



# The impact of vocabulary preparation on L2 listening comprehension, confidence and strategy use

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## Abstract

Building on previous studies of the effects of planning on second language learners' (L2) oral narratives and writing, this research reports an investigation of the effects of vocabulary preparation prior to a listening comprehension test on L2 learners' vocabulary performance, listening comprehension, confidence levels and strategy use. The participants were given three different lengths of preparation time to study new vocabulary that would be heard in a listening text. The instruments involved a vocabulary test, a listening comprehension test, and a questionnaire to elicit their confidence levels and strategy use. A semi-structured interview was conducted immediately after the test. The results show that though a consistent pattern was found for the tests of vocabulary and listening comprehension (the more preparation time they had, the higher score they achieved) significant differences between groups were detected only in the vocabulary test but not in the listening comprehension test. In relation to the level of confidence and strategy use, the group with 30-min preparation showed the highest levels of confidence and more strategy use, followed by the group given 1-week preparation. It is concluded that allowing students to study vocabulary before a test could improve their vocabulary knowledge and confidence but not their listening comprehension. In the light of students' responses in the questionnaire and reports in their interviews, the paper discusses a few problems participants had studying the vocabulary and suggestions are made for the teaching of listening.

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## 1. Introduction

Comprehending spoken English is certainly not easy for EFL learners, in part because their first language dominates most of their communication; learning how to listen largely through formal instruction in the classroom and with limited exposure to English outside the context of formal study. Even when taking a classroom English listening test regardless whether it being high stakes or not, learners are usually confronted with a number of difficulties, including limited vocabulary, unfamiliar topical knowledge, fast speech rates, unfamiliar accents, and listening only once, to name but a few. Among these factors, lack of vocabulary knowledge seems to cause the most worry to EFL learners (Boyle, 1984; Chang, 2005; Chang and Read, 2006) and due to this reason, it has become a common practice to become familiar with some lexical items before doing a listening task. Therefore, providing test-takers with pre-task activities may increase their confidence and make them feel the task is less demanding.

Pre-task activities have been tested and demonstrated to be helpful to fluency and complexity in the performance of oral narratives (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Robinson et al., 1995; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Robinson, 2001) and with writing skills (Kroll, 1990; Ellis and Yuan, 2004). Such activities can make the task more productive (Willis, 1996), and can reduce cognitive strain and processing load (Foster and Skehan, 1996; Skehan, 1996). Other reasons for using pre-task activities are to introduce new language, to mobilize language, to recycle language, and to ease the processing load (Skehan, 1998). Three major types of pre-task activities were proposed by Skehan (1998): teaching, consciousness-raising, and planning. Teaching is concerned with the introduction of new language to the interlanguage system or restructuring the underlying system. Consciousness-raising activities involve pre-task discussion and exposure to material relevant to the task. Planning involves the issue of time. Different lengths of time for planning affect learners' performances, usually more on difficult tasks than easier ones. Several studies on the effect of planning time on second language output suggest that planning time influences output to a significant degree in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy (Ellis, 1987; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Skehan and Foster, 1997, 1999; Wigglesworth, 1997). These encouraging results were from studies of output skills, whether receptive skills, e.g. listening, would obtain similar results is therefore explored in this study.

## 2. Literature review

At present, there is no research regarding the effect of vocabulary preparation on listening comprehension (LC). However, there are a few studies focusing on pre-teaching vocabulary or including lexical support in listening comprehension tests. Reviewing such relevant studies may lend support to the current study.

With regard to vocabulary support in listening comprehension, its effects appear salient only when it is combined with multiple listening (Berne, 1995; Elkhafaifi, 2005). Berne looked at how vocabulary-preview (V-PRE) and question-preview (Q-PRE) affected her tertiary level Spanish learners. The results show that the Q-PRE group scored higher than the V-PRE group, but the difference was not significant. However, when all the participants watched the videotape again and retook the test, the average score for each group after the second exposure was significantly higher than in the first test. Elkhafaifi replicated Berne's study and the results were found comparable. It was apparent that studying

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