

Fostering Economics Students' Listening Skills through Self-Regulated Learning

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This study aims at fostering students' listening skills by scaffolding their self-study learning practices in the English for Special Purposes (ESP) course. While there is a significant body of research exploring classroom-based teaching approaches, there is little empirical research into how students develop their ESP listening skills outside the classroom. Our study suggests that developing a self-regulated model for acquiring ESP listening skills in a self-study mode is an efficient way to improve students' performance as it provides them with relevant scaffolding and makes the listening process more transparent. The article provides theoretical grounding for the self-study model. The entry-level and post-study tests in listening scores (IELTS test) are compared across the control and the experimental groups (60 students in total). The results of the study indicate that students who were developing their listening skills in a self-study mode via the designed scaffolding performed significantly better than their peers in the control group. Scaffolding self-study listening practices of students outside the classroom prove to be a significant factor in facilitating English learning in an ESP classroom.

Keywords: listening skills, study skills, self-regulated learning, scaffolding, ESP classroom, staged activity, meaning making

The effectiveness of students' performance within the field of higher education is significantly determined by their ability to study efficiently. Lectures are increasingly delivered in English, making good listening skills in English one of the major prerequisites for the successful completion of studies. While doing their degree in a discipline, students are expected to read a wide variety of English-medium printed texts and to regularly listen to English-medium speeches (lectures, seminars, discussions, presentations). Using real-life professional English listening resources (e.g., economist.com, BBCs economic news, etc.) has become crucial for building students' professional knowledge.

Yet, the traditional English as Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogical approach to teaching listening via

pre-, while- and after-listening activities is aimed at checking listening comprehension rather than systematically contributing to students' knowledge-building and involving them in meaning-making around the issues raised in an audio text. For instance, a traditional set of listening comprehension tasks includes true/false questions, gap filling and other tasks, which are not creative.

A limited pedagogical focus on listening comprehension results in the fact that at the B2+ CEFR level, students may experience a lack of motivation as their need for meeting challenges is not fulfilled with a traditional set of listening tasks where there is the testing comprehension skills focus.

Finally, there has been a significant reduction

of the amount of the classroom-based EFL learning within higher education in Russia overall. As a result, classroom-based study mode provides little space for the development of listening skills (Stone, Lightbody & Whait, 2013). Limited time available for fostering students' listening skills and face-to-face interaction (Parker, 2011) is partly the result of the global tendency to run larger classes and introduce a greater number of professional subjects in higher education.

In this context, it is necessary to develop pedagogical approaches that may counter these difficulties via a self-study mode. The article assumes that developing a (SRL) learning model may foster learning skills in professional contexts within a life-long perspective. The article first foregrounds listening as a staged and a complex phenomenon and then highlights the importance of developing listening skills in a self-regulated mode. This is followed by the self-study model for fostering listening skills of students and the results of the experimental study are shown. Finally, the author concludes with pedagogical implications relevant for EFL teaching of listening skills.

Materials

Theoretical Background

Listening is regarded as a soft skill employability factor and even as an "indispensable attribute" to effective practice in a profession (Stone, Lightbody, & Whait, 2013). Listening is pivotal to learning as well as enhancing students' future employment opportunities.

It was commonly assumed that listening was a reflex ('a little like breathing') and listening seldom received overt teaching attention in one's native language (Morley, 1972). In the 1970s the works by Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and later Krashen, brought attention to the role of listening as a tool for understanding and a key factor in facilitating language learning (Feyten, 1991). Listening has emerged as an important component of second language acquisition (Feyten, 1991). For instance, Rivers (1966) states that speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is said is comprehended by another person. Teaching the comprehension of spoken speech (i.e. listening) is, therefore, of primary importance for the communication aim that is to be reached.

The teaching of listening has attracted a greater level of interest in recent years; yet, Morley (1991) claims that listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and language acquisition.

Although once perceived as a passive skill, listening is very much an active process of selecting

and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues (Richards, 1983). Rivers (1981) states that listening is a crucial element in the competent language performance of second language learners, whether they are communicating at school, work or in the community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and 4 to 5 times as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). Brown & Yule (1983) stress that listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message, and any visual support that accompanies the message (Brown & Yule, 1983).

While teaching graduate students listening, it is important to understand that normally three skills are to be employed: speaking (as a way of sharing ideas), writing (taking lecture notes, presenting an opinion in a written mode) and further reading on the topic. Whenever time permits, it is desirable that the final outcome of all the previous stages in listening acquisition should be the exchange of opinion, students' attitudes and discussion. Thus, the so-called pure listening is practically never possible, as while listening students make observations, speak, write and share information.

Listening is an invisible process, making it difficult to describe (Wipf, 1984). Listeners must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intention, retain and interpret it within the immediate as well as the larger socio-cultural context of an utterance. In general, there are various approaches that shed light on the invisible process of listening. For example, Rost (2012) defines listening in a broader sense, as a process of:

- receiving what the speaker actually says (receptive orientation);
- constructing and representing meaning (constructive orientation);
- negotiating meaning with the speaker and responding (collaborative orientation);
- creating meaning through involvement, imagination and empathy (transformative orientation).

Nunan (2001), when analyzing the process of listening, differentiates six stages: hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding. For tertiary education, the last four stages (understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding) are the most important. According to Nunan (2001), understanding consists of analyzing the meaning of what we have heard and understanding the symbols we have seen and heard. We must analyze the stimuli we have perceived. Symbolic stimuli are not only words, they can also be a picture, a diagram,

a map, the lecturer's body language and other signs. To do this, the listeners have to be in the right context and understand the intended meaning. The meaning attached to these symbols is a function of past associations and of the context in which the symbols occur for successful communication: the listener must understand the intended meaning and the context assumed by the sender. Remembering means that in addition to receiving and interpreting the message, the listener has added it to his mind's storage bank. At the evaluating stage, the listener evaluates the message that has been received. At this point, active listeners weigh evidence, sort fact from opinion and determine the presence or absence of bias or prejudice in a message.

Self-Regulated Learning as a Way to Develop Listening Skills

In general, SRL has been substantially studied in the field of educational psychology (Paris & Paris, 2001) and incorporates meta-cognitive, motivational, socio-cultural, and behavioral approaches (Zimmerman, 1989). Yet, the notions of self-regulation and SRL have no clear definition due to their multidimensional nature (Dörnyei, 2005; Pintrich, 2000). Most commonly used terms are self-directed learning, personalized learning, autonomous learning, self-planned learning, and self-education.

Despite the diversity of definitions and terminology used by different researchers, it is commonly agreed that SRL is an essential component of any learning process, which should be taken into account by both teachers and students (Paris & Paris, 2001; Zimmerman, 2008).

There are four main SRL features inherent to most of the definitions. According to Zimmerman (1989), self-regulated learners possess meta-cognitive strategies. Thus students are able to plan and self-control their learning activities. Meta-cognitive strategies are crucial to the development of self-regulated acquisition of listening skills (Vandergrift, 1999). Students develop listening skills much better than their counterparts when they know how to develop an awareness of the process of one-way listening. Vandergrift (1999) introduces a pedagogical sequence that can help develop this awareness: 1) planning for the successful completion of a listening task; 2) monitoring comprehension during a listening task; 3) evaluating the approach and outcomes of a listening task.

Motivation is the second key factor in achieving high academic performance and reflects learners' abilities to initiate and persist in learning (Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 1989). The third component

is learners' behavior in terms of developing their learning environment, managing and adapting it to their current needs. Finally, reflection as a cognitive strategy is essential for self-regulated acquiring and processing of new information (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990).

Motivational factors have been analyzed in a number of studies. These studies have demonstrated that SRL skills are ineffective without sufficient intrinsic motivation, as one of the important aspects of SRL learning strategies is a choice (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Thus high self-efficacy, as one of the key motivational factors, fosters self-regulation and more effective self-regulation promotes self-efficacy.

According to Baranovskaya (2015), self-control, self-esteem and motivation affect students' learning behavior, which has been supported by empirical research. Ample evidence proves that self-control, motivation and self-esteem elevate student communicative competence. Self-regulation skills that were developed during the specially designed course positively influenced students' language acquisition.

A self-regulated model for fostering listening skills

In designing a self-regulated model for fostering listening skills, the key aim is to make the complex process of listening visible to students and scaffold their listening skills acquisition. Self-regulation can be thought of as a cyclical process or as a continuum (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). This helps to construct an SRL-based model and apply it to the process of learning by defining learning activities at each stage of listening and at particular moments during the course of a study. In the model (Appendix A), the self-regulated learning cycle is applied. It relates to the social-cognitive perspective formulated by Bandura (1986) and features a number of distinct phases, namely, planning, monitoring, and reflections on academic performance (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000).

Another feature of the developed model is that this model represents the active and staged nature of listening as a process. The listening process is active and it means that within the self-study mode of learning, we increase students' involvement in the process at various stages (pre/while/post listening stages) as well as key stages of understanding, remembering, evaluating and responding (Nuan, 2001) (see Appendix A). Overall, the experimental model addresses the complex nature of listening by anticipating and guiding students through a set of complexities as well as provides them with advice on how to overcome them. Finally, the model actively involves EFL speaking, writing, and reading modes that support listening skills development.

Methods

The study aims to facilitate economics students' acquisition of listening skills in a self-regulated learning mode with the help of a SRL listening model (Appendix A). Specifically, the following research questions were set:

- Is there a significant difference in pre-/post-test results of economics students in (a) the experimental group exposed to SRL mode of learning (SRL-based scaffolding of self-study mode) and (b) the control group exposed to the traditional English language teaching approach (traditional scaffolding of self-study mode) before and after intervention?
- What stages of listening as an active and complex process would be treated as most/least useful by the students?

Two groups of the fourth-year students (60 participants) in the Department of Economics at the Higher School of Economics represent the experimental and control groups of the study. The research methodology consists of a reference analysis, modeling, a quantitative analysis of the results of the questionnaire, pre-/post- language testing (listening focus). The first group of students (the control group) participated in in-class activities only, where the teacher used traditional methods and strategies. The second group fulfilled the major part of tasks individually through SRL model (LMS-based). The experiment was conducted from September to March 2017. During the final stage of the study all data and results were analyzed and described.

Results and Discussion

The pre-test revealed that the overall English language competence in both groups was of the same B2 CEFR level. The students from both groups had a IELTS pre-test and post-test in listening. The results of the tests indicate a significant improvement of listening skills of the experimental group (Table 1).

Starting from the same level, both groups improved their listening skills. The experimental group demonstrated a significant advancement with the majority of students scoring from 37 to 40 points, whereas the highest results in the control group were only 32-35.

The teaching resource for the study included: the course book, "Objective IELTS", students book and official examination papers from University of Cambridge, ESOL Examinations. Authentic audio texts from the 'The Economist' journal were used. Further

reading on the subject and classroom discussions were based on authentic texts from British and American sources. Teaching listening skills in the control group was based on the traditional approach, which assumed that all the listening tasks were completed in the class. Actually, this was time-consuming, with the teacher reflecting that she had to devote more time to developing listening skills at the expense of other skills of reading and writing.

The self-study scaffolding was based on the SRL model developed for the second group. Most tasks were LMS-based and were designed for the self-study mode. This approach also enabled to combine two ways of assessment: teacher assessment and self-assessment. The tasks were organized in a way that the students could come back to the task and do it again if the score that they got did not meet their expectations. This is particularly important in situations where the classes are large and it is virtually impossible to continually monitor individual performance. Self-assessment activities provided a continuous, personalized and formative element of assessment, in settings where practical assessment measures were mostly tests (Harris, 1997). In the second group individual work, followed by self-assessment was integrated into classroom activities.

The tasks constructed for LMS studies embraced both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Bottom-up processing in our study refers to using the incoming input as the basis for understanding the message. Comprehension begins with the data that has been received which is analysed as successive levels of organization - sounds, words, clauses, texts - until meaning is arrived at. Comprehension is viewed as a process of decoding (Richards, 1983).

The tasks that develop bottom-up listening skills in our study required the students to: identify the referents of pronouns in an utterance, recognize the time reference of an utterance, distinguish between positive and negative statements, recognize the order in the words occurred in an utterance, identify sequence markers, identify key words that occurred in a spoken text, identify which modal verbs occurred in a spoken text. An essential part of the pre-listening phase was the introduction of unknown words using such tasks such as matching synonyms, antonyms. Gap filling was also considered to be an efficient way to introduce unknown words, while slang and idioms were explained by the teacher when necessary.

Top-down processing refers to the use of background knowledge in understanding the meaning of a message. Whereas bottom-up processing goes from language to meaning, top-down processing goes from meaning to message. In our study, the top down approach encouraged the use of resource material

resulting in authentic learning. In order to illustrate the approaches discussed above, an adjustment was made by combining the stages of listening activities performed out-of-class and in-class. The concept of top-down and bottom-up approaches (Richards, 1983) was applied when constructing a set of tasks for individual work and further class activities. The pre-listening stage was conducted in class, as was the post-listening phase. The bulk of the while-listening tasks was performed individually by LMS. The score of each task permitted to evaluate the completion of the task in percentage (80% of correct answers was considered successful completion).

A questionnaire was constructed in order to evaluate the students' attitude towards the offered approach and to find out the difficulties that they confronted. Getting students to reflect on their own performance is the key to perceiving progress not only in terms of language, but in terms of communicative objectives, so that skills development can be seen as a, "gradual, rather than all or nothing progress" (Nunan, 1988, p. 5).

The results of the questionnaire clearly indicate that self-assessed usefulness of the staged listening activities is high across the experimental group of students. The highest value students see in the context-based and responding stages of listening as these stages are the most challenging to students and require critical thinking skills and an ability to go beyond the audio text. Understanding the intended meaning and evaluation stages are also treated as very important by the students. Although these stages are known to the students, they stated that identifying

biases (evaluation stage) and addressing multiple views on the issue and juxtaposing them with their own point of view were the least developed skills. The value of the remembering stage was the least positively rated by students: a result that can be explained by the fact that the students have developed this skill within the course of prior university studies.

Conclusion

The current study addressed the hypothesis that the development of listening skills via SRL-based model would lead to their substantial increase. More specifically, the research studied: a) if post-test results would be significantly higher within the experimental group due to the self-study mode scaffolding, and b) what stages of listening as an active and complex process would be treated as most/least useful by the students. The results of the study indicate that modeling is an important way to address the complex nature of listening skills development and the SRL-based model helps to make listening process more transparent to students and empower them with proper self-study mode instructions in order to foster this type of learning.

Future ELT research implications suggest application of the model to scaffolding the lower language proficiency levels of students with bottom-up strategies becoming the major drive in fostering listening comprehension skills and developing their ability to analyse the audio text and express an attitude.

Table 1
Economics students' listening pre/post test results

	Pre-test average (max 40)	Mean difference	p-value	Pre-test average (max 40)	Mean difference	p-value
Experimental group (EG)	29	1	Less 0,05	37	1	Less 0,05
Control group (CG)	30	1	Less 0,05	32	1	Less 0,05

Table 2
Economics students' self-assessment of their listening skills development via SRL mode

Degree of self-assessed usefulness of staged listening activities (1 - least useful, 5 - most useful)	1	2	3	4	5
understanding the meaning via the context					30
understanding meaning via the intended meaning				2	28
remembering	4	5	21		
evaluating				1	29
responding					30

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Appendix A

Table 1
Fostering listening skills: A self-regulated learning model

Self-study mode	Types of activities	Activities grounded in staged self-regulated learning with a focus on planning, monitoring, and reflections on performance
Goal: understanding meaning through understanding the larger context	<p>Answer the questions and take notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>what is the source of listening? (private, governmental)</i> <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section</i> - <i>what does the title signal? (opinion, historical account, problem solution)</i> - <i>can you guess what this audio text will be about? why?</i> <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - study the sources of the audio text (the website and its owner) and find out what kind of texts are usually published by this portal (experts opinions, owner of the website, anonymous opinions). - if you fail to guess what the text might be about, try searching the Internet and read some information relevant for this topic. The key goal is to broaden your outlook and have some background knowledge about the issue. This background knowledge will allow you to predict the information in the text and enable to get more details while listening.
Goal: understanding meaning through understanding the intended meaning and the context	<p>Listen to the audio text and answer the questions in writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - what is the main idea of this text? Write it in 1-2 sentences. <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to the text once again and make pauses while listening every two minutes. - If you are still struggling, listen to the text once again and make pauses every minute. Use the dictionary to learn the meaning of new words and expressions. - If you are still struggling, listen to the text once again and use the audio script to help you understand the intended meaning (key message of the text) and use the dictionary to learn the meaning of new words and expressions. Make a list of key vocabulary for this text. Divide your vocabulary notes into: professional terms and concepts, collocations (set phrases), idiomatic expressions.
Goal: remembering via receiving the message and storing it in the memory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how is this main idea developed in the audio text? (argument, description, problem solution, a sequence of historical accounts). Take notes reflecting this structure. <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to the text again and make pauses while listening every two minutes. Take notes on the key structural elements of this text. Listen to get the signal words that indicate the structure of this text (linking words, etc.) -If you are still struggling, listen to the text once again and use the audio script to help you understand the internal structure of the text.
Goal: evaluating by looking for evidence, facts, opinions, biases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - do you think that the main idea expressed in the text is reliable and trustworthy? Why? What evidence do you get from the text that supports this opinion? <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.</i> - have you noticed any biased opinions? <i>If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to the text again and make pauses while listening every two minutes. Take notes on the key facts, opinions, expressed in this text. Read your notes after listening and make a decision if the main idea is reliable or contradictory. -If you are still struggling, search for some information on the Internet and find evidence that supports/contradicts the evidence supporting the main idea of the audio text. - A biased opinion is an opinion which is representing only one side of the argument (e.g. supports the opinion of one side and ignores the opinion of the other side: the elite/the poor, migrants/migration authorities, newspaper owner/experts, government/business, etc.). Listen to the text again and critically look for possible biases expressed in the text.

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Goal: **responding** by constructing new meaning

- what is your own opinion on the issue stated in the audio text (do you agree/disagree and why)?

- does the intended meaning (text message) meet your personal values, beliefs? Why?

If you experience a problem, follow the advice next to this section.

- the main idea (message) in the text may be or may not be similar to what you think about the issue. In order to give your own opinion, it is important to know some possible views on this issue (supporting opinions, criticisms, questionable issues, etc.). Search the Internet and find some possible alternative points of view on the addressed issue. Compare these views with the opinion stated in the audio text. Which opinion do you tend to support and why? Be ready to provide reasons and evidence to justify your point of view.
