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<b>Author(s)</b>	Mehran Sabet
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# **The Effects of Repetition on Listening Comprehension**

**Mehran Sabet**

## **Introduction**

In recent years, emphasis has been placed upon the role of listening in second language acquisition. Numerous textbooks and listening techniques have helped teachers and students to teach and learn the skills necessary for communicating. After all, communication cannot take place if one party is not able to comprehend and respond to what has been said to him/her.

In a classroom setting where teachers' goals are to introduce a language and instill some degree of the retention thereof, we as educators must find ways to use listening as effectively as possible to facilitate learning.

Research has shown that repetition is an effective facilitator in developing listening comprehension (Cervantes, R./Gainer, G., 1992). In their research, two versions of a short lecture were prepared by Cervantes and Gainer. One group listened to a simplified version and another group listened to a complex version. After listening to the lecture twice, both groups showed higher scores than their first listening, although the second group demonstrated greater improvement.

The goal of this study was to find out whether students' scores in a listening task would improve significantly if they listened to the task more than once. With most textbooks containing some listening exercises and some teachers using supplementary listening textbooks in their classrooms, it is important to know that by playing the tape more than once, we are truly assisting our students to receive, comprehend, and retain the language as effectively as possible.

This writer would like to point out that an exhaustive search

was done to locate similar studies in this area. Although the role of repetition in some studies has been evaluated, most of these have investigated the effects of listening tasks as applied to modified lectures versus natural or complicated ones. More than 2400 entries on the ERIC network were searched, as well as professional publications such as TESOL Quarterly and JALT journals, but nothing was found that could assist this writer in this study.

### **Subjects**

The subjects for this project were twenty-three students in the SEP-B program at Seigakuin University. Fifteen students majored in Euro-American Culture Studies and the other eight majored in Child Studies (early childhood education). They were all first-year students, of which thirteen were women and twelve were men. They were placed in the SEP-B program through the Secondary Level English Proficiency (SLEP) test, which was administered in April of 1997. Based on their SLEP scores, students were divided into the three levels of A, B, and C, with the A level being the highest.

SLEP scores for the target group in this study ranged from 36-39. Comparable TOEFL scores would be in the approximate range of 330-360. The class met for 90 minutes twice a week, once on Monday from 1:30 to 3:00 and once on Wednesday from 8:40 to 10:10, and it should be noted that attendance in this class was excellent.

### **Materials**

The textbook used for this study was Basic Tactics in Listening by Jack C. Richards. This book is designed for false beginners who have had limited access and exposure to authentic English (Richards, 1996). It contains twenty-five units organized around a topic or theme related to the everyday experiences of

adults and young adults. Each unit starts with a "Getting Ready" section, where students are introduced to the general topic of the unit and the essential vocabulary. "Let's Listen" follows next, which contains three listening exercises, such as: filling in charts, responding to questions (yes/no answers), ordering or labeling pictures, and multiple-choice answers. "Top Down" processing (using background knowledge and context) and "Bottom Up" processing (using mainly the individual words uttered) are extensively used in this book. The topics for these listening tasks correspond with suggested tasks for building listening proficiency for novice/intermediate students by Hadley in her book *Teaching Language in Context* (1993).

### **Procedures**

For this study, students listened and completed the listening tasks contained in each unit. The subjects were introduced to the topics and relevant vocabulary twice prior to doing the listening tasks: once through "Getting Ready" sections in their listening books, and prior to that through their textbooks (*Interchange 1*, by Jack C. Richards), which also included pair and group work, listening, and grammar.

Two different experiments were administered in the classroom. In the first one, students listened to a listening task once and wrote or marked their answers. The teacher played the tape for a second time. This time the subjects wrote their answers with a different colored pen than what they had used in the first listening. At this point they could change an answer that they had written in the first listening, or write an answer that they had not written on the first try.

In the second experiment, the same procedure was repeated, but this time on the first try, students listened to the task twice, and then one more time (three listenings altogether) on the second try.

Once the tasks were finished by the students, the teacher read the correct answers to the class. After that, the score sheets (see Chart One) were completed by the students. They were collected by the teacher at the end of each class and the data was compiled for future evaluation.

### Chart One

Name \_\_\_\_\_

ID# \_\_\_\_\_

First try: .....times	Second try: .....times							
Unit#	Total	Correct	%	#of Changes	Plus(+)	Minus(-)	Net	%
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....

- Unit # \_\_\_\_\_ Unit number of the textbook
- Total \_\_\_\_\_ Total number of items in each unit of the textbook
- Correct \_\_\_\_\_ Number of correct answers on the first listening
- % \_\_\_\_\_ Percentage of correct answers on the first listening
- # of changes \_\_\_\_\_ Number of items that were changed from the first listening or added in the second listening
- Plus (+) \_\_\_\_\_ Number of answers that were changed to the correct answer during the second listening
- Minus(-) \_\_\_\_\_ Number of answers that were added or changed to the wrong answer during the second listening
- Net \_\_\_\_\_ The difference in changes made between the first and second listening
- % \_\_\_\_\_ Percentage of correct answers on the second listening

## **Analysis**

According to Michael Rost, three factors influence students' listening comprehension. They are, 1) learner's knowledge of phototactic rules; 2) grammatical sequences; and 3) cultural scripts (Rost, 1990). Knowing that the subjects in this study were at the Novice-High to Intermediate-Low level (Hadley, 1994), it became obvious to this teacher that the students, due to their proficiency level, were unable to respond to or process more than one piece of information at a time when doing the listening tasks in the classroom. That means the subjects did better and scored higher on the first try in single-task exercises compared with multi-task exercises (Charts Two and Three). But as the students listened to the tape for a second or third time, the improvement in their scores was greater in multi-task activities than in single-task exercises! For example, in weeks 1, 2, 3, and 4, where the exercises were the single-task type, the increases between the first and second listening were not very significant (Chart Two). But in weeks 5, 6, and 7, where the exercises were multi-task, the improvement in students' scores averaged about 9% (Chart Two). We can see more evidence for this claim in weeks 12, 13, and 14 where, after listening to the tape three times, the average score on multi-task exercises went up approximately 7% (Chart Three). (See Appendix for depiction of these two charts in graph form.)

## Chart Two

### (One Listening/First Try vs. Two Listenings/Second Try)

Week#	Task Type	#Items	1st Try	2nd Try	#Changes	Improvement
#1	S	23	83%	88%	39	5%
#2	S	21	77%	82%	47	5%
#3	S	24	94%	96%	22	2%
#4	S	19	83%	85%	26	2%
#5	M	30	82%	91%	69	9%
#6	M	16	73%	80%	51	7%
#7	M	27	69%	81%	96	12%

## Chart Three

### (Two Listenings/First Try vs. Three Listenings/Second Try)

Week#	Task Type	#Items	1st Try	2nd Try	#Changes	Improvement
#8	S	15	80%	82%	11	2%
#9	S	16	94%	95%	4	1%
#10	S	17	98%	98%	1	0%
#11	S	19	82%	83%	20	1%
#12	M	26	59%	66%	76	7%
#13	M	15	68%	78%	34	10%
#14	M	31	42%	47%	44	5%

That could also mean that there were some questions that were indeed answerable, but due to the complexity of the task the subjects were unable to answer them on the first or second listening. There seemed to be a need for the students to have at least one or two more repetitions in order to get a fair exposure to the listening tasks. As is evident in Chart Three, the improvement in scores between a second and third listening in single-task exercises in weeks 8, 9, 10, and 11 was very minimal. On the other hand, scores in Charts Two and Three show a considerable increase in multi-task exercises in weeks 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, and 14.

In addition, when the number of changes made during the

second listening were analyzed, it was discovered that a significant number of items were added or changed that, as a result, improved the subjects' scores. This might indicate that the tasks were not as difficult as they sounded in the first listening, were the students given an opportunity or two to have the task repeated. But a comparison of average scores in the second listening shows that, in multi-task listening, overall scores in general were lower than single-task ones. This could be due to the difficulty of the tasks or the subjects' overall language ability. This seems to confirm the belief among many teachers that when a task is beyond students' ability, no matter how many times they listen to it, their scores or listening comprehension will not improve much.

Therefore, it may be concluded that task difficulty was apparently a factor here. Based on the students' scores, the higher the scores the first try, the more chances of getting a perfect score the second try. The subjects recorded fifteen perfect scores on the second listening from weeks one through seven, but only five perfect scores from weeks eight through fourteen. In weeks 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 11, where average scores were above 80% after the first try, the number of perfect scores was the highest (cf. Chart Six). In Week Seven, for example, three students who scored 80% or higher on the first listening were able to achieve 100% after the second try (cf. Chart Four).

On the other hand, in weeks 12, 13, and 14, where average scores remained low, so were the hopes of answering all the questions correctly. This was especially true in week 14 where, despite listening to the tape three times, the subjects' average score stood at 47%. That means, of course, that more than half of the questions were still not answered or marked correctly (cf. Chart Five).



## Chart Four

(Week Seven: Correlation between Task Difficulty and Perfect Scores)

Student	Total	Correct	%	# of Changes	Plus(+)	Minus(-)	Net	%
#1	27	17	63	7	6	1	5	81
#2	27	11	41	7	4	3	1	44
#3	27	24	89	3	2	1	1	93
#4	27	15	56	8	8	0	8	85
#5	27	18	67	6	2	4	-2	59
#6	27	22	81	5	5	0	5	100
#7	27	20	74	3	3	0	3	85
#8	27	15	56	5	5	0	5	74
#9	27	23	85	3	2	1	1	89
#10	27	17	63	5	4	1	3	74
#11	27	21	78	1	1	0	0	81
#12	27	23	85	4	4	0	4	100
#13	27	20	74	4	3	1	2	81
#14	27	22	81	5	5	0	5	100
#15	27	22	81	0	0	0	0	81
#16	27	20	74	2	2	0	0	81
#17	27	20	74	3	3	0	3	85
#18	27	15	56	10	10	0	10	93
#19	27	19	70	6	6	0	6	93
#20	27	16	59	4	4	0	4	74
#21	27	12	44	5	4	1	3	56

## Chart Five

(Week Fourteen: Correlation between Task Difficulty and Perfect Scores)

Student	Total	Correct	%	# of Changes	Plus(+)	Minus(-)	Net	%
#1	31	16	52	1	1	0	1	55
#2	31	9	29	2	2	0	2	35
#3	31	13	42	2	2	0	0	48
#4	31	13	42	0	0	0	0	42
#5	31	16	52	1	1	0	1	55

#6	31	20	64	0	0	0	0	64
#7	31	12	39	0	0	0	0	39
#8	31	8	26	4	4	0	4	39
#9	31	9	29	0	0	0	0	29
#10	31	12	39	3	2	1	1	42
#11	31	13	42	5	5	0	5	58
#12	31	15	48	2	1	1	0	48
#13	31	15	48	0	0	0	0	48
#14	31	13	42	0	0	0	0	42
#15	31	14	45	3	2	1	1	48
#16	31	9	29	6	0	1	5	48
#17	31	12	39	0	0	0	0	39
#18	31	8	26	1	1	0	1	29
#19	31	12	39	1	1	0	1	42
#20	31	21	68	4	4	0	4	80
#21	31	13	42	9	8	1	7	64

### Chart Six

#### (Perfect Scores Registered after First and Second Listenings)

Week#	Task Type	Avg. First Listening	Avg. Second Listening	Perfect Score 1st Listening	Perfect Score 2nd Listening	Total Perfect Scores
#1	S	83%	88%	0	2	2
#2	S	77%	83%	2	1	3
#3	S	94%	96%	7	4	11
#4	S	83%	85%	0	1	1
#5	S	82%	91%	0	1	1
#6	M	73%	80%	1	3	4
#7	M	69%	81%	0	3	3
.....						
#8	S	80%	82%	1	0	1
#9	S	94%	95%	8	2	10
#10	S	98%	98%	18	0	18
#11	S	82%	83%	2	1	3
#12	M	59%	66%	0	0	0
#13	M	68%	78%	0	2	2
#14	M	42%	47%	0	0	0

As to what constitutes a difficult task at a given level, it is beyond this writer's intention to define, but one could hypothesize that, in single-task exercises where tasks and conversations on the tape are simple and short, students are able to process the information with ease and accuracy.

Listening comprehension is subject to many variables, such as: task complexity, content, time constraints, and affective factors (Nagle & Sanders, 1986). It was already mentioned and evidence has been presented showing that, the more complicated and demanding the task, the lower were the scores in this research project.

The content and the speed of the speech seemed to be a significant barrier to comprehension as well. Since the tape was done by professional actors and was intended for false beginners, the speed of the spoken language was rather slow. Despite that, the students nevertheless had difficulty understanding simple but usually contracted spoken forms. This problem was mentioned on several occasions by the subjects in the classroom.

Time was another factor in this study. In TOEFL and SLEP, the time allowed between each question is about 12 to 13 seconds. But in the book used for this research, the time is only about 4 seconds, regardless of the task! This lack of sufficient time between questions can leave the students scrambling for time and as a result make the task more difficult than what it actually needs to be.

## **Conclusion**

The answer to the initial question of, Will students' scores on listening tasks improve if they listen to it more than once? is in the affirmative. According to this study, replaying the tape more than once does in fact prove to be beneficial. In single-task listening exercises such as yes/no answers, multiple choice,

matching pictures, etc., repetition improved the scores in the second listening, but did not show a significant improvement in the third listening. In multi-task listening exercises such as writing the time and date at the same time (Week Nine) , three seems to be the appropriate number of times that students needed to listen to the tape.

Whether this result could be applied to students at lower or higher levels is something that needs further study and research. However, when introducing a listening task in our classrooms, no matter at what level, as teachers we often ask ourselves whether it is necessary or beneficial to play the tape more than once or not. If our goal is to teach and have some input, then the answer based on this study, at least at this particular level of proficiency (Novice-High to Intermediate-Low), is a definite "Yes". The increase in students' scores in the second or third listening may not seem radically significant, but the improvement is encouraging enough to warrant at least a second attempt, and possibly even a third on multiple-task listening exercises.

Teachers should take advantage of any opportunity to facilitate their students' language retention or production. As professional educators, we need to give our students every chance to get as much information as possible from a listening task in order to increase their comprehension level and, perhaps even more importantly, instill some degree of confidence in them. We also must capitalize on every learning opportunity in the classroom and exploit it to its fullest potential, and the research done for this project indicates that including repetition in listening exercises is one means by which that is accomplished.

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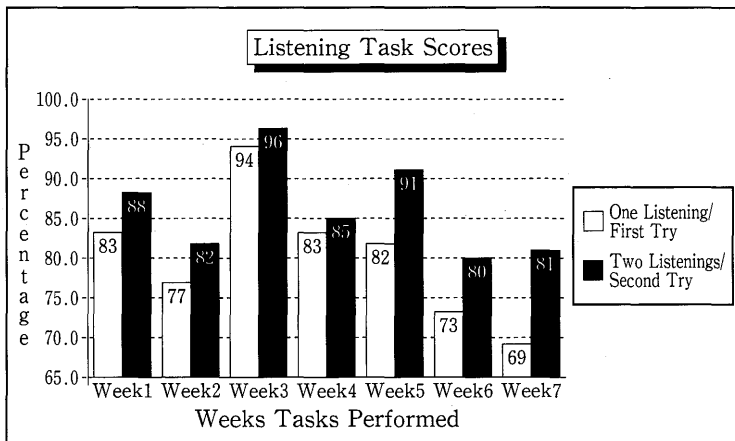
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# Appendix

## Graph One

(One Listening/First Try vs. Two Listenings/Second Try)



## Graph Two

(Two Listenings/First Try vs. Three Listenings/Second Try)

