The effect of portfolio approach and genre-based pedagogy on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine whether raising the awareness of EFL listeners about the generic structure of news through portfolio approach may significantly enhance the subjects' listening comprehension performance. To this end, around 97 advanced Iranian EFL learners participated in this study. The first experimental group received explicit teaching of generic structures of the genre of news. The participants in the second experimental group (i.e. portfolio assessment group) were helped to develop their awareness of the genre of news through completing their portfolios. The subjects in the control group listened to the news and completed some conventional activities. Instrumentation included a listening comprehension test and an attitude questionnaire. The results showed that explicit teaching of the generic structures of the genre of news as well as the application of portfolio assessment did not have any significant effect on listening comprehension performance of EFL listeners. It is concludes that only skilled listeners

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may benefit from genre-based pedagogy and portfolio assessment.

Keywords: EFL listening comprehension, genre knowledge, generic structure, portfolio assessment, genre-based instruction, news

1. Introduction

The vital role of listening comprehension as an integral part of language proficiency is agreed upon by experts in the context of EFL learning and instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1997). Anderson and Lynch (1998), for example, argue that "listening skills are as important as speaking skills; we cannot communicate face to face unless the two types of skill are developed in tandem" (p.3). Along the same line, Celce-Murcia (1997) maintains that "it [listening] is not only an important skill by itself but also has a paramount role in oral proficiency" (p.60). Given the significance of listening comprehension and the current focus on learner autonomy in education, it is highly important to explore means of engaging listeners in the process of listening comprehension and to activate their knowledge, including genre knowledge, during the listening comprehension process.

2. Review of Literature

When someone listens to a text in his mother tongue, he usually tends to use different sources of knowledge such as linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, topical knowledge, knowledge of the context in which listening happens, etc. in order to comprehend what has been said by the speaker. Second language listeners may not enjoy an adequate command of such sources of knowledge and skills, and therefore may fail to work out full comprehension of the message (Buck, 2001). As generally believed by the listening experts, what adds to L2 language listeners' problems is 'lack of enough linguistic', 'background' and 'sociocultural knowledge' about the material they listen to, while in

L1 listening the listeners' problems in understanding the material is, to the great extent, due to such factors as' listeners being distracted', 'disinterested' or 'responding to the content by thinking about something else' (Buck, 2001).

It is axiomatic that part of the knowledge which the listeners activate during the listening comprehension process is related to the knowledge of genre. As Brown and Yule (1983, p.32) maintain, native speakers have been building up 'stereotypical knowledge', including genre knowledge, from the first time they acquired language as infants. Rost (2002) argues that part of listener's initial task is to determine the type of genre he is listening to. Hence, knowledge of genre is part of formal schemata which is activated by the listener during top-down processing.

The renewed interest in genre and genre-based traditions with the main purpose of helping nonnative speakers master L2 use in a specific context (Hyland, 2006; Hyon, 1996) stimulated the growth of genre-based approaches and pedagogies (Hyon, 1996).There are many empirical studies which support the use of genre-based pedagogy in developing language skills. By the same token, the results of a multicultural workshop designed by Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998), in which participants were allowed to share their expertise in the field of genre, revealed that genre-based teaching approaches are largely viewed positive, even though some concerns were voiced regarding their practicality. Hyon (2001) investigated the effect of an EAP genre-based reading course on adult nonnative speakers and documented the positive effects of explicit teaching of genre-knowledge on student's L2 reading and writing. In order to further investigate the effectiveness of ESP genre-based framework of writing instruction, Cheng (2008) conducted a study in which he worked with a Chinese-speaking graduate student in electronic engineering who analyzed genre exemplars in preparation for writing. The participant engaged in rhetorical and evaluative reading of research articles in his field of study. The findings highlighted the potential power of genre as a supportive tool for building academic literacy.

However, the bulk of investigations conducted have mainly focused on written texts in ESP context. There are few studies that specifically examined the effect of genre-based approaches on oral

comprehension of EFL learners. Using Swales' approach as a framework to analyzing lecture introduction, Thompson (1994), for example, found application of the techniques of genre analysis as a useful tool which helped students comprehend the rest of the lecture better.

Moreover, the review of the literature on genre-based pedagogy indicates the compatibility of genre approaches and process approaches (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). "Such approaches would combine knowledge about genre product with the opportunity to plan, draft, revise, and edit work, as well as provide the opportunity for greater interaction" (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998, p. 312). Such approaches are also believed to contribute to the process of making learners aware of what is actually involved in learning a certain language competence (Christiansen & Laplante, 2004), which in turn motivate them to acquire that competence. One such process approach is portfolio assessment. Portfolios are defined as "systematic collection of student's work that is analyzed to show progress over time with regard to instructional objective"(O'Malley & Pierce, 1996, p.35). There are many empirical studies in favor of portfolio application as a tool for awareness raising purposes.

Delett et al. (2001) offered a framework to foreign language teachers through which they can systematically design and implement portfolios in their courses. Moreover, they maintained that the framework they offered could help the teachers conduct further research on the use of portfolio assessment in their own situation and classrooms. The results of their study also supported the use of portfolio as a tool that creates an interactive assessment involving both teachers and learners in the learning process.

Allen (2004) conducted a project in which the students were supposed to use portfolio to compare and contrast an aspect of French culture with their own culture. The results revealed that the culture portfolio presented in his study is consistent with current methodologies emphasizing that learning about another culture is a discovery process in itself.

Chen (2006) investigated the implementation of a portfolio system at secondary English classrooms in Taiwan. The study included two classes of seventh grades and their English teachers.

The findings indicated that students favored the portfolio system and considered the learning tasks conducive to their learning. Teachers' observations also confirmed that students benefited from the portfolio system in terms of the development of English use and confidence, learning ownership, versatile talent, and critical thinking.

3. Purpose of the Study

The present study aimed at investigating listening comprehension at discourse level and focusing on teaching generic structures of the genre of news and its possible effects on the comprehension of EFL listeners. Further, it probed the effectiveness of portfolios as tools to make students aware of discourse structures of the genre of news in Iranian EFL context which is typically dominated by more bottom-up skills-based ELT programs. More specifically, we addressed the following questions:

1. Does explicit teaching of generic structures of the genre of news have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension performance?
2. Does portfolio assessment have any significant effect on EFL learners' listening comprehension performance?
3. Do portfolio assessment and explicit teaching of generic structures have any significant effect on students' attitudes regarding the usefulness of genre awareness-raising activities?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

A total number of 97 male and female advanced English students of 16 to 20 years of age participated in the study. The participants included three groups of advanced English learners at an evening language institute in Karaj, Iran. Their syllabus comprised listening comprehension activities on news.

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4.2 Instrumentation

The instrumentation utilized in this research included:

Listening comprehension test: The listening comprehension test constructed based on the "news broadcast "genre was used as a post-test. According to Rost (2002), listening to the genre of news always involves some elements of time orientation, place orientation, character identification, events, complication, goals, and meanings.

The listening comprehension test utilized in this study consisted of 20 multiple-choice items on place, time, character, the event itself, and so on. There was no control on the topic of the oral texts, but most of the texts were related to the social themes. As a criterion for text selection, we checked the clarity of the voice and the accents of news announcers. Regarding the content of the oral texts, those texts which required detailed technical background information were deleted.

To construct the test, initially, seven texts were chosen and 25 questions were made based on the content of the texts. To check the appropriateness of the test for the intended participants and purpose of the study, three pilot studies were completed. The results of the first pilot study indicated that the test was difficult for the participants with regard to both length of the texts and also number of the texts. For the second pilot study, the participants, who were very similar to the students in the target sample, listened to the four texts and shared their perceptions with the researchers concerning length and the number of the texts. Following the third pilot study, the items were checked for conventional item characteristics and those items with weak indices were modified and improved. Also, we examined the reliability of the test as a major psychometric feature against KR-21 and an index of .70 was obtained for the test.

Attitude questionnaire: To explore the participants' attitudes towards the impact of applying awareness-raising activities on oral comprehension, a questionnaire was developed. The items followed Flowerdew's (1993) model on teaching genre and intended to check

students' awareness of different goals which participants follow in different contexts, how participants organize their communication to obtain the intended communicative goal in different contexts, the effects of knowing communicative goal on participants' expectations and comprehension, the necessity of doing awareness raising activities toward communicative goals and how they are formed in language learning courses. The rating of questions was based on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly agree to 3=disagree. The items of the questionnaire were cross-checked by two experts in terms of clarity and relatedness. The reliability estimated through Cronbach alpha (*a*) formula turned out to be 0. 64.

Student portfolio: The portfolio used in this study consisted of three checklists: students' log, students' task marking sheet, and teacher's task evaluation sheet. The three checklists, developed by the researchers, were judged by two experts for their appropriateness and their compatibility with course objectives and then were piloted with some participants. In the first session of the pilot study, the participants were given some explanations on how to use the checklists. Each student had two checklists. The first one was 'student's log'. It consisted of three parts. For the first part, the students were supposed to write the date they had done the activity. In the second part, they were asked to mention the problems they faced and in the last part they were asked to evaluate and score what they had done. If they had no problems dealing with generic structures, then they marked 'excellent'; if their problems were not very serious they marked 'good'; and if they were unable to deal with generic structures and they could not find them and understand them, they were supposed to mark ' I need more practice'. The second checklist was related to 'task marking sheet'. In this checklist, the generic structures were listed. The participants were supposed to practice them for six sessions. Here, again, they were asked to determine if they had done the activity successfully or not. For each generic structure, the students would mark 1 or 0; 1 meant they had no problem and 0 meant it was a complete failure or they had still serious problems. The third checklist was designed for the teacher in which she gave points to the learners. For each learner,

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the teacher had one 'teacher task marking sheet' similar to the 'student's task marking sheet'.

4.3 Materials

The materials used in this study were some pieces of news broadcast. The listening materials used in the experimental groups, that is, genre-based instruction group and portfolio assessment group, included written texts of news as well. The participants in the genre-based instruction group were given the written text each session following the generic structure instruction. The subjects in the portfolio assessment group were supposed to look for the written texts of news in the Internet, using *bbcnews.com*. The participants in the control group listened to the oral texts, which were selected and prepared by the researchers prior to the experiment.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

In order to investigate the probable effects of explicit teaching of generic structures of the genre of news and the use of portfolio assessment on the oral comprehension of the Iranian EFL listeners, in the first phase, the instruments necessary to collect data were constructed and pretested. During the experiment phase, based on Flowerdew's (1993) model, four generic features of the news genre were examined and discussed in the experimental groups. The features included verb tenses, common vocabularies, relationship between forms and functions, and organization of the materials. The classes met for six sessions, two sessions in a week and forty five minutes each session. The generic features were explicitly taught to the genre-based instruction group and the participants were required to find some further instances in the written texts of news which were given to them. As for the portfolio assessment group, the experiment started with explaining what portfolio is, the purposes it serves and how participants must use their portfolio checklists. All instructional procedures for the three groups were implemented by the second researcher, an English language teacher at the institute where the study was conducted.

More specifically, the following activities were carried out in the portfolio assessment group:

1. Studying and comparing some pieces of news in order to find the intended features in their portfolio assessment checklist before the class met. There was no explanation before their reports of their findings. The number of news tasks they read varied according to the activity they were asked to do, but for each activity, at least three pieces of news were completed.
2. Using student's log for each completed work as a self-assessment tool for monitoring their progress over time, and reflection about the challenges they faced.
3. Using student's task marking sheet to grade their own portfolio pieces based on the assessment criteria assigned.

Then, the teacher graded the students' portfolios according to the task evaluation sheet. Some samples of genre analysis utilized in the experimental groups are as follows:

- Analyzing verb tenses and organization of materials

For this part, the students analyzed the pieces of news. They were supposed to find verb tenses which are common in all pieces of news. Furthermore, they were asked to read one of the samples and understand how the information is organized. About the verb tenses, for example, they explained:

The most common verb tenses in political news are simple past and simple passive. Of course, sometimes present perfect tense is also used.

About the organization of the materials, they said that:

In all types of news, the description starts with a general picture and then the details are given which lose their importance towards the end of the text.

-Finding the relationship between form and function:

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In this part, the participants were asked to find reasons for using any of the tenses in each kind of news texts. For political news, for example, they explained:

In political news, simple past is generally used, since they are talking about the actions which happened in the past and finished or they use passive voice, since they do not want to reveal the person, organization or the group who were the source of news. In sports, they use present continuous, since sports events last for a period of time.

- Finding the related and commonly used vocabulary:
It was the most difficult part for most of the students, since they thought they had to find the meanings of the vocabularies. After three sessions, they suggested the following:

If the news, event itself is very important and attractive enough to attract people's attention, simple words would be used, but if the news event were not very important and attractive, they use those vocabularies that could attract more listeners and readers. The use of adverbs, especially adverbs of manner was more common in political news. In each type of news, a group of vocabularies was generally frequent.

The subjects in the control group used a more conventional approach modeled on the same genre. The instruction for the control group also lasted for six sessions. The instruction of listening comprehension followed a relatively consistent format based on Field's model (1998):

- Pre teaching of new vocabulary
- Extensive listening ⟶ questions about general context;
- Intensive listening ⟶ detailed questions;
- Examination of vocabulary or exponents of grammar;
- Use of play and repeat/play and predict/recall words.

(Field, 1998, p.110)

More detailed information about the routine instructional procedures for the control group is as follows:

1. Pre-teaching of vocabulary: during which the teacher wrote the new or difficult vocabularies on the board for the students and taught their meanings as well as their pronunciation.
2. The students were divided into groups and they were supposed to listen to the news two or three times and answer some general questions that appeared in multiple choice format. Sometimes, the groups exchanged their papers for peer correction.
3. Some detailed questions, which were already prepared by the researchers, were asked from the students.
4. After answering the detailed questions, the students were asked to use the newly learned words in sentences.
5. Finally, the news texts were played chunk by chunk while the students listened and repeated them. In some other cases, they were asked to paraphrase some selected sentences of the oral text. Sometimes, however, certain grammatical points such as word order, propositions, relative and adverbial clauses were taught to them as well.

    After the treatment, the participants in all groups took the listening comprehension test. The participants in the experimental groups completed the attitude questionnaire immediately after taking the test.

4.5 Data Analysis

Initially, descriptive analysis of the performances of the groups on the listening comprehension test as well as their attitudes regarding the usefulness of genre awareness-raising activities was completed. Then, t-tests were run to probe the corresponding null hypotheses.

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5. Results

5.1 Explicit Teaching of Generic Structures

To investigate the first research question which was concerned with the effects of explicit teaching of generic structures of the news on listening comprehension of EFL learners, an independent sample t-test was utilized to compare the means of the first experimental group and the control group. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Results of independent sample t-test for control group and genre-based instruction group

Sig(2-tailed)	df	T	sig	F	Mean differences	groups	Mean	N	Groups
0.271	60	1.11	.950	0.004	-0.73	2.4	13.17	28	Control group
						2.7	13.91	34	Genre-based instruction group

Based on the level of significance of t observed, which is greater than .05, the first null hypothesis was not rejected. That is, the independent variable, i.e., explicit teaching of generic structures of the genre news does not have any significant effect on the oral comprehension performance of participants on the genre of news.

5.2 Genre Awareness-raising through Portfolio

To probe the second research question which deals with the effects of portfolio procedures aimed at generic structures awareness on oral comprehension performance of EFL learners, an independent sample t-test was conducted on the differences between the mean score of the second experimental group and that of the control group. The results are reported in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results of independent sample t-test for the control group and the portfolio assessment group

Sig(2-tailed)	Df	T	sig	F	Mean differences	SD	Mean	N	Groups
0.918	61	.103	.961	0.002	0.64	2.4	13.17	28	Control group
						2.5	13.11	35	Portfolio assessment group

p<0.05

Again, the level of significance of t observed is greater than .05 which indicates that the corresponding null hypothesis is not rejected at .05. In other words, the use of portfolio assessment does not have any significant effect on the oral comprehension performance of Iranian EFL listeners.

5.3 Genre-based Explicit Instruction vs. Genre Awareness-raising through Portfolio Assessment Procedures

In order to compare the two modes of genre instruction (i.e. explicit teaching versus awareness-raising through portfolio assessment procedures), another independent sample t-test was conducted on the means of the first experimental group and that of the second experimental group. The results are depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Results of independent sample t-test for genre-based instruction group and portfolio assessment group

Sig (2tailed)	df	T	Sig	F	Mean difference	SD	Mean	N	groups
.210	67	1.266	.984	.000	.7975	2.7	13.9118	34	Genre-based instruction group
						2.5	13.1143	35	Portfolio assessment group

The level of significance of t observed, which is greater than .05, reveals that there is no significant difference between genre-

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based instruction and portfolio assessment with regard to the students' performances on listening comprehension of the news genre.

5.4 Analysis of Learners' Attitudes

The third research question addressed the experimental groups' attitudes towards the effectiveness of genre-based activities on learners' oral comprehension. A paired sample test was utilized to compare the differences between the two experimental groups' means of attitudes before and after the treatment. The t observed (T=2.36, df=68) indicates that, the corresponding null hypothesis can be safely rejected. This means that students significantly favored doing genre awareness-raising activities as an efficient means of enhancing their listening comprehension performance.

As Table 4 shows, there is a significant difference between experimental groups ' perceptions and their attitudes towards awareness-raising activities before and after the treatment.

Table 4. Results of paired sample t-test for experimental groups' attitudes before and after treatment

sig	Df	T	SD	Mean differences	Std	Mean	groups
* 0.021	68	2.36	4.93	-1.4	3.03	30.26	Pre attitude
					3.48	31.76	Post attitude

p<0.05

6. Discussion

Given the significant role of listening skill in developing language proficiency, listening skills should be taught to the learners and second/foreign language listeners should learn how to listen (Vandergrift, 2004). Celce-Murcia (1997) argues that "both top-down and bottom-up listening skills should be integrated and

explicitly treated pedagogically to improve L2 listening comprehension" (p.340). Vandergrift (2004) points out that listening comprehension construct involves some underlying cognitive processes which are integrated and interact with one another, and that the learners need to learn these processes. "Given the critical role of the listening in language learning, students need to 'learn to listen' so that they can better 'listen to learn'" (Vandergrift, 2004, p.3).

The present study investigated genre-based pedagogy and its implications for listening comprehension. More specifically, we explored if explicit teaching of generic structures of the genre of news or portfolio assessment approach to genre awareness-raising have any significant effect on comprehension performance of EFL listeners. We also examined the participants' attitudes towards effectiveness of genre awareness-raising activities. The results suggested that neither explicit teaching of generic structures nor the use of portfolio approach to genre awareness-raising had any significant effect on the oral comprehension of the participants. However, the analysis of the subjects' attitudes indicated that they favored doing awareness-raising activities as a means towards enhancing their listening comprehension.

The findings of the present study are not consistent with some empirical studies suggesting that genre-based approaches are useful for teaching second language skills including writing, reading, and listening. Using Swales' approach as a framework to analyzing lecture introduction, Thompson (1994) for example, found that "it is likely that increasing student's familiarity with and facility in using the framework provided by a lecture introduction can improve their ability to comprehend the rest of the lecture"(p. 184). Investigating the effect of ESP genre-based framework on writing instruction for the preparation of L2 graduate students for writing, Cheng (2008) found out genre as an explicit, supportive tool for building academic literacy.

Approaches to genre-based pedagogy emphasize two phases in doing genre- analysis: understanding and application (Cheng, 2008). The results of most of the empirical studies indicate that learners were successful in both aspects. Hyon (2001), for example, documented long-term positive effects of genre-based

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writing/reading instruction. It should be pointed out that these participants didn't face serious comprehension problems typical of the listeners studied by Goh (2002). Problems such as not recognizing words, that the listeners actually know, missing the beginning of the text, losing quickly what they heard are among the comprehension problems that listeners face in different phases of comprehension process. These are the problems that actually prevent listeners from application of higher order processing skills including knowledge of genre. Furthermore, listening to a genre is different from reading or writing a genre. While listening, the listeners have to listen to all words and sentences. Moreover, during reading and writing, the students have enough time to reflect on the meaning of what they are reading or writing, but listening is an online process which requires high speed in low level skills. This makes applying the knowledge of genre so difficult for the listeners, especially when they are not well-prepared for the listening at discourse level.

To sum up, one can conclude that to be a competent listener at discourse level, one should be a skilled listener. In other words, only skilled listeners who are not stopped at word level during listening, who know how to listen selectively, and who are able to look for key words which help comprehension, may take advantage of genre-based listening courses. The participants in this study could not apply what they had learned during genre treatment sessions to their listening comprehension process because of the above-mentioned problems. They actually did not develop an ear for listening at discourse level. This implies that listening skills must be taught in all levels, so that the listeners get ready for listening at discourse level. Moreover, the duration of the experiment in this study was only six sessions. It seems that more focused sessions are needed to practice listening to the oral texts after awareness-raising activities have been accomplished, especially when the listeners are not well-prepared for listening at discourse level.

Regarding the use of portfolio assessment, no significant effect on the listening comprehension of the learners was found in this study. However, based on the results obtained from analysis of the teacher's task evaluation sheet, portfolio contributed well in

developing awareness of what is involved in learning a competence (Christiansen & Laplante, 2004) which was the knowledge of genre in the case of the present study. This is compatible with the results of the empirical studies that already found the use of portfolio a useful tool for pedagogical and evaluative purposes. Stecher's finding (1998) also supports the previous literature on the use of portfolio. Delett et al. (2001) offered a framework to foreign language teachers through which they can systematically design and implement portfolios in their courses. The framework they offered helped the teachers conduct further research on the use of portfolio assessment in their own situations and classrooms. The results of this study also emphasize the use of portfolio as a tool that creates an interactive assessment involving both teachers and learners in the learning process. Similarly, using portfolio as a tool for strategy training, Yang (2003) found that portfolios facilitate students' learning and autonomy. After a one-year practice of portfolio in EFL classrooms, Nunes (2004) found that portfolio assessment contributed to a greater student involvement in the teaching-learning process.

7. Conclusion

The present study was implemented to investigate if genre-based pedagogy can significantly improve oral comprehension of the genre of news by EFL learners. The second purpose of the study was to probe if portfolio assessment has any significant impact on raising listeners' awareness of the generic structures of the genre of news, which in turn may help their overall comprehension of this genre. The analysis of the data indicated that explicit teaching of the generic structures of the genre of news did not have any significant effect on the oral comprehension of Iranian EFL listeners. Moreover, we found that the use of portfolio assessment did not have any significant impact on the oral comprehension performance of the participants. However, the subjects reported that they developed an awareness of knowledge of genre through using portfolio assessment. Furthermore, the analysis of the experimental subjects' perceptions as elicited through pre and post attitude questionnaires indicated that the participants favored doing genre

awareness-raising activities. It may be concluded that only skilled listeners can benefit from genre-based pedagogy and portfolio assessment. Further research may take up developing process-based approaches to genre-based instruction of listening comprehension for less skilled learners.

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