

Is Seeing a Part of Listening: Opinions of ESL Teachers

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Abstract

The dilemma as to whether interpreting visual information is part of the listening skill has been the focus of previous qualitative research, which mainly explored second language (L2) learners' opinions on the effect of videos on comprehension in L2 listening tests (e.g., Cubilo & Winke, 2013; Suvorov, 2009; Wagner, 2010b). However, the research into the related perceptions of L2 teachers has been extremely scarce. This study attempted to reduce this scarcity by surveying the opinions of 42 teachers of English as a second language (ESL) and a foreign language (EFL) about the role of visuals in the listening comprehension construct. For this, the questionnaire was developed and administered online. The results showed that, regardless of the amount of L2 teaching experience, educational level (Master's vs. PhD), and the degree of familiarity with the listening construct, the teachers considered interpreting visuals to be a construct-relevant factor. Also, visuals in general as well as of each type (context vs. context) were perceived as decreasing listening difficulty. Finally, as judged by the teachers, motivation and authenticity benefit from the presence of visuals. The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for re-defining L2 listening as a visual-inclusive skill.

Is Seeing a Part of Listening: Opinions of ESL Teachers

The place of interpreting visual information in the listening construct has been a topic of debate among researchers. Researchers have mostly tried to justify the inclusion of visuals into the construct by comparing L2 listeners' comprehension of visually enhanced and visual-free listening messages (e.g., Batty, 2015; Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005; Suvorov, 2009), with mixed results. Also, some studies investigated test takers' perceptions of visuals during listening tests (e.g., Progosh, 1996; Wagner, 2010a). On the most part, visuals were found to be motivating and helpful for comprehension. However, there are no studies that would look into the opinions of L2 teachers about the role of visual information in the listening comprehension construct. Such opinions may reflect knowledge of TLU situations, which is one of the two fundamental prerequisites of defining a listening construct (Buck, 2001), and, thus, bring additional arguments for or against the inclusion of visuals in the construct. Generally, it is this gap that motivated the present study.

The study aimed at investigating ESL and EFL teachers' opinions about: (a) whether the listening construct includes the ability to process visual information; (b) how viewing visuals affect listening difficulty, authenticity, and listeners' motivation; (c) whether teachers estimate the effects of context vs. content visuals on listening difficulty differently.

This study was governed by the following research questions:

1. How does the degree to which ESL/EFL teachers agree that interpreting visual information is part of the listening comprehension construct relate to teachers' background?

2. How do ESL/EFL teachers' opinions about the effects of viewing visuals on listening comprehension (i.e., difficulty, authenticity, and motivation) relate to teachers' background?
3. How do ESL/EFL teachers estimate the impact of context versus content visuals on listening comprehension difficulty?

Methods

Participants

Thirteen ESL teachers working in an intensive English program at a southwestern American university have been invited to take an online questionnaire. As well, 257 people on the email list of the graduate students in Teaching English as a Second language and Applied Linguistics (TESL/AL) program in the same university received online invitations. The list consisted of emails of current as well as former students in the program. Out of 270 potential respondents overall, 49 agreed to participate, and 42 actually took the questionnaire, setting the response rate at 15.6%.

The 42 participants in the study were a mixture of former, current, or future ESL or EFL teachers who earned or were working towards their Master's or Ph.D. degrees in TESL/AL. Twenty-six respondents (61.9%) reported having or pursuing a Master's degree while the remaining 16 (38.1%) were involved with a doctoral degree. The majority of respondents had taught L2 or worked in a closely related area for 5-10 years (42.86%) and 3-5 years (30.95%). Other respondents had 0-2 years (7.14%), 11-15 years (4.76%), 16-20 years (11.9%), and more than 20 years (2.38%) of L2 teaching experience. Most participants (95%) considered themselves familiar with the construct of listening comprehension and its constituents. The respondents were both native and non-native English speakers.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to elicit participants' opinions on the following five areas of interest – the place of visuals in the listening comprehension construct, effects of visuals on listening comprehension, motivation, and authenticity, effects of context visuals on listening comprehension, and effects of content visuals on listening comprehension. Accordingly, six multi-item scales were developed, each scale containing items about the corresponding content area (see Table 1 below). Items were written in English in the form of statements and asked respondents to express the degree of their agreement with the statements. For this, a classical Likert scale (1 – Strongly Disagree; 5 – “Strongly Agree”) and a semantic differential scale were used (1 – Strongly Disagree; 7 – Strongly Agree”). In addition, the questionnaire ended with four multiple-choice items eliciting background information (i.e., L2 teaching experience, education level, familiarity with the listening construct and the place of visuals in it). The questionnaire can be found under the following link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GFC76BM>.

As the present study was the final pilot-test of the questionnaire (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2009), the reliability analysis was run to identify problematic items, which were then deleted from the subsequent analyses. In turn, it boosted the reliability of some scales (see Table 1).

Table 1

Reliability Statistics for the Questionnaire Items

#	Multi-item scale (content area)	Item type	Initial number of items	Items deleted	Final number of items	Initial reliability	Final reliability
1	Place of visuals in the construct	Likert	7	0	7	0.90	0.90
2	Effects on LCD	Likert	7	0	7	0.80	0.80
3	Effects on motivation	Likert	5	0	5	0.76	0.76
4	Effects on authenticity	Likert	4	1 (# 1.10)	3	0.29	0.50
5	Context visuals: Effects on LCD	Semantic differential	5	0	5	0.70	0.70
6	Content visuals: Effects on LCD	Semantic differential	5	1 (# 3.2)	4	0.72	0.80
	Background info	Multiple-choice	4	-	4	-	-
	Overall		39		37	0.93	0.93

Note: LCD = Listening Comprehension Difficulty

Data Collection

After obtaining an approval from the Institutional Review Board, the questionnaire was administered online via Survey Monkey. Potential respondents were sent emails with the invitation to participate and the link to the questionnaire. After about two weeks, a reminder was emailed. The questionnaire was open for 20 days and required less than 15 minutes to complete.

Results

Before running inferential statistical analyses for each RQ, the data were analyzed descriptively. Table 3 presents the following information for each of the six subconstructs: sample size, mean, standard deviation, and minimum and maximum values. Looking at the table, we can see that, on average, the respondents had positive attitudes towards the inclusion of visuals in the listening construct ($M = 3.47$; $SD = 0.74$). The respondents also agreed that the presence of visuals decreased listening comprehension difficulty ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 0.57$), and increased authenticity ($M = 3.60$; $SD = 0.61$) and listeners' motivation ($M = 3.91$; $SD = 0.51$). Similarly, the means of 5.21 and 5.18 out of 7 possible points showed that context and content visuals were perceived as having a strong facilitative effect on listening comprehension.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Each Subconstruct in the Study

Subconstruct	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> (max possible)	<i>SD</i>	min	max
Place of visuals in the construct	42	3.47 (5)	0.74	1.43	5.00
Effects on LCD	42	3.56 (5)	0.57	2.43	4.86
Effects on motivation	42	3.91 (5)	0.51	2.40	5.00
Effects on authenticity	42	3.60 (5)	0.61	2.33	5.00
Context visuals: Effects on LCD	42	5.21 (7)	0.88	3.40	7.00
Content visuals: Effects on LCD	41	5.18 (7)	0.99	2.50	7.00

No statistically significant relationships were found between the teachers' opinions about each of the subconstructs in Table 3 and their background (i.e., L2 teaching experience,

familiarity with the construct and the role of visuals in it). Similarly, teachers' involvement with the master's versus the doctoral degree did not affect their opinions. Finally, there was no difference in how teachers perceived the effects of context versus content visuals on listening comprehension difficulty.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Regardless of their background and familiarity with the construct and the role of visuals in the listening skill, the teachers agreed that interpreting visual information is a part of the listening construct. In other words, listening was consistently perceived as a visual as well as an auditory act. This finding is unique in the sense that it sheds new light on how L2 teachers define the listening skill. The teacher's concession to having a visual-inclusive definition supports the growing tendency to refine the listening construct by including processing visual information (e.g., Ockey, 2007; Suvorov, 2014; Wagner, 2007) and challenges the opposite view found in some scholarly groundwork (e.g., Buck, 2001; Lado, 1961).

The teachers' positive attitudes about including visuals were further revealed through their opinions about the effects visuals have on listening difficulty, listener's motivation, and authenticity of a listening situation. Generally, the teachers expressed their agreement that the presence of visual information in a listening setting decrease listening comprehension difficulty but increase motivation and authenticity. These judgments were not dependent on teachers' background. The teachers also reported that the presence of context versus content visuals could equally diminish listening difficulty.

The finding of this study may be taken as a new piece of evidence proving that processing visuals and the listening skill are related and interdependent, conjuring up their affiliation with the same construct. The credibility of this piece is magnified by the fact that it

came from the opinions of educated and experienced L2 teachers familiar with the construct and its constituents. Moreover, this evidence is one-of-a-kind, as no other empirical studies have looked into the professional judgment about the visual nature of the listening skill. It is believed that the newly enriched knowledge will be more able to move the field of L2 listening assessment towards defining and operationalizing L2 listening as a visual-inclusive skill.

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