The Impact of Knowledge Background on Listening Comprehension among Iranian EFL Learners: A Vygotskyan Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Vygotsky's concept of "scaffolding"(1978), which is defined by him as helping the learners to process the information, has significantly contributed to improvement of the three language skills of speaking, writing, and reading comprehension and particularly the two latter ones (writing and reading) among the EFL learners (Brown, 2000). It is while the effect of scaffolding on listening comprehension skill has been studied by very few studies. This study aims to investigate the possible effects of giving the related background such as telling the stories and experiences similar to the ones included in the listening materials on the listening comprehension skill among 60 upper-intermediate level students through an experimental method in an English language institute in Rafsanjan. The participants were chosen through matched cases method and 30 members were assigned to each of the control group and experimental group. The instruments used in this study were two listening comprehension tests. One of these tests was used before the investigation to recognize the listening level of each student. The other test which was different from the first one in content was given to both groups after the treatment to see if this treatment has any impact on the facilitating the participants' processing of listening materials. The results of the t-test for independent samples showed the experimental group who was provided with such as related questions, experiences, stories and discussion before listening to the test materials got higher test scores in the post-test than the control group that wasn't provided with any knowledge background.

Keywords: Vygotsky, scaffolding, listening comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

As Vygotsky (1978) contends in his sociocultural theory, the information processing could be facilitated by helping the learners in this process. The results of many researches have revealed that this phenomenon which is called scaffolding by Vygotsky has significantly contributed to improvement of the three language skills of speaking, writing, and reading comprehension and particularly the two latter ones (writing and reading) among the EFL learners. However, the effect of scaffolding on listening comprehension skill has been studied by very few studies.

For EFL students, listening comprehension is often a so difficult and challenging skill to learn (Huang, 2005, as cited in Qiu, 2012). The new content and the unfamiliar/lack of background can be one of the causes of these difficulties. The other reason could be the lack of appropriate and effective learning strategies or skills. Therefore, seeking the ways which could help EFL students improve their listening comprehension proficiency, is of high importance in this field and could have valuable educational implications.

The assumption of giving related background and information to the learners to help them increase the comprehension of texts or listening materials is also in accordance with what Ausubel (1968) proposed as theory of meaningful learning. According to this theory, if the new information is not related or familiar to the already existing cognitive concepts or proposition in the knowledge structure of the learner, meaningful learning would not happen. Also, among the two conditions that this theory considers as necessary for learning situation to be meaningful is that the learning task must be relatable to the learners' structure of knowledge.

The role of teachers and peers as facilitators and/or mediators in learning all language components and skills is also emphasized in the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is at the heart of the concept of scaffolding (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Giving background to the students and reminding them of the strategies which may help them in a task or activity in the class could be one of the tools that teachers may utilize to help them do the information processing required for a skill.