
**Improving Listening Skills through Teaching
Intrusive /r/ and Linking /r /**

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Abstract

English language teaching does not mean teaching of rules of English grammar only with the teacher playing the role of an authority and students participating in a very passive manner. Teaching of English involves a lot more since language means its active use for the sake of communication and not a skill to be exhibited only on the day of examination. It must focus on other language skills too with students actively participating like the teacher. Looking at these four major skills, one realizes that listening is perhaps the most difficult one. What make it so difficult are fluency devices. These are weak forms, assimilation, elision and linking. Where these devices help native speakers in terms of execution and delivery, they surely trouble foreign learners in terms of perception and comprehension. With the same idea in mind, the present research was carried out in the department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. It was conducted at Diploma level where listening is taught along with other language skills. This is an experimental study in which the researchers investigated the effectiveness of teaching intrusive / r / and linking / r / to improve listening skills of Pakistani learners of English language. An experimental group, which consisted of 30 participants, was given treatment for six weeks by manipulating independent variable. Control group with same strength was given a traditional training with the help of a variety of recorded texts taken from different sources. Both the groups were post tested and it was observed that experimental group outperformed the control group. The study suggests that foreign learners of English can improve faster and perform better in listening skills if they are taught listening comprehension by focusing on the sounds of English which cause problems in connected speech thus affecting the perception of foreign learners badly.

Key words: listening comprehension, foreign language teaching, Pakistani learners, intrusive / r / , linking / r / , National University of Modern Languages.

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching in nonnative areas is done for different reasons and the goal of teaching this language according to De Houwer & Wilton (2011: 143) is "successful communication with native speakers". In order to ensure the successful communication, the teachers in nonnative areas need to make their learners familiar with fluency enhancing factors used by native speakers such as assimilation, elision, linking and weak forms. The use of these features by the English is very frequent and can be easily observed all around us. It is believed that economy of effort is the chief reason behind the use of fluency devices. Therefore, native speakers of English use them for smoother and faster speech in day to day communication. However, they cause intelligibility problem for the nonnative learners when they are exposed to a native like speech. One way to reduce this intelligibility gap is to intensively attune the ears of the learners to the native model. It is possible if the learners are taught listening skills with the help of fluency devices. The present study focuses on intrusive / r / and linking / r / to remove the stumbling blocks on the way of foreign language learners which cause difficulty in understanding the native speech in a better way.

1.1 Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To enhance the listening skills of English language learners.
2. To highlight the importance of intrusive / r / and linking / r / in listening skills.
3. To see how far the teaching of listening skills with the help of fluency devices is useful.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

English language learners of nonnative areas have intelligibility problem, especially when they are exposed to native or native-like speech due to fluency devices such as intrusive / r / and linking / r / used by native speakers for articulatory reasons. However, teaching of such devices can improve the listening comprehension of foreign learners of English. The present study aims at teaching listening comprehension to Pakistani learners of English with the help of intrusive and linking / r /.

1.3 Hypothesis

Listening comprehension of English language learners can be enhanced if they are taught these skills by focusing on intrusive / r / and linking / r /.

1.4 Sampling/population

The researchers selected the sample through a simple random sampling technique. This sample consisted of 60 students out of total population of 200 male members with ages between 20 and 22. The study sample was once again divided into control group and experimental group each consisting of 30 members. The members of the sample shared the same level of proficiency in English language. It was so because they had to pass through two different stages at the time of admission. Firstly, they had to take a written test of 40 marks and 1 hour time duration. Those who passed the test by scoring at least 50 percent marks were supposed to appear in an interview conducted by at least two experienced and qualified language teachers in the department. Those candidates who proved their worth to be placed at this level were offered admission. Those who were weaker were either refused admission or offered admission to lower levels (Certificate and Foundation) offered by the department.

1.5 Research tools

To collect the data for the present study and to test hypothesis the following research tools were administered.

- i- Pretest
- ii- Posttest

The rationale behind conducting the pretest was to determine the level of the participants and to ensure that they had the same level of competence in listening skills. The treatment was given to

the experimental group by manipulating the independent variable which was followed by a posttest. The rationale behind conducting posttest was to provide comparison between posttest of experimental and posttest of control group. The hypothesis was justified with the help of this comparison.

The researchers made use of pretest and posttest as tools for the present study. These tests were modeled on different language tests used by NUML teachers for the same purpose. The collection of accurate data also reinforced the reliability of the tests.

1.6 Significance of the present study

This research study is an attempt to teach listening comprehension with a different mode. It is in fact, a mode where listening skill has been further narrowed down by focusing on one of its micro components: linking. This attempt will hopefully help in understanding the right concept of native speech with its various components. It will also develop an understanding of the problems that pose a great deal of difficulty in the correct reception of the message though at surface level these problems may not appear so crucial to meaning making and understanding of the message.

1.7 Delimitations

The fluency devices used by native speakers include assimilation, elision, weak forms, and intrusive / r / and linking / r / but the present study is delimited to teaching of intrusive / r / and linking / r /. This research was conducted in the Department of English Functional Courses at National University of Modern Language, Islamabad. 60 students studying at Diploma were selected for this study.

Literature Review

In English there are a number of phenomena that are exploited by the native speakers to make their connected speech more fluent and rapid. Among these phenomena the most important one is fluency devices. These fluency devices help native speakers of English in executing speech in an easier and trouble-free manner. It is sort of an escape from those sounds which are hard to pronounce in connected speech. According to Kelly (2006: 108) the chief reason behind the use of fluency devices is "economy of effort". All these factors are employed mainly for articulatory reasons. Under such treatment, words and phrases are made easier to execute either by altering the articulatory route or by shortening it. This sort of activity makes muscular activity less rigorous. Amazingly, such an ease of articulation is achieved either by dropping phonological material, like in elision or clipping, or by adding phonological material like in the case of / r / sound. The main focus of this research was on the second type of connected speech.

According to Skandera & Burleigh (2011: 63), "There are two types of r-sound used to link words in connected speech: the linking r and the intrusive r. The linking occurs between two words. The final sound in the first word is a schwa or any of the back vowels...The intrusive / r / occurs in exactly the same phonetic context."

Though their use by the native speaker is very frequent, these features in connected speech do not alter meaning. Chi Che (2010: 74) believes that "They are simply features of euphony in articulation." Whereas such devices help the native speakers to make their speech more fluent, they have the tendency to become barriers to communication for non-native learners of the language because they can affect their intelligibility. According to De Houwer & Wilton (2011:143), "by and large 'intelligibility' is taken to mean being intelligible to native speakers and being able to understand native speakers"

To understand native speakers, listening skills need to be developed and for this Guffey & Loewy (2010:11, 12) suggest that "we must first recognize barriers that prevent effective listening. Then we need to focus on specific techniques that are effective in improving listening skills". As the

present study hypothesizes that liking and intrusive /r/ can improve listening of native speakers, is it important to explain these features in some detail.

2.1 Linking / r /

The variety of British English used for ELT purposes and by the BBC, labeled as RP (Received Pronunciation) is non-rhotic. Pronunciation of /r/ sound in this variety of English is conditional. It is pronounced initially. It is also pronounced medially if followed by a vowel sound, e.g. 'graph' / gra:f /. It is always dropped finally e.g. 'car' /ka:/ but if the following word begins with a vowel sound, / r / sound will be pronounced e.g. 'his car is parked' //hiz ka:r lz pa:kt//.

This phenomenon is called linking /r/. Trask (1997) explains the notion of linking in the following words: "In non-rhotic accents of English, the /r/ which surfaces before a following vowel in words which have lost their historical final /r/ in isolation".

Just like linking /r/, speakers of English very commonly use intrusive /r/. This type of linking can be noticed by carefully listening to native speakers.

2.2 Intrusive / r /

It is a very interesting phonological feature of English language. This phenomenon can be noticed in the speech of native speakers by close observation. Intrusive /r/ does not have any orthographic status. It is merely the part of connected speech. Such /r/ sound intrudes between two vowel sounds. Trask (1997) explains it as, "A non-historical / r / which, in certain non-rhotic accents of English, appears between vowels in certain circumstances: /law{r} ing".

The main purpose behind the use of linking and intrusive / r / is to make speech faster by making it smoother in terms of articulation. This smoothness is achieved by filling up the vacuums in the speech with the help of a phonological material (in the form of / r / sound).

In the end the researchers would reinforce the idea of teaching fluency devices to improve listening skills of language learners in nonnative areas because in nonnative areas as De Houwer & Wilton(2011) claims that "The teachers are expected to help their learners cope with "real English", which is taken to be the English used by native speakers in their speech communities" (p.143)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research under view follows quantitative research methodology and experimental style as a general design. The researchers carried out this experimental research by selecting a group of 60 students studying at English diploma level at National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad. The study was conducted during Jan-Jun semester, 2010. These students were divided into two groups each group consisting of 30 students. The first group, that is, the experimental group was given treatment though independent variable (teaching of intrusive / r / and linking /r/), whereas group two, the control group was given usual training for six weeks. Both groups were given a pre-test before the treatment and the results show that both of them showed almost same performance in their listening skills. After the treatment phase, both the groups were given a posttest. Analysis of the result is given in data analysis section that follows.

DATA ANALYSIS

This part gives a detailed view of the outcome of the present study. As discussed in the previous section that both groups were given pre-test and post-test, the analysis was made of the data collected through these tools. Tables show the results drawn from pre-test and post-test. The students were taught the listening skills with the help of linking and intrusive / r / for six weeks before they were given a posttest. Then the comparison between the results of experimental group with the control group was made in order to draw the findings and conclusion.

4.1 Pre-test: Control and Experimental Group

A pre-test was designed for both the groups in order to judge that both the groups had same level of listening comprehension.

4.1.2 Comparison between the Pre-test of Control Group and Pre-test of Experimental Group

For the comparison between results of pre-test of both of the groups, T-Test is applied and for that the following null hypothesis is established.

Ho, $\mu_1 = \mu_2$ (both the groups are same)

H1, $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ (both the groups are not same)

$$T = \frac{19.75 - 20.3}{5.3997(.3162)} = -0.22$$

Mean(Control Group)	19.75
S.D (Control Group)	4.00
Mean(Experimental group)	20.3
S.D(Experimental group)	4.75
T-value	-0.22

As the t-value -0.22, given in row five column two of the table given above, does not fall in the critical region which is either more than 0.5 or less than -0.5, we cannot reject our null hypothesis (Ho, $\mu_1 = \mu_2$). In other words the result of the pre-test of control and the pre-test of experimental group shows that both the groups are same. If manipulation of independent variable during the treatment phase of experimental group creates the difference in posttest, the researchers' hypothesis is justified.

4.2 Post-tests: Control and Experimental Groups

After six weeks of treatment given to experimental group in which the researchers manipulated independent variable, both the groups were given a post-test in order to judge the differences which were expected in the performance of the participants of the groups. A comparison is presented in the form of a table in the following section.

4.2.1 Comparison between Post-tests of Control and Experimental Groups

This comparison between the post-test results of control and experimental group is required to justify our hypothesis. As the experimental group was given proper treatment for six weeks and the control group was not exposed to any special treatment, so this comparison will now clearly show the effectiveness of the treatment given to the experimental group. Before the analysis of the table the following null hypothesis is established.

Ho, $\mu_1 = \mu_2$ (there is no significant difference between the results of post-test of control group and post- test of experimental group)

H1, $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ (there is a significant difference between the results of the post-test of control group and post- test of experimental group)

$$T = \frac{25.95 - 34.85}{4.11 (0.3162)} = -6.85$$

Mean(Control Group)	25.95
S.D (Control Group)	4.11
Mean(Experimental group)	34.85
S.D(Experimental group)	4.20
T-value	-6.85

The t-value, that is, -6.85, as given in row five, column two of the table given above, falls in the critical region which is either more than 0.5 or less than -0.5, we can reject our null hypothesis and accept alternative hypothesis. In other words, the result of control group and experimental group in the posttest is not same. Moreover, this difference in the performance justifies the researchers' hypothesis as well. If the mean of both the groups is taken into consideration, it is found that experimental group has shown better performance in the posttest. Mean of control group is 25.95 and that of experimental group is 34.85. As before the treatment both the groups were the same, it is concluded that the improvement is brought about by the treatment given through independent variable. Moreover, this improvement justifies our hypothesis as well.

5.1 Findings

1. Teaching of intrusive and linking /r/ improves listening comprehension of English language learners.
2. The participants of experimental group were more confident after the treatment phase as they were sure that they would not be having intelligibility problem if they were made to listen to a native speech.
3. During the treatment phase, the participants of experimental group were found more motivated and participative.

5.2 Suggestions and Recommendations

In present study the researchers selected two of the English fluency devices: intrusive and linking /r/ which proved to be fruitful as they could enhance listening skills of the participants. Further study is suggested on fluency devices such as assimilation elision, and weak forms to enhance listening comprehension of the learners. The teachers teaching listening skills are suggested to teach the learners the fluency devices to enhance the listening comprehension of their learners.

Conclusion

The comparison of the results of both of the groups has justified the researchers' hypothesis that listening skills of nonnative learners of the language can be improved by teaching and practicing the fluency devices such as intrusive and linking /r/ used in native speech. The results in the posttest show that the teaching listening skills from such an angle is very useful. As a matter of fact, human speech is not composed of just one phonological organism. It is a combination of so many components. These components are sounds, their combinations, letters and interplay between/among these letters. They become very hard to cope with in case of a language which employs a number of fluency tools. English is one such language which offers all such stuff to its foreign learners, making language learning task quite hard and frustrating. So, it is important to understand each component in order to understand speech as a whole.

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