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The Correlation Between Elementary Students' English Listening Skills and Their Interest in and Views on Learning English

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between students' listening comprehension skills and their opinions and interest in learning English. The participants were 514 ninth-grade students in public elementary schools in the Republic of Kosovo. A standardised listening comprehension test was used to assess students' listening skills, followed by a questionnaire covering a range of opinions and interest in learning English. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between proficiency in English listening and factors such as interest in learning English, perception of English as a motivating skill, and lower levels of learning difficulty. In addition, favouring a dedicated language school for learning English was found to be a significant factor in English listening proficiency.

Keywords: developing listening skills, elementary school students, foreign language acquisition, non-cognitive learning factors

Introduction

Teaching and learning languages have changed a lot during the last decades, especially due to the rapid advancement of technology and learners' access to these tools. Previous research has shown that listening is the most important skill for language acquisition because language learning may occur only when receiving

understandable input (Hamouda, 2013). Listening is the foundation for developing the other three language skills (i.e., reading, writing and speaking) (Huo et al., 2018), and it “lies at the heart of language learning, but it is the least understood and least researched skill” (Vandergrift, 2007, p. 191).

Exposure and input to listening materials in English are very important in advancing listening skills. Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 201) defined input as the “language that learner is exposed to in the environment”. In order to create and reinforce the good habit of listening, teachers should provide their learners with many sources of input such as lectures, radio news, music, films, TV plays, documentaries, announcements, everyday conversations, and interviews, but also ask their learners to be exposed to these sources (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). The use of podcast materials was helpful, too (Hasan & Hoon, 2012; Kavaliauskiené & Anusiené, 2009).

Motivation and interest are among the main factors influencing language learning (Mao, 2011). Vandergrift (2005, p. 70) argues that “motivation plays a key role in the rate and success of second or foreign language learning”. Researchers have understood that motivation should include students’ choice, effort, and persistence in second language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Hou et al. (2018) explored the factors contributing to the improvement of listening skills of two English major university classes. The control class used traditional teaching, whereas the experimental class applied the negotiated teaching mode to English listening teaching, allowing learners to participate in the selection of teaching content and assessment. Results showed that the English listening performance of the students from the experimental class significantly improved with positive changes in their interests in language learning (Hou et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important that “teachers should design listening tasks that arouse students’ interest and help them learn listening skills and strategies” (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016, p. 128).

Methodology

Research Question and Hypotheses

The main research questions were: RQ1: *Are opinions about useful English sources and activities related to the achieved level of English listening skills in primary school students?* RQ2: *Are the interest and fondness for learning English related to the achieved level of English listening skills in primary school students?* In support of the research question, two hypotheses were proposed: (1) *Opinions about useful English*

sources and activities are related to the level of English listening skills; (2) Interest and fondness for learning English are related to the level of English listening skills.

The research approach of the “ex-post facto” type, on which this research is based, largely relativises the traditional categorisation of variables as criterion and independent (behavioural and stimulus) ones. The opinions, interest and motivation in learning English were used as the independent variables, while the level of the English listening skills was positioned as the criterion.

Given the assumed differences in areas of interest, social habits, and cultural choices (as significant determinants of the opinions and interest & motivation in learning English), gender was treated as a moderator variable. Hence, a major part of planned statistical calculations was computed for each of the two genders separately.

Participants

The sample consisted of 514 students (278 females, 236 males) recruited from different elementary public schools in Kosovo, grade 9, aged 14 or 15. Students from this sample learn English in school every year with an average of three instructional classes per week. By the time students finish elementary school (grade 9), they are supposed to complete about 623 lessons of English as a foreign language. The lessons in Kosovo public schools last 45 minutes.

Instruments

Data collection was performed using two measuring tools:

The two-part standardised listening comprehension test was the first one. Part one consisted of a closed-gap text with 6 distractor words. Part two consisted of multiple-choice questions (6 items, each presenting 4 options).

The author-designed questionnaire covered the opinions, interest, and motivation for learning English. Five-point Likert scale was employed in rating weight via categories such as: (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) undecided, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree.

Data Analysis

The data matrix was dominated by variables of nominal and ordinal type (questionnaire, i.e., independent variables), with a single scale (listening test, i.e., the criterion variables). Considering the variables' nature, the measurement levels, and

the lack of normality in the criterion's distribution (which will be briefly elaborated in the Result section), a set of non-parametric procedures was employed for data analysis. Spearman correlation, Man-Whitney U test, Kruskal-Wallis test and Chi-square test were the inferential statistical tools to test the research hypotheses. A routine set of descriptive parameters (frequencies, arithmetic means, standard deviations, etc.) were used occasionally as supporting indicators throughout the data analysis.

Results

A brief review of descriptive data may be insightful, so simultaneously with testing the hypotheses, we offer a glimpse into descriptive measures for each independent variable. First, the criterion variable, i.e., the listening test, is described below.

As seen in Figure 1, male students score slightly better than their female peers, which may be somewhat surprising, given the stereotype that females usually do better in languages. The difference, though, is too small to be considered statistically significant (*Man-Whitney U test: $Z=0.308, p>.05$*). We performed the preliminary distribution normality check for this variable. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test failed to confirm the normality of distribution in both female ($D=0.096, df=278, p<.01$) and male ($D=0.134, df=235, p<.01$) subsamples, which implied the usage of a non-parametric procedure (Man-Whitney U test) in the previously reported statistical test. This approach shall be kept throughout the forthcoming statistical analyses.

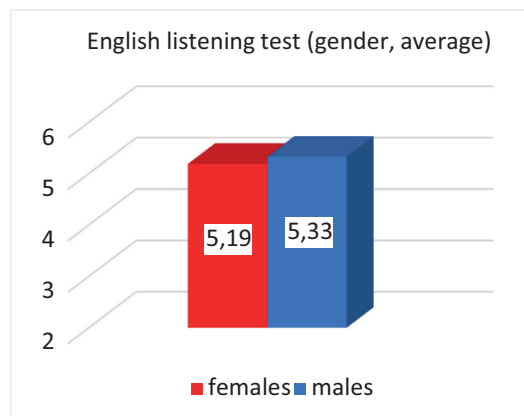


Figure 1. English listening test: gender difference

Each independent variable's descriptive data and simultaneous statistical crossing with the criterion, i.e., testing the research hypotheses, is presented in the remainder.

Students' Opinions Towards Learning English

In the first block of the analyses, we investigated students' most commonly used sources in learning English as possible indicators of the level they achieve in English listening skills. Respondents were asked about their main source of learning English and their opinions about the usefulness of activities and exposure to these sources for improving their English listening skills.

As Table 1 indicates, TV and the Internet are most commonly addressed as the main sources of English learning, unlike radio, which covers only a tiny fraction. Gender-wise, there are some minor differences. Girls point out TV and school lessons (both in regular and language school) more frequently than boys, while boys find the Internet, written English (magazines, books, etc.), and radio more common personal English sources than girls. Differences between genders, though, emerge not prominent enough to be considered relevant (Chi-square tests proved insignificant).

Table 1. The main sources of English learning

The main sources of English learning	Females			Males		
	Yes	No	Yes (%)	Yes	No	Yes (%)
TV	107	171	38.49%	79	157	33.47%
Magazines, books	9	269	3.24%	14	222	5.93%
Radio	2	276	0.72%	7	229	2.97%
Internet	98	180	35.25%	100	136	42.37%
English lessons in regular school	77	201	27.70%	55	181	23.31%
English lessons in language school	52	226	18.71%	39	197	16.53%
Other	6	276	2.16%	8	228	3.39%

In the female subsample, students who point out English lessons in a language school as the main personal source of English learning score significantly higher (*Man-Whitney U test: Z=-2.619, p<.01*) than other students. A similar result was shown in the male subsample. Male students who point out English lessons in

a regular school as the main personal source of English learning score significantly lower (*Man-Whitney U test*: $Z=-2.371$, $p<.05$) than their male peers from this sample.

Male students also differ in the English listening ability level, depending on the attitude towards language school English lessons as the main personal source of learning English. Our data show that male students who point out English lessons in a language school as the main source of English learning score significantly better (*Man-Whitney U test*: $Z=-3.464$, $p<.01$) than other boys in this sample.

As Table 2 indicates, active speaking with other people is given the highest value as the most useful activity for developing English listening skills in girls and boys. A very high average value is given to regular school lessons and listening to music in English. However, a visually lower average mark is given to lessons in language schools. The lowest value is attributed to listening to radio programmes. Gender-wise, there are some minor differences, with a single prominent one: girls give an unexpectedly modest, even low, value for the lessons in language school, much lower than boys. Statistical check confirms that this particular difference between the two genders is the only one prominent enough to be statistically significant (*Chi-square test*: $\chi^2=9.901$, $df=4$, $p<.05$).

Table 2. Usefulness of different activities in developing English listening skills

Activity	Females	Males
	Average value (1-5)	Average value (1-5)
Watching English TV content with Albanian subtitles	3.64	3.83
Watching English TV content with no subtitles	3.95	3.83
Listening to radio news and similar content in English	3.11	3.13
Listening to music in English	4.31	4.22
Internet content in English	4.08	4.09
Active speaking English with other people	4.44	4.43
Attending English lessons in regular school	4.34	4.39
Attending English lessons in language school	3.88	4.17
Playing videogames (with an English interface)	3.40	3.28

In the female subsample, three significant correlations are recorded. Girls that attribute a higher value to either watching subtitled films on TV or listening to music in English as useful sources in developing listening skills, on average, score

lower on the listening test ($r = -.127, p < .05$). On the other hand, girls that attribute higher value of the active conversation as a useful source in learning English, on average, score higher on the listening test ($r = .132, p < .05$). Surprisingly, however, there is the almost total absence of any substantial correlation in the male subsample, let alone statistical significance. It is visible that this set of opinions among the male respondents proved almost fully unrelated to their listening English proficiency.

Concluding the first phase of analysis, we can say that the findings identify certain indicators of English language learning to students' success, especially their listening skills. Preference for or dislike of English lessons (in both regular and language school) as the main personal out-of-school source of English could be one of the differential indicators of attaining or not attaining higher levels of listening skills. For females, disfavoured subtitled TV films or favouring active English conversation may also indicate their ability to achieve a higher level of listening skills. What puzzles us, however, is that aversion to listening to music in English as an indicator of better listening skills is not as pronounced in girls as we thought, and similar indicators are completely absent in the male subsample.

Altogether, we have only a few indicators in favour of accepting hypothesis 1. Hence, we would accept it only partially.

Students' Interest and Motivation in Learning English Listening Skills

In the second block of analyses, we investigated students' interest and motivation in learning English as possible indicators of the level they achieve in English listening skills. Respondents were asked why listening to English sources is difficult, to what extent English interests them, and how much they like English lessons.

Table 3 indicates that respondents report, in general, a mild amount of perceived difficulty in listening in English, regardless of gender. General estimation in both subsamples is anchored around the "2" mark ("a little bit"), but with some differences in preference, i.e., males' estimations emerge visibly less focused towards "a little bit" mark. Statistical check confirmed the statistical significance of gender in estimations' distribution (*Chi-square test*: $\chi^2 = 14.789, df = 4, p < .01$).

Our data reveal that there is a significant negative correlation between the estimated level of listening English difficulty and listening skills achieved in both female ($r = -.208, p < .01$) and male ($r = -.304, p < .01$) subsamples. In other words,

Table 3. Listening English difficulty

Is listening in English difficult for you?	Females			Males		
	Frequency	Percent	average	Frequency	Percent	average
Not at all (1)	73	26.35%	2.02	85	36.32%	2.00
A little bit (2)	139	50.18%		85	36.32%	
So-and-so (3)	57	20.58%		49	20.94%	
Quite a lot (4)	3	1.08%		10	4.27%	
A lot (5)	5	1.81%		5	2.14%	

the assessment that listening in English is less difficult results in students' higher listening skills, which is a correlation that can be easily predicted.

In a further step, we asked students to name the main personal reason why listening in English might be difficult. Table 4 reveals that students in this sample, regardless of gender, most often identified the speaker's rapid speech as the main problem in mastering English listening comprehension. Female students state that they have slightly more problems coping with the speaker's strong accent than their male classmates, while male students complain more about too many unfamiliar words. However, the statistical check failed to prove this pattern's statistical significance (*Chi-square test*: $\chi^2=3.172$, $df=2$, $p>.05$).

Table 4. Main reason for listening to English difficulty

Why is listening in English difficult for you?	Females		Males	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Rapid speech	103	46.40%	79	46.47%
Too many unknown words	43	19.37%	44	25.88%
Strong speaker's accent	76	34.23%	47	27.65%

Non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test reveals that female students who declare too many unknown words as the main reason for listening comprehension difficulty score significantly (*Kruskal-Wallis test*: $H=9.847$, $df=2$, $p<.01$) lower than other girls. Insufficient vocabulary is the main factor in listening comprehension problems in the female subsample.

As for the male students, those who pointed out the speaker's strong accent as the main problem in listening comprehension scored significantly higher (*Kruskal-Wallis test*: $H=6.674$, $df=2$, $p<.05$) than their male peers from this sample.

Students were also asked whether studying the English language was interesting to them. Table 5 reveals that a very convincing majority of students, regardless of gender, perceive the English language as “very interesting” to study. A small minority, particularly in the female subsample, describe studying English as “not interesting at all”. Statistically, there is a significant difference (*Chi-square test*: $\chi^2=3.172$, $df=2$, $p<.05$) between genders in this pattern, with male students being more prone to “not interesting at all” and females more addressing to “partly interesting” mark.

Table 5. Is studying English an interesting activity?

Is studying English interesting for you?	Females		Males	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Very interesting	213	77.74%	171	76.68%
Partly interesting	58	21.17%	41	18.39%
Not interesting at all	3	1.08%	11	4.93%

Statistical crossing with the criterion variable (Spearman Rho correlation) indicates a significant correlation between perceiving studying English as being interesting and the level of listening skills only in the female subsample ($r=.199$, $p<.01$), but not in males ($r=.075$, $p>.05$).

In the final question, students were asked how much they liked English lessons. Table 6 shows that students generally indicated a strong liking for English lessons. Gender-wise, female students show significantly more enthusiasm, especially for the highest rating (“a lot”). The statistical test confirmed this difference as statistically significant (*Chi-square test*: $\chi^2=16.910$, $df=4$, $p<.01$).

Table 6. Fondness for English language lessons

How much do you enjoy your English language lessons?	Females		Males	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Not at all (1)	1	0.36%	4	1.74%
A little bit (2)	3	1.09%	7	3.04%
So-and-so (3)	22	8.00%	34	14.78%
Quite a lot (4)	101	36.73%	96	41.74%
A lot (5)	148	53.82%	89	38.70%

Our data reveal that there is a significant correlation between self-reported fondness for English lessons and level of listening skills again in the female subsample only ($r=.201, p<.01$), and again not in male students ($r=.063, p>.05$).

In the final analysis phase, several quite revealing findings emerged. It was found that the perceived level of difficulty in listening to English sources correlated directly with the measured performance on the English listening comprehension test: the lower the perceived difficulty, the higher the measured listening proficiency. Furthermore, an examination of possible reasons for this difficulty revealed that self-perceived inadequacy of vocabulary (“too many unfamiliar words”) was likely related to measured lower listening skills. In contrast, complaints about the speaker’s pronunciation (“strong accent”) proved relatively “innocuous” in terms of a relatively higher score on the listening test. Finally, the level of both estimated attractiveness of the English language and liking for English lessons were found to be significantly positively correlated with listening skills, but only in the female subsample.

All in all, the results provide more than enough indicators to support the full acceptance of hypothesis 2.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study attempted to explore how non-cognitive personal factors such as learners’ opinions, interest, perceived difficulty and preference to learn English as a second language affect students’ listening skills. The results show that few indicators support the acceptance of the first hypothesis: *Opinions about learning English are related to the level of English listening skills*. Both female and male participants who stated that English lessons in a language school are the main source of their English learning scored significantly higher than other participants in our study who stated other activities as the main source of language input. It indicates that students prefer out-of-class activities to regular school lessons. Therefore, teachers should create a pleasant environment in regular classrooms and use more authentic and interactive listening materials and activities. It would allow students to be exposed to different learning practices, which would help them take control over their learning, become more confident, and have a variety of learning experiences outside the formal language classrooms (Lamb, 2004).

Our data suggest a partial relationship between students’ perceived usefulness of language learning activities for learning English and their level of English lis-

tening skills. Participants in our study selected active speaking with other people out-of-class as the most useful activity. A study by Anderson et al. (2008) showed that playing video games creates a rich and enjoyable environment for language learning and enables a relationship between foreign language learners and native speakers. Speaking exercises that allow students to ask each other questions and switch the roles of listener and speaker tends to be very productive for improving English language skills, especially listening comprehension, as students need to expand their vocabulary and grammar (Saricoban & Karakurt, 2016).

The second key concept of this study was to examine the relationship between students' interest and preference in learning English and their listening skills. Both estimated interest in studying English and liking to study English were significantly positively correlated with the level of listening skills, but only in the female subsample. The data of our study provide sufficient evidence for the full acceptance of the second hypothesis – *Interest and fondness for learning English are related to the level of English listening skills*. The main difficulty faced by our participants in listening in English is the speaker's rapid speech, followed by the listeners' lack of vocabulary to comprehend the listening texts, and the last one is the speaker's accent. Those students whose main difficulty in listening comprehension was a lack of vocabulary performed significantly worse on the test, and when the speaker's accent was the main difficulty, these students performed better on the test than other students. Similar difficulties have been reported by other researchers who concluded that speed of listening, learner vocabulary, and speaker accent are some factors that make listening comprehension difficult or even impossible (Azmi et al., 2014; Buck, 2011; Graham, 2006; Underwood, 1989).

Most students in our sample declared that learning English is very interesting to them, and there is a significant correlation between females' interest in learning English and their listening comprehension skills, but we did not find such a correlation among male students. We identified similar patterns among our subsamples in terms of preference for English language learning. A statistically significant correlation between self-reported fondness for English learning and level of listening skills was again found only in the female subsample but not in the male participants. These findings mirror those of Che Mat and Yunus (2014) and Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012), suggesting that attitudes and motivation are very important factors in successfully learning English as a second language, in and out of school. Similarly, a study by Liu (2007) examined Chinese students' attitudes toward learning English, orientations toward learning English, and

correlations between these measured variables and students' English proficiency. The statistical analyses revealed that students who had positive attitudes toward learning English and were highly motivated tended to perform better on English tests. Motivation seems to play a crucial role in language learning because only when motivated learners embark on the tasks and devote energy and dedication to learning (Littlewood, 1984).

Our findings suggest that it is very important for teachers to expose students to different sources and activities and offer guidance on using them out of class to help them improve their listening skills by bridging the formal and informal language learning experiences.

This study was based on a group of ninth-grade learners of English as a foreign language in Kosovo, and the results are based on their opinions about language sources and activities and listening tests scores. Further studies are needed to explore this phenomenon by including teachers' views on the topic, classroom observations and in-depth interviews.

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