resulted in somehow different outcomes that limits the generalizability of their findings to the other contexts. This necessitates conducting more studies in this area to obtain more accurate results.

Schweppe (2012) tried to determine whether a 'task-based approach' to L2 listening instruction with explicit instruction on meta-cognitive strategies would enhance learners' listening comprehension of science content and enable them to perform concrete tasks throughout the listening process. The findings of her study highlighted the positive effect of integrated models such as task-based instruction on learners' learning. She found that meta-cognitive awareness increased in task-based models leading learners to continue listening to what they heard even when they did not understand. Nevertheless, the task-based instruction implemented in this study is highly generalised, thus, failing to account for individual differences. In addition, the very short length of the study (two-week span) sheds doubt on the effectiveness of this instruction in the long run.

Farrokhi and Modarres (2012) studied the extent to which two pre-task listening activities, i.e. glossary of unknown vocabulary items and content related support, assisted listening comprehension performance of 120 EFL language learners at low proficiency (LP) and high proficiency (HP) levels. Results showed that at low proficiency level, the vocabulary group outperformed both content and control groups, while in the high proficiency level, the content group outperformed the two other groups. This study suggested incorporating pre-task activities due to the demanding nature of listening and various listening activities across different proficiency levels. However, few factors

such as time seemed to have influenced the results because the extra preparation time given to the learners with low proficiency enabled them to process and internalise the lexical items.

Motallebzadeh (2013) explored the role of task-based listening activities in improving 50 Iranian EFL learners' listening self-efficacy. The results of the study indicated that the experimental group receiving task-based listening activities during the 19 sessions (30 minutes) of instructions reached a significantly higher self-efficacy than the control group receiving the traditional question-and-answer practices. Nevertheless, the findings of this study were only based on the data obtained from the self-efficacy questionnaire and needed to be triangulated with other methods of data analysis to reach more reliable results.

In a recent study, Sarani *et al*. (2014) studied the effect of video-based tasks in improving the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension ability, whereas the experimental group was taught by a course of instruction including video tasks, and the control group was directed by a course including audio materials. The results showed that using the video-based tasks, the experimental group could realize and understand the authentic language more effectively. However, the researcher did not provide any examples of the listening tasks in the experimental group to see how they differed from the tasks in the control group. Moreover, as this is a rare line of research, it should be put under more investigation.

The review of literature shows that despite the increasing concerns about making listening activities more communicative and incorporating more real-life tasks, listening is still the least studied modality (Brown, 2011; Ferris & Tagg, 1996) compared to other skills and very few studies have addressed the effects of different listening tasks and their effects on learners' listening comprehension ability specifically at different proficiency levels (Ellis, 2003). Although the studies reviewed here have incorporated task-based activities (Bahrami, 2010), they are limited in their scope, theoretical foundation, methodology and the tasks incorporated; therefore, the results should be used with caution. Above all, the correspondence between productive listening tasks and learners' proficiency level has not been the subject of any of previous studies.

To bridge these gaps, the present study was set out to investigate the overall effects of task-based listening activities among Iranian EFL students. It specifically studied the influence of different types of listening tasks among students with different proficiency levels. Simply put, attempt was made to answer to the following questions:

*Research Questions*

1. Do task-based listening activities have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' overall listening ability?
2. Do receptive and productive listening task types have any correspondences with a particular language proficiency level?

Based on the above research question, the following null hypotheses were posed:

$H_0$ 1 = Task-based listening activities do not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' overall listening ability.

$H_0$ 2 = Receptive and productive task types do not have any correspondences with a particular language proficiency level.

## METHODOLOGY

*Participants*

The participants were selected from a population of 105 EFL language learners registered for IELTS courses at Jahad-e Daneshgahi Language Centre in Shiraz, Iran. They were chosen through availability sampling. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Demographic information of the participants

| | |
|---|---|
| Number | 90 |
| Sex | Male & female |
| Age | 19-26 |
| First language | Farsi |

The participants had studied English at different language institutes for eight semesters or so; thus, they could easily follow the listening procedures of the present study. The participants were placed in three proficiency levels: intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced, each containing 30 students, for the new semester based on their scores in the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) test. The lower-intermediate group was excluded from the study as, unlike the other groups, it consisted of 15 students and this could negatively affect the results.

*Instrument*

**Oxford Placement Test (OPT)**

The Oxford Placement Test was used in this study to enable the researchers to evaluate the learners' language proficiency level and place them in the right proficiency level. This test consists of two parts. First, the listening part which involves 100 items is taken from authentic situations. Students listen to the conversations spoken by native speakers at normal speaking speed and make their choices on the basis of what they hear. Listening is played only once. Students must complete the test in 10-12 minutes. Second, the grammar test consists of 100 multiple-choice items examining a range of grammatical and lexical items which are contextualised situationally or linguistically. This test takes 50 minutes to complete. The choice of this instrument is that not only does it test grammar and vocabulary, but it also tests how learners use that knowledge in order to understand the meaning in communication.

**Pretest and Posttest**

Pretest is a task-based test of listening comprehension developed by Cameron (2000) including four productive listening task types, namely, labelling, selecting, matching, and form filling. A parallel form of the test is also developed to serve as a posttest. The right/wrong scoring

procedure is used for the four receptive tasks. A response receives a score of '0' for 'wrong' and '1' for 'correct'. On the other hand, given that productive listening tasks, namely, sentence-completion, summary completion, and short-answer questions require students to briefly write the answers (usually within a 3-word limit), the scoring is more subjective. However, to assure reliability, the answers are checked by two proficient scorers. A response receives a score of '0' for 'unacceptable' and '1' for 'acceptable'. In this study, the inter-rater relationship between the two sets of scores scored by the two scorers was 98% and thus was highly reliable.

## DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

At the beginning of the term, OPT was administered and 90 language learners were placed in three intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels based on their scores in this test (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Placement of the learners at different proficiency levels according to their scores in OPT

| Proficiency level | Score |
|---|---|
| advanced | + 0.5 SD or more above the mean |
| upper-intermediate | + 0.5 SD above and - 0.5 SD below the mean |
| intermediate | 0.5 to -1 SD below the mean |

During the course of the term (11 weeks), different IELTS listening task types were practiced in all the classes. All the classes were taught by the same instructor. The learners were briefed about the usefulness of task-based activities; however, they were not informed about the purpose of the study. The materials selected for each proficiency level included all seven receptive and productive task-based listening activities which were authentic and the difficulty level of the tasks differed to make them suitable for a particular proficiency level (Scrivener, 1994). The difficulty level of the listening was determined via Fog readability formula (Farhady *et al*., 2000, p. 282).

In the first four listening tasks called receptive tasks, the learners only needed to comprehend and perceive them and check the correct choice in their answer sheets. On the other hand, the three remaining tasks, referred to as productive listening tasks, required the learners not only to comprehend the listening but also to produce and write the correct answer themselves rather than simply reading through a list of choices and checking the correct choice. The listening task types were sequenced by their complexity (Ellis, 2003) and played only once. The strategies devised for pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening tasks (Table 3) were primarily taken from Cameron (2000):

At the end of the course, a posttest, a parallel form of the pretest, was administered to all the classes with the same procedure as the pretest.

TABLE 3
Strategies used for implementing the listening tasks

| Pre-listening | While-listening | Post-listening |
|---|---|---|
| a. Read the question(s). | a. Listen carefully to any taped instructions for each section. | a. Transfer you answers to the answer sheet in pencil |
| b. Check whether you have to write your answer, and in what form (a name, a number, a tick or a cross, a phrase, circle the correct answer, etc.). | b. Focus on more than one question at a time. | b. Pay attention to lower case and capital letters. |
| c. Predict the content of what you will hear. | c. Do not stop on an answer you do not know: move on. | c. Attempt all questions and do not leave any question unanswered even if you are not sure about the answer. |
| d. Anticipate the words and phrases you are most likely to hear. | d. Listen for the specific information pin-pointed in your pre-listening preparation. | |
| e. Translate any pictures into words to anticipate hearing them in the listening passage. | e. Do not worry if you do not understand every word when listening for the overall meaning or gist. | |
| f. Predict possible answers to the questions to prepare yourself to hear the answers. | f. Write an answer for every question: sometimes your guesses are accurate as your ears hear more than you think. | |
| g. Anticipate synonyms and ideas expressed in different words. | g. At the end of each section check your answers and transfer them with care to the answer sheet. | |
| h. Concentrate! | | |

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## DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

For data analysis, first, the pretest and posttest papers at all levels of proficiency were collected and scored. Then, the data were subjected to descriptive statistics using SPSS software (19.0). To see the overall effects of task-based listening activities on students' listening ability of the learners, the mean and SD of the learner' pretest and posttest overall scores at each proficiency level were determined and compared using three paired t-tests. In order to determine any interrelationships between each task type and the participants' language proficiency level, the learners' score in each particular task was calculated across the three proficiency levels. As there were seven task types, twenty-one paired t-tests were run.

TABLE 4
Mean and SD of the participants' overall listening performance in pretest and posttest at each proficiency level

| Level of proficiency | Mean pretest | Mean posttest | Mean Difference | SD pretest | SD posttest | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intermediate | 26.66 | 30.73 | -4.06 | 5.34 | 4.38 | .000 |
| Upper-intermediate | 25.83 | 29.86 | -4.03 | 3.67 | 2.81 | .000 |
| Advanced | 34.96 | 40.73 | -5.76 | 4.64 | 2.07 | .000 |

P<0.05

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*The effect of task-based listening activities on overall listening ability*

Table 4 presents the results of three paired t-tests run to answer the first research question as follows:

1. *Do task-based listening activities have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' overall listening ability?*

As can be seen, learners at all proficiency levels outperformed in their posttests compared to their pretests, indicating the positive effect of task-based listening activities on the overall listening ability of the participants. Thus, the first null hypothesis, 'task-based listening activities do not have any effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening ability', is rejected. The mean difference between the pretests and posttests at intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels was -4.06, -4.03, and -5.76, respectively, which were significant at P<0.05. The mean difference of the advanced level (-5.76) was the highest of all, suggesting that advanced learners benefited from the task-based listening activities more than the intermediate and upper-intermediate learners.

The reason may lie in the way learners at different proficiency levels approach the tasks. Low proficiency learners, due to their undeveloped skills and limited processing ability, usually resort to bottom-up processing, i.e., they use the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Hence, providing that the incoming input is not comprehensible enough for them, no understanding and subsequently no task achievement can be obtained. On the other hand, high proficiency learners, due to their more developed skills, use top-down processing, i.e., they use their background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message, usually in combination with bottom-up processing which helps them to manage the listening tasks. Moreover, as stated by Saricoban (1999), listening to and understanding speech involve a number of basic processes including linguistic competence, previous knowledge and psychological variables that affect the mobilisation of these competence and knowledge in the particular task situation. These factors could be responsible for the difference in the listening performance of the three groups.

This finding, in general, provides evidence that shows the influence of having a task-based syllabus as a cognitively motivating approach to language learning (Prabhu, 1987), and specifically, confirms the positive effects of task-based listening activities on Iranian EFL learners' listening ability at all levels of language proficiency, and is to some extent consistent with the results obtained by other studies (Bahrami, 2010; Chang, 2008, 2009; Farrokhi & Modarres, 2012; Nasirian, 2012; Sarani *et al*., 2014).

*The correspondence between task types and proficiency level*

Table 5 shows the results of multiple t-tests conducted to answer the second research question as follows:

2. *Do receptive and productive listening task types have any correspondences with a particular language proficiency level?*

As shown in Table 5, a correspondence can be detected between receptive and productive task types and a particular proficiency level; therefore, the second null hypothesis, 'the receptive and productive task types do not have any correspondences with a particular language proficiency level', is also rejected.

The results of paired t-tests run to determine any correspondences between each task and a particular proficiency level indicated that learners at all three levels of proficiency outperformed in their posttest compared to their pretest in the four receptive listening tasks which included matching, labelling, form-filling, and selecting where all the mean differences were significant at $.000 \geq 0.05$. As far as the three productive listening tasks were concerned, i.e., in sentence completion, summary completion, and short-answer questions, the mean difference of the intermediate group was .090, .281, and .130, respectively, which was not significant at 0.05. However, the performance of the upper-intermediate and advanced level learners in all productive tasks was significant at 0.05.

The reason why lower-intermediate learners could not manage the productive listening activities, as suggested by researchers, might be that learners find tasks with an oral input easier than tasks presented in writing (Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987). Learners can process the tasks containing the pictorial input (drawings, graphs, etc.) as presented in tasks such as matching, labelling, etc. more easily than those with written or verbal input including summary completion (Ellis, 2003). However, limiting the low proficiency learners to just receptive skills is not a good solution as it encourages just listening for comprehending whereas the ultimate goal of any language task is using language for communication and it is important to ascertain that learners are aware of this goal. In fact, receptive tasks should give way to productive tasks which integrate a verity of language skills including comprehending, listening, writing or speaking. If learners are made to produce something, the tasks will be more communicative. Therefore, it is suggested

that productive skills should be introduced for learners at all proficiency levels with the difficulty level adjusted, and with low proficiency learners receiving more instruction and practice on the productive tasks.

These findings are partially consistent with those of Bahrami's (2010) in which students showed improvement in matching and labelling tasks except for the task of selecting at all the proficiency levels, due to the fact that it was a context-free task which was not supported by visual information, and also form-filling at the advanced level which was probably due to the procedural reasons. Nasirian (2012) also found a significant positive relationship between listening ability and all four (receptive) tasks. However, in terms of correspondence with proficiency level, his findings are not in agreement with those of the present study. In his study, labelling, selecting and matching tasks were found to have high correspondence to advanced and lower intermediate proficiency levels, whereas the matching task corresponded to the upper-intermediate proficiency level.

TABLE 5
Paired t-test of the participants' performance on each listening task at each language proficiency level

| | Level of proficiency | Mean pretest | Mean posttest | Mean Difference | SD pretest | SD posttest | Sig. Matching |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Listening Task | Intermediate | 4.73 | 5.60 | -0.86 | 1.74 | 1.24 | .002 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 4.86 | 5.73 | -0.86 | 1.35 | 0.98 | .000 |
| | Advanced | 5.23 | 6.23 | -0.90 | 1.44 | 0.77 | .000 |
| Labelling | Intermediate | 4.70 | 5.30 | -0.60 | 1.80 | 1.24 | .001 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 4.76 | 5.46 | -0.70 | 1.75 | 1.04 | .001 |
| | Advanced | 4.90 | 5.73 | -0.83 | 1.95 | 1.22 | .002 |
| Form-filling | Intermediate | 3.90 | 4.60 | -0.70 | 1.82 | 1.32 | .002 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 4.53 | 5.16 | -0.63 | 1.54 | 1.28 | .004 |
| | Advanced | 5.56 | 6.23 | -0.66 | 1.25 | 0.81 | .000 |
| Selecting | Intermediate | 4.70 | 5.40 | -0.73 | 1.72 | 1.27 | .002 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 4.90 | 5.60 | -0.70 | 1.32 | 1.03 | .001 |
| | Advanced | 5.73 | 6.30 | -0.56 | 1.14 | 0.79 | .001 |
| Sentence Completion | Intermediate | 2.70 | 2.93 | -0.23 | 1.29 | 1.04 | .090 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 3.20 | 3.93 | -0.73 | 1.64 | 1.41 | .000 |
| | Advanced | 4.56 | 5.40 | -0.83 | 1.75 | 1.19 | .001 |
| Summary Completion | Intermediate | 2.73 | 2.93 | -0.20 | 1.70 | 1.50 | .281 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 3.76 | 4.26 | -0.50 | 1.59 | 1.28 | .000 |
| | Advanced | 4.23 | 5.06 | -0.83 | 1.61 | 1.20 | .000 |
| Short-answer Question | Intermediate | 3.53 | 3.83 | -0.30 | 1.87 | 1.62 | .130 |
| | Upper-intermediate | 4.06 | 4.86 | -0.80 | 1.72 | 1.40 | .000 |
| | Advanced | 4.66 | 5.76 | -1.10 | 1.89 | 0.97 | .001 |

A closer look at the results also shows an upward trend in the mean differences from intermediate to advanced levels for the productive listening tasks. More specifically, although learners at all proficiency levels showed improvement in all the listening task types, except for the productive tasks in the intermediate group, the improvement (and the mean difference between pretests and posttests) was the highest in the advanced level. For example, the mean difference between the pretest and posttest of the form-filling task in the intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced levels was -0.60, -0.70, and -0.83, respectively. It shows that as the learners advance in their language proficiency, listening tasks become easier to manage for them. At lower levels, however, listening remains a more demanding task requiring more instruction and practice.

Overall, the findings support having a task-based approach (Nunan, 2004; Farrokhi & Modarres, 2012; Sarani *et al*., 2014; Schweppe, 2012) to listening comprehension which leads to improvement in receptive and productive listening tasks. Using a variety of task types is necessary to make the language more communicative and make the activities more meaningful.

## CONCLUSION

Listening, specifically, has an important place in second language learning; therefore, without good listening skills, successful communication cannot be achieved. TBLT is an effective methodological tool for investigating both theoretical and pedagogical aspects of listening and places meaningful tasks at the heart of the learning process. The present study not only confirmed the finding of the previous studies but also added further insights into the relationship between different listening task types and learners' proficiency level.

Incorporating task-based listening activities in this study exposed ESL students to real-language use and enhanced their listening ability. The results showed both overall improvement in the listening ability of learners at all proficiency levels, and progress in each listening task type at each proficiency level except for the productive skills of sentence completion, summary completion, and short-answer question at the intermediate level. In other words, it was shown that productive tasks were more demanding for intermediate students than the receptive ones. Although the productive listening tasks did not result in significant improvements at this proficiency level, some degree of achievement was made; thus, a tentative conclusion can be drawn that productive skills may not be appropriate for the intermediate level and this finding certainly requires more investigation. In addition, it is suggested that productive skills are introduced at all less advanced levels with the difficulty level adjusted while more instruction and practice on these tasks are provided.

It is important to note that the advanced students appeared to progress more than the intermediate and the upper-intermediate groups. Apart from the learners' approach to listening activities and their processing ability, there are two overlapping purposes

underlying L2 listening process, namely, input and intake that may explain why advanced learners developed more in the listening tasks. Receptive tasks only need comprehension and what is understood as intake does not necessarily contribute to language development; thus, it does not turn into intake. This is when the importance of productive skills is highlighted. As the productive tasks require learners to both comprehend and produce language or, in other words, turn the input to intake, they are more likely to result in listening development. Thus, lack of productive activities compared to the receptive ones can be attributed to little achievement made in listening classes. In addition, advanced learners usually have inclination to utilise the linguistic input for successful communication while for intermediate students, it suffices to comprehend the input and not much effort is made to use it for more important goals such as communication. Accordingly, if communication as the main goal of language learning is emphasized and productive activities are incorporated from the early stages, the possibility of managing these tasks at different levels of proficiency would increase.

The findings of the present study provide foreign language educators and researchers with some implications. First, it encourages them to identify and utilise proper listening tasks with the right difficultly level in their classes which are compatible with learners' proficiency level. Therefore, learners become more encouraged to practice the listening tasks and enhance their listening ability. Second, it invites them to incorporate both receptive and productive tasks to enhance learning and successful communication. Third, it encourages them to insert more control at less advanced levels and provide the learners with effective instruction on how to approach the productive tasks.

Despite its significance, this study had some limitations including using a sample which was not representative of the population and thus limited the generalisability of the results to wider contexts. Since this was the first study investigating the effect of all listening task-types on EFL students' language proficiency, further studies are required to confirm the results obtained by this study while taking the aforementioned limitations into account. Future studies can also take gender differences into account and observe if there is any difference between the effects of task types on listening ability of either male and female students.

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