

Effects of Task-based Academic Listening on High School EFL Students' Listening Comprehension: Does Experiential Learning Style Matter?

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been considered as an effective language teaching methodology. However, its applicability for lower-proficiency learners in EFL contexts has not been adequately justified. Moreover, the possible mediating effect of the experiential learning styles on academic listening TBLT has not been targeted in the literature, a gap that this study attempts to fill. To this end, male pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners ($N=88$) in four experiential learning styles ($n=22$), selected purposefully through the experiential learning style questionnaire, took part in the study. The study utilized a time series design and all participants received the TBLT. To get some insights regarding the learners' attitudes toward the TBLT, the researchers implemented a perception questionnaire at the end of the treatment. The results of a mixed-method ANOVA for within-group difference revealed that the task-based instruction significantly affected pre-intermediate EFL learners' performance on academic listening tests. A between-group comparison of the four experiential learning styles also confirmed that the learners with different learning styles performed similarly on the tests. It was also found that learners had positive attitudes toward such instruction. The results have clear implications for foreign language teaching, teacher training and curriculum design with regard to the selection of appropriate methodology for teaching academic listening.

Keywords: Academic listening, TBLT, experiential learning style, perception, EFL

1. Introduction

The overwhelming interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) in second/foreign language pedagogy (see Ellis, 2009, 2012; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007, among many others) is highly conspicuous if we only consider the number of books published recently by prominent figures (Adams, 2009; Ellis, 2012). Despite such rich literature on TBLT, its applicability has not been examined adequately in foreign language contexts (Carless, 2007). Besides, the majority of the studies, in fact, have addressed learners at intermediate or higher intermediate proficiency levels while little attention has been paid to learners at lower proficiency levels (Carless, 2007). Skehan (2003) postulated that research on TBLT “tends to be with adults (and some adolescents), generally at intermediate proficiency levels, and mostly with English as the target language” (p. 3). Swan (2005), in the same vein, claimed that TBLT is inappropriate for learners at lower levels of language proficiency. However, these assumptions were rejected by Willis and Willis (2007) who argued that even learners at lower proficiency levels could benefit from TBLT, which might provide them opportunities to exploit the grammar system of the target language through the resources available. Examples of task-based approaches which have been implemented successfully with lower-level learners are available in the literature (e.g. Duran & Ramaut, 2006; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). Along the same line, Ellis (2012) maintained that input-based tasks such as listening “are well-suited to beginner learners who have not yet developed sufficient proficiency to engage in L2 production” (p. 211).

1.1 Purpose and significance of the study

Nowadays, it is indeed fashionable for the Iranian high school EFL students to go to private language institutes. This is most probably because they believe that their language needs are not met in high-school classes where the large portion of time is usually spent on reading, translation and grammar, to the partial or total detriment of oral skills development (Kiany, Mahdavy & Ghafar Samar, 2011). However, when the EFL students pursue their studies in higher academic levels, namely at universities, they find they

need to be competent in academic listening skills to be able to overcome the listening difficulties they would face in their academic contexts where listening to lectures is inevitable both at seminars and in the English proficiency tests they might be required to take. As Flowerdew (1994) rightfully postulated, within the domain of academic study and from among a myriad of instructional media available to teachers, the lecture is the principal instructional activity. Despite the growing interest in academic study and the importance of lectures within this field, very little research has been done on the second/foreign language academic listening (Goh, 2008; Lynch, 2011).

Moreover, research has demonstrated that listening comprehension instruction in which learners' strategies are called upon and various components are targeted can have significant effects both on L2 learners' listening skills and on their L2 learning in general (Bozorgian, 2012, Goh, 2008; Siegel, 2013, for example). However, these studies have focused merely on strategic investment in listening without recourse to learners' individual learning styles. As Ellis (2012) and Dörnyei (2005) contended, the possible effects of individual differences on the learning processes in any particular instruction such as TBLT cannot be overlooked in the field of SLA. In addition, the issue of experiential learning styles, although well appreciated in the literature within different educational contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), suffers from negligence in the EFL context, especially within the domain of TBLT. Specifically, no study, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, has been undertaken to investigate the possible relationship between different experiential learning styles and successful performance on a listening task. As Prince (2013) stated, listening is the most difficult skill to deal with in a systematic way. Perhaps, one way to achieve this is through the academic listening TBLT.

Furthermore, as Seigel (2013) rightfully postulated, to shed more light on academic listening, "students' perceptions are needed to help educators better understand how to best guide learners in developing their L2 listening skills" (p. 4). Learner perspectives on academic listening TBLT also deserve attention, as they can provide insights into the cognitive and metacognitive changes resulting from such instruction (Seigel, 2013) as well as some

indications of the efficacy of such instruction, as it is the concern of this study. Hence, to fill the gap in the literature, the researchers developed the following questions:

1. Does academic listening TBLT significantly affect the pre-intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension?
2. Is there any significant difference among EFL learners with different experiential learning styles in their performance on academic listening tasks?
3. What are the EFL learners' perceptions of the academic listening TBLT?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Task-based language teaching

Built upon the experiential learning theory (Norris, 2009; Nunan, 2004), constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning (Robinson, 2011), Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, and assumptions of analytical syllabuses (Wilkins, 1976), TBLT was introduced to the field of second/foreign language pedagogy. Meanwhile, Willis (1996) and Ellis (2003) argued that TBLT was developed from communicative language teaching, which put emphasis on meaning, learner-centeredness and authenticity. Ellis (2003) further stated that it was developed as a reaction to the inadequacy of Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) procedure employed in communicative language teaching. In addition, TBLT, according to Robinson (2011), can provide an ideal framework for collaborative learning: A context for interactional scaffolding of other significant people in the learning process.

The notion of TBLT, in fact, began in the 1980s with Prabhu's Bangalore project in India. Since then, various frameworks for TBLT have been developed by researchers such as Skehan (1996), Willis (1996), Ellis (2003) and Nunan (2004). Ellis (2003) listed a number of definitions of task which address the following dimensions: (1) the scope of a task; (2) the perspective from which a task is viewed; (3) the authenticity of a task; (4) the linguistic skills required to perform a task; (5) the psychological processes involved in task performance, and (6) the outcome of a task. Nunan (2004) analyzed tasks in terms of several components, such as goals,

input, procedures, teacher and learner roles and instructional settings in which tasks occur. Skehan (2003) pointed to four main approaches in the discussions of tasks: A psycholinguistic approach to interaction, a social interactive approach, a concern for structure-focused tasks, and a cognitive perspective. For the present study, we took Skehan's (1996) widely-cited definition of the task comprising five key characteristics:

Meaning is primary; learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.
(p. 20)

2.1.1 TBLT and experiential learning

As its cornerstone, TBLT rejects the idea that knowledge can be acquired without considering its application and emphasizes instead the value of learning by doing, or experiential learning (Norris, 2009; Nunan, 2004). The relationship between TBLT and experiential learning might be well detected through Kolb's (1984) description of experiential learning. Nunan (2004) pinpointed that

An important conceptual basis for task-based language teaching is experiential learning. This approach takes the learners' immediate personal experience as the point of departure for the learning experience. Intellectual growth occurs when learners engage in and reflect on sequence of tasks. The active involvement of the learner is central to the approach. (p. 12)

Tasks, indeed, provide an ideal framework within which knowledge can be experienced and understood, and from which learning opportunities are developed (Norris, 2009). They provide a rich context for learners to grasp and transform knowledge, skills and feelings. In the same vein, Samuda and Bygate (2008, p. 36) postulated that tasks could be considered "as a means of creating experience based opportunities for language learning". According to Nunan (2004), Kohonen's (1992) model can be seen as a theoretical underpinning for TBLT. Kohonen (1992) highlighted the

relationship between experiential learning and key concepts of communicative language teaching. He postulated that

Experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. This process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him or her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in charge of his or her own learning. (p. 37)

Despite the fact that TBLT and the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) draw upon similar learning models, no study, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, has so far addressed the relationship between the experiential learning styles and successful implementation of a TBLT in an EFL context.

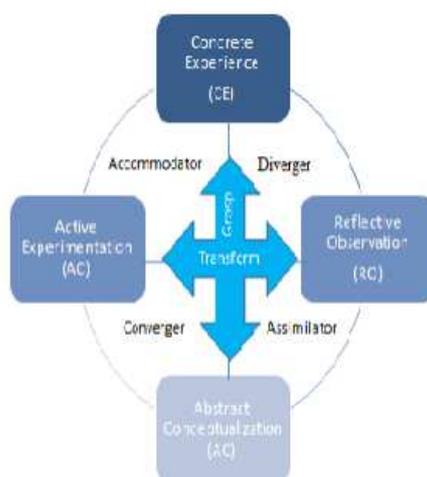
2.1.2 Experiential learning theory

There is, indeed, a tendency toward the idea that individual preferences and styles of learning play a significant role in second/ foreign language learning (Ellis, 2012). This has led to the assumption that planning instruction to adjust individual learning should yield improved learner outcomes (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005). Dörnyei (2005), for example, believed that classroom practices should be adapted to a number of learning styles to increase learning opportunities for all learners. Ellis (2012) also acknowledged that exploring the effects of individual differences on the learning processes in an instructional context such as TBLT would be highly promising in the field of SLA.

According to Kolb's (1984) ELT, learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). This model is represented by a four stage learning cycle comprising two modes of grasping experience—Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and two related modes of transforming experience—

Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). Effective learning occurs when a person advances through a cycle of four stages: A concrete experience followed by observation and reflection on that experience which leads to the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations resulting in new experiences. Based on this model (see Figure 1), people can be divided into four major groups with regard to their preferred learning style: *Divergers* (CE & RO), *assimilators* (AC & RO), *convergers* (AC & AE), and *accommodators* (CE & AE).

Figure 1. Kolb's learning style (adopted from McCarthy, 2010, p.132)



According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), divergers have great imaginative abilities and they are interested in people. They also prefer to work in groups, and they like to gather information. In addition, they appreciate different viewpoints, and they like to receive personal feedback. Lecture methods and hands-on experience can best suit them. Assimilators can understand a wide range of information and organize it in a concise and logical way. Furthermore, they like to create theoretical models, and they are interested in abstract concepts more than concrete ones. They are not very comfortable with randomly exploring a system, and “they prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 5). Convergers, however, are “best at

finding practical uses for ideas and theories” (p. 5). Moreover, they are somehow unemotional and prefer to deal with things rather than individuals. They are able to solve problems and make decisions. They also “tend to learn best when given simulations, practical applications, lab work, and opportunity to experiment with new ideas” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 5). Finally, accommodators have the ability to learn basically from hands-on experience. They like planning and challenging experiences. They also rely more on their feelings rather than on logical analysis, and they like to take risks and can adapt themselves to new situations. Besides, “they enjoy setting goals, working with others, and using different approaches for completing a project” (p. 5). Any instructional method that encourages discovery learning and active participation in the learning process seems appropriate for this learning style.

2.1.3 Academic listening

An important issue in second/foreign language learning which has not received due attention is the listening skill (Field, 2008; Goh, 2008; Lynch, 2011; Prince, 2013; Siegel, 2013). In the same vein, according to Bozorgian (2012), although listening comprehension is the key factor in language learning, it is the least researched skill in language learning. Ellis (2003) also pointed out that academic listening tasks offer a promising tool for investigating the processes involved in language comprehension and acquisition. In academic listening, mainly characterized by listening to lectures (Ellis, 2003), EFL students are expected to process the information they receive orally. Flowerdew (1994) stated that the most distinctive feature of the academic listening is the rare use of turn-taking. Thus, the listener has to develop the ability “to concentrate on and understand over long stretches of time without the opportunity of engaging in the facilitating functions of interactive discourse, such as asking for repetition, negotiating meaning, ...” (Flowerdew, 1994, p. 7).

There have been numerous studies on the effects of academic listening instruction on L2 learners' listening comprehension and L2 learning (e.g. Bozorgian, 2012; Brown, 2008; Carrell, 2007; Dunkel, 1988; Dunkel, Mishra & Berliner, 1989; Goh, 2008; Kiewra, 1985; Killikaya & Kokal-

Kardas, 2009; Siegel, 2013). Except Dunkel, et al. (1989), who found no significant effect of academic listening instruction on L2 learners' listening comprehension, most of the studies mentioned above found that such instruction is beneficial to listening comprehension and L2 learning.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 88 male Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners who were selected purposefully from among the available 153 pre-intermediate EFL students at three private high schools in Rasht, a city in the north of Iran. The students' age ranged from 15 to 18. All the students had already passed some pre-intermediate language courses in private institutes. However, to be sure about their proficiency, as they came from different institutes utilizing different assessment criteria, the researchers asked them to take the Preliminary English Test (PET). A hundred thirty-eight students who had obtained scores between one standard deviation above and below the mean were invited to take part in the study. Moreover, to have participants with the four experiential learning styles, on the basis of the Kolb's learning style inventory-version 3.1 (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), the researchers assigned them to four groups. The results showed that there were 39 divergers, 32 assimilators, 26 convergers and 41 accommodators. All of them received the treatment. However, to have an equal number of participants in the four learning style categories for the ease of data analysis, the researchers randomly chose equal number of students in each style. In other words, the inventory was administered to 138 EFL learners available; their learning styles were identified and an equal number of students from each learning style category were selected randomly.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Kolb's learning style inventory-version 3.1

Kolb's learning style inventory version 3.1 (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) is the latest revision of the original learning style inventory developed by David Kolb. This inventory, which is based on his Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), has attracted a lot of attention in the field of language pedagogy

(Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann, 2010; Decapua & Wintergerst, 2005; Kayes, 2005). Kayes (2005), for example, stated that Kolb's model provided one of the few comprehensive models among the other models in the field. It is grounded on ELT (Kolb, 1984) and is developed to help individuals identify the way they learn from experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). According to Kolb and Kolb (2005), the inventory is a short questionnaire with 12 items that ask respondents to rank four sentence endings that correspond to the four learning modes. The format of the inventory is a forced-choice format that ranks an individual's relative choice preferences among the four modes of the learning cycle. More specifically, by combining scores from AC-CE and AE-RO, the learning style type can be determined. Although some studies have questioned the reliability and validity of the inventory (see Bhatti & Bart, 2013), many others have just the opposite view (e.g. Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010; Decapua & Wintergerst, 2005; Kayes, 2005). In order to eliminate possible problems in understanding the questionnaire due to the limited English proficiency of the students, the researchers translated the questionnaire into the participants' mother tongue, Persian. Back translation was used to check its accuracy. To ensure its reliability, the researchers, then, ran a test-retest with a sample of 35 students ($r=.86$).

3.2.2 PET listening test

The Cambridge ESOL PET is the second level of the ESOL which is at Level B1-pre-intermediate level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. PET deals with the ability to cope with everyday written and spoken communications. The listening section consists of four parts comprising a total of 25 items: (1) seven multiple choice questions about corresponding pictures; (2) six multiple choice questions about longer recording such as an interview; (3) six gap-fill items for longer monologues, and (4) six true/false items for still longer monologues. The reliability value reported by Cambridge English Exams 2010 for the listening part of the PET was .77. A test-retest with a sample of 30 students indicated good reliability ($r=.81$). The test was used to determine the

listening proficiency of the learners, hence achieving homogeneity among participants.

3.2.3 TOEFL listening tests

The listening tests were chosen from *Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test* by Phillips (2001). The listening section (30 items) in the test includes academic lectures and long conversations. Test takers were allowed to take notes on any listening section throughout the entire test. The lecture part comprised four lectures with five questions per lecture. The conversation part included two conversations with five questions per conversation. According to the Educational Testing Service report (2011), the reliability value for the listening part of the TOEFL is .85. To ensure its reliability, the researchers administered the test to 30 students; the Cronbach's Alpha obtained was .87.

3.2.4 Perception questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from Seigel (2013). It was in the Likert scale with five options: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree, and I don't know (see Table 7). To fulfill the requirements of this study, the researchers modified some of its items. The original questionnaire had 12 items. Items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 remained untouched. In item 7, instead of "listening strategy training", "task-based instruction" was used. Item 8 was revised as "I will be able to use listening strategies for English lectures in language institutes or other academic settings." In item 9, "listening to lectures in academic listening tests" was employed. Items 5, 10 and 12 of the original questionnaire dealing with listening materials, entertainment and travelling, respectively were removed, as they were not the concern of this study. Finally, item 11 (now item 8) became the last item. To ensure its reliability, the researchers ran a test-retest with a sample of 32 students in a two-week interval. The test-retest reliability index was 0.81, which showed the questionnaire was reliable.

3.3 Design

This study deployed a time-series design to compensate for the absence of a control group. The independent variable was the academic TBLT, and the experiential learning styles in four levels (i.e., divergers, assimilators, convergers & accommodators) served as the moderator variable. The dependent variable was the participants' academic listening comprehension assessed through TOEFL listening tests. The EFL students' performance on different pre-tests and post-tests was, then, compared. In addition, performance of learners with different learning styles was compared for each test through a mixed-method ANOVA.

3.4 Procedure

At the outset of the study, the available 153 students took the PET listening test. Those students who got the requisite scores ($N=138$) were given the experiential learning style questionnaire. All the 138 students received the intervention. However, only 88 students in four learning styles were randomly selected. The duration of the study was 21 days—three sessions per week. Prior to the treatment, three pretests (TOEFL listening tests) were administered in a weekly time interval to provide insights regarding the current academic listening ability of the participants. The participants received the academic listening TBLT (Ellis, 2003) in the last 30-40 minutes of each session allotted to the listening sub-skills. At the end of the treatment, they received two post-tests (TOEFL listening tests): An immediate and a delayed post-test after two weeks. The perception questionnaire was also administered to them. The data were fed into SPSS, version 20. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. A mixed-method ANOVA was implemented on the data obtained from the 88 participants' performance on the TOEFL tests. The assumptions for a mixed-method ANOVA were met, and post-hoc analysis was conducted using pair-wise comparisons, adjusting for multiple comparisons with Bonferroni corrections. A mixed-method ANOVA (also known as a split-plot ANOVA) combines two different types of one-way ANOVA into one study: Between-groups ANOVA to tailor such between group comparisons of four experiential learning styles and within-subjects ANOVA to investigate the

possible differences in the performance of the participants at five time points. In addition, the obtained data from the questionnaire were subjected to descriptive analysis.

3.4.1 The task-based program

The researchers developed an extra-curricular English program with the collaboration of the three schools involved in the study. They believed that contrary to Skehan (2003) and Swan (2005) it was possible to offer an academic listening TBLT to low proficiency high school EFL students.

According to Ellis (2003), “academic listening tasks all have the same format. They consist of a lecture on academic topics and taking notes” (p. 59). They meet all the requirements for a task: They focus on meaning to achieve a certain outcome, that is, a set of notes; they require learners to focus on their own resources to process input; and they engage a large number of cognitive processes (Ellis, 2003). Table 1 represents a specification of the academic listening task (Ellis, 2003).

Table 1. Academic listening task specification based on Ellis (2003)

Design Feature	Specification
Goal	The task enhances learners' listening comprehension and note-taking abilities
Input	Input consists of some mini lectures
Conditions	The task is non-reciprocal and guided
Procedures	The task requires students to utilize different note-taking strategies such as topicalizing
Outcome	A set of notes

According to Field (2008), TBLT is implemented to explicitly help learners use appropriate strategies while doing listening. Likewise, while the study followed Ellis's (2003) framework for task-based instruction (see Table 2), it tried to develop learners' related listening strategies in each phase. The academic listening TBLT was as follows: In the pre-task phase (about 5-7 minutes), the participants were informed about the academic listening task, its significance, and about the outcome of the task (i.e., note-

taking). A similar task was also provided. According to Field (2008), successful academic listening requires setting a purpose for listening and explicitly pre-teaching language clues or signals to listen for. In the task phase (about 25 minutes), the actual task was performed by the participants in groups of three and four.

To provide more authentic materials to challenge learners' listening comprehension abilities (Field, 2008), the teacher should ask learners of academic listening to practice tasks that require them to work on the language beyond their current level of knowledge. Hence, some intermediate level mini-lectures from TOEFL Listening texts by Phillips (2001) were provided.

Table 2. A framework for designing task-based lessons (Ellis, 2003, p. 244)

Phase	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	Framing the activity (e. g. establishing the outcome of the task) Planning time Doing a similar task
B. During task	Time pressure Number of participants
C. Post-task	Learner report Consciousness-raising Repeat task

The listening texts were presented on an audio CD player. Before listening to the lecture, to activate their schemata, the teacher (the second author), encouraged the students in each group to ask each other some questions with regard to the lecture. In each session the participants became acquainted with a particular note-taking strategy and technique such as topicalizing, schematizing, and hierarchy cuing (Ellis, 2003).

In topicalizing, the learners were trained how to write a word or phrase as the presentation of the proposition in the lecture. The participants, for example, were required to write about the main propositions; they also became acquainted with the abbreviating techniques. While schematizing

required drawing a diagram to represent the proposition, in hierarchy cuing, learners provided some labeling points as the main points, supporting points and examples. They collaboratively prepared notes and shared and compared their techniques in pairs, discussing what they had understood from the lecture. The teacher provided some positive feedback after all pairs had shared their performance. To enable the students to perform various listening sub-skills and strategies throughout their listening comprehension as Field (2008) put forward, the teacher chose some listening sub-skills (Brown, 2004) such as (1) the ability to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words from the context; (2) listening for the gist; (3) making inferences; (4) listening for key words; and (5) listening for details. According to Field (2008), once listening is broken into a series of separate sub-skills, strategies should be selected to develop them in an academic listening task, rather than taught separately. Hence, note-taking strategies such as topicalizing, schematizing, and hierarchy cuing, were selected to tailor those sub-skills. In the post-task phase (10 minutes), they reported their notes to the teacher, and their performance was evaluated by both the students themselves and the teacher.

4. Results

A mixed-method ANOVA was implemented on the data obtained from the participants' performance on the TOEFL tests at five time points. Descriptive data for the performance of the participants on the TOEFL listening tests at five points are presented in Table 3. As Tables 3 and 4 indicate, the 88 EFL learners' performance showed significant difference, $F(4, 87) = 443.86, p = .000, \eta^2 = .88$, at the first time point (test 1), $M = 14.30, SD = 2.61$, the second time point (test 2), $M = 14.46, SD = 2.52$, the third time point (test 3), $M = 14.51, SD = 2.53$, the fourth time point (test 4), $M = 17.78, SD = 2.48$, and the fifth time point (test 5), $M = 17.87, SD = 2.31$. It was also found that the differences in the means were statistically significant for the divergers, $F(4, 21) = 123.19, p = .000, \eta^2 = .74$; for assimilators, $F(4, 21) = 24.65, p = .000, \eta^2 = .69$; for convergers, $F(4, 21) = 37.69, p = .000, \eta^2 = .74$; and for accommodators, $F(4, 21) = 187.71, p = .000, \eta^2 = .81$.

Table 3. A within-group descriptive statistics for the performance of participants on five TOEFL listening tests

	Test1		Test 2		Test 3		Test 4		Test 5	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total	14.30	2.61	14.46	2.52	14.51	2.53	17.78	2.48	17.87	2.36
Dive	14.02	2.97	14.13	2.86	14.14	2.94	17.95	1.86	17.63	1.62
Assim	14.54	2.12	14.68	2.81	14.81	1.98	17.77	2.73	17.68	1.90
Conv	13.22	2.11	13.45	2.18	13.63	1.83	16.90	2.03	17.13	2.76
Accom	15.43	2.30	15.58	2.21	15.45	2.17	18.50	2.06	19.04	1.78

Note. Dive=divergers; Assim=assimilators; Conv=convergers; Accom=accommodators.

Table 4. Mean difference for the performance of participants on five TOEFL listening tests

Within group	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta squared	Wilks' Lambda
Total	1830.76	4	547.69	443.86	.000	.88	.81
Diverger	517.40	4	129.35	123.19	.000	.74	.62
Assimilator	490.78	4	122.67	24.65	.000	.69	.62
Converger	356.03	4	89.72	37.69	.000	.74	.48
Accommodator	533.32	4	138.33	187.81	.000	.81	.52

Bonferroni post-hoc tests results (Table 5) revealed a significant difference within the total group between test 1 and test 4, $MD= 3.47$, $p= .000$; between test 1 and test 5, $MD= 3.56$, $p= .000$; between test 2 and test 4, $MD= 3.31$, $p= .000$; between test 2 and test 5, $MD= 3.40$, $p= .000$; between test 3 and test 4, $MD= 3.47$, $p=.000$; and between tests 3 and 5, $MD= 3.36$, $p= .000$. No significant difference was found between three subsequent pre-tests. In addition, no significant difference was found between tests 4 and 5 (the posttests), $MD= .91$, $p=1.00$. The results indicated that the students' performance on three pretests was not significantly different, and they could provide an appropriate indication of the learners' initial academic listening proficiency level. Other mean difference comparisons for different learning styles have also been presented in Table 5—the significant differences have been demonstrated.

Table 5. A post hoc analysis of differences in performance of participants on TOEFL listening tests

Comparisons	Mean difference	SD	Sig.
Total			
test 1 vs. test 4	3.47*	.13	.000
test 1 vs. test 5	3.56*	.12	.000
test 2 vs. test 4	3.31 *	.11	.000
test 2 vs. test 5	3.40 *	.12	.000
test 3 vs. test 4	3.27 *	.12	.000
test 3 vs. test 5	3.36 *	.13	.000
Divergers			
test 1 vs. test 4	3.95*	.20	.000
test 1 vs. test 5	3.63*	.22	.000
test 2 vs. test 4	3.81 *	.19	.000
test 2 vs. test 5	3.50 *	.12	.000
test 3 vs. test 4	3.20 *	.18	.000
Assimilators			
test 1 vs. test 4	3.22*	.24	.000
test 1 vs. test 5	3.13*	.21	.000
test 2 vs. test 4	3.09 *	.19	.000
test 2 vs. test 5	3.00 *	.17	.000
test 3 vs. test 4	2.97 *	.22	.000
test 3 vs. test 5	2.86 *	.19	.000
Convergers			
test 1 vs. test 4	3.68*	.23	.000
test 1 vs. test 5	3.90*	.22	.000
test 2 vs. test 4	3.45 *	.23	.000
test 2 vs. test 5	3.68 *	.25	.000
test 3 vs. test 4	3.27 *	.24	.000
test 3 vs. test 5	3.50 *	.24	.000
Accommodators			
test 1 vs. test 4	3.04*	.32	.000
test 1 vs. test 5	3.59*	.35	.000
test 2 vs. test 4	2.90 *	.27	.000
test 2 vs. test 5	3.45 *	.30	.000
test 3 vs. test 4	3.05 *	.26	.000
test 3 vs. test 5	3.59 *	.35	.000

*Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

A between-group comparison of learners with four experiential learning styles (Table 6) also confirmed that the learners with different learning

styles performed similarly ($P > .05$) both on the TOEFL listening pre-tests (i.e., tests 1, 2 & 3) and on the post-tests (i.e., tests 4 & 5), with *Wilks' Lambda* = .91, $F(3, 21) = 4.63$, $p = .22$ for the test 4, for example.

Table 6. A between-group comparison of performance of four experiential groups on TOEFL listening tests

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Wilks' Lambda
Between groups						
Test1	673.12	(3, 21)	184.45	4.83	.13	.53
Test2	598.16	(3, 21)	195.74	5.14	.24	.67
Test3	425.19	(3, 21)	142.11	3.94	.78	.38
Test4	294.13	(3, 21)	85.65	4.63	.22	.91
Test5	623.13	(3, 21)	98.25	3.82	.71	.64

Finally, Table 7 presents a descriptive analysis of the perception questionnaire. It displays information regarding the frequency and percentages of the choices made by students on the questionnaire. The result also showed that the overall mean score of the learners' perception of the academic listening was 3.33 ($SD = .96$). In sum, seemingly these results revealed that the participants had a positive attitude towards the academic listening TBLT.

Table 7. Frequency and percentage (in brackets) of students' responses to each item in the perception questionnaire

Item	Frequency and Percentage				
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	I don't know	Somewh at agree	Strongly agree
1. I like listening to English	3 (3.4)	10 (11.4)	6 (6.8)	22 (25)	47 (53)
2. I feel confident when listening	3 (3.4)	8 (9.1)	4 (4.5)	35 (39.8)	38 (43.2)
3. I like to practice listening outside of class	0	8 (9.1)	9 (10.2)	25 (28.4)	46 (52.2)

Item	Frequency and Percentage				
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	I don't know	Somewh at agree	Strongly agree
4. My listening ability improved as the result of teacher's explanation	4 (4.5)	20 (22.7)	10 (11.4)	26 (29.5)	28 (31.8)
5. My listening ability improved with the listening activities	0	1 (1.1)	3 (3.4)	25 (28.4)	59 (67)
6. The instruction helped me to improve English listening ability	0	3 (3.4)	5 (5.7)	28 (31.8)	52 (59.1)
7. I will use listening strategies in my future English lectures in language institutes or other academic settings	0	2 (2.3)	5 (5.7)	36 (40.9)	45 (51.1)
8. I will use listening strategies in future academic tests	1 (1.1)	4 (4.5)	1 (1.1)	26 (29.5)	56 (63.6)

5. Discussion

This study was carried out to probe into the efficacy of an academic listening TBLT and to see whether lower proficiency EFL learners with different experiential learning styles could benefit differentially from such instruction. The findings revealed that such task-based instruction significantly affected pre-intermediate EFL learners' performance on academic listening tasks, supporting Duran and Ramaut (2006), Leaver and Willis (2004), as well as Willis and Willis (2007) who reported a successful implementation of TBLT with learners at lower levels of language proficiency. The finding, however, disconfirmed Skehan's (2003) and Swan's (2005) views that TBLT should not be used with lower-level learners.

The study also corroborates findings obtained by Carrell (2007), Carrell, et al. (2002), Kiewra (1985) as well as those by Killikaya and Kokal-Kardas (2009) who found that listening strategies such as note-taking were beneficial to listening comprehension, thus disconfirming the findings of Dunkel et al. (1989) who found no significant effect for such strategies on listening comprehension. Moreover, this study did not support the idea that TBLT is much more congruent with the diverging and accommodating learning styles as defined by Kolb (1984) and predicted by the authors, hence supporting that learners with different experiential learning styles could equally make use of such instruction as Samuda and Bygate (2008) and Norris (2009) put forward.

The results also indicated that learners had positive perceptions of the TBLT framework. Many students reported that their listening abilities considerably improved as a result of the instruction as a whole. They acknowledged that they would make use of such strategies in their EFL academic settings and tests: A sort of transforming knowledge as postulated by Kolb (1984), thus, providing further evidence for Nunan's (2004) claim that TBLT can provide an appropriate framework for operationalizing experiential learning. This positive attitude might be explained in terms of the close relationship between such task-based instruction and the development of skills and sub-skills required to perform high stake tests, which might reflect a more direct relationship between exams and task-based teaching (Carless, 2007).

The effectiveness of an academic listening TBLT can be explained in terms of both the "interactionist-cognitive" and "sociocultural theories of learning" (Ellis, 2012, p. 238). From an interactionist-cognitive perspective, acquisition is a mental phenomenon resulting from the input and the activation of "cognitive mechanisms responsible for attention, rehearsal and restructuring of existing knowledge systems" (p. 238). In fact, when learners are exposed to academic listening tasks such as note-taking, their comprehension of lectures is enhanced in two ways (Ellis, 2003). Based on the *encoding hypothesis*, note-taking "serves as a way of organizing lecture content while listening and thus of enhancing comprehension" (Ellis, 2003, p. 61). It also triggers learners' noticing mechanisms, hence the cognitive

processes such as coding, synthesizing, and transforming information are facilitated (Dunkel, 1988). According to the “external storage hypothesis” (Ellis, 2003, p. 61), taking notes gives rise to a “record of the content of a lecture” which can be later referred to and consequently enhance “long term retention and ease of recall” (p. 62).

From a sociocultural perspective, learning occurs through mediation offered by social interaction. The collaborative nature of the task-based approach and the interaction afforded by the academic listening TBLT through pair work, as well as the feedback learners receive during the task cycle can help learners to move from what Vygotsky (as cited in Ellis, 2012) called the intermental plane (other- regulation) to the intramental plane (self-regulation). It is evident that these listening tasks can provide learners with rich exposure, so they can be used effectively with beginners to cater for the silent period characterizing the early stages of acquisition (Ellis, 2003). Another possible explanation for such effectiveness will be the meaningfulness, purposefulness, communicativeness, authenticity and learner-centeredness of the TBLT, as put forward by Ellis (2003).

The strategic view toward L2 listening can also give us some indication on the efficacy of such task-based instruction, as Field (2008) postulated. According to him, listening practice in the real-life task required learners to extract meaning from utterances which were beyond their current level of knowledge. Accordingly, a demand for a type of listening methodology different from the traditional listening lessons is highly felt. The academic listening TBLT seems to have catered for such a call. In this view, listening is broken into separate sub-skills, and strategies are framed in a task rather than taught separately (Field, 2008). Such instruction calls for both top-down processing and bottom-up processing. Moreover, the findings provide further evidence for the teachability of strategies and the effectiveness of such strategy training, as pointed by Ellis (2012) and Field (2008).

The findings of this study also indicated that the TBLT approach to L2 listening instruction was effective for all learners regardless of their different experiential learning styles. This can be accounted for through the fact that TBLT makes use of various activities calling for different types of styles. Its problem-solving, decision-making and technical nature suits the convergers;

it requires learners to generate new ideas (brainstorming) and receive personal feedback, hence of great appeal to the divergers; assimilators can also enjoy the lectures and organizing a range of information this type of instruction demands; and accommodators can benefit from the complexity and the originality of the academic listening experience, adapting to a new type of instruction as well as setting goals.

Last, but not certainly least, performance of the EFL learners on TOEFL test for both pretests ($M= 14.42$, $SD= 1.09$) and the posttests ($M= 17.82$, $SD= 0.63$), out of the possible total score 30 revealed poor performance of the pre-intermediate EFL students on the academic listening tests. This supports the idea that for EFL learners listening is a great challenge (Seigle, 2013) and much more should be done in this regard.

6. Conclusion

Considering the fact that in the majority of academic listening contexts, the participants can make use of different listening strategies such as note-taking, and a myriad of the studies reviewed have approved the efficiency of such strategies, this study might have its pedagogical implications especially in the EFL contexts like Iran. It can highlight the importance of alternative approaches such as TBLT for academic listening. It also revealed that it will be possible to improve low proficiency EFL students' academic listening skills provided that appropriate instruction is utilized. Furthermore, the findings provide further evidence that academic listening is one of the difficult skills to be acquired by EFL learners, and much more time and effort should be invested on this skill. In most cases, EFL students are not well acquainted with the academic listening strategies such as note-taking, and consequently, they lose confidence and motivation, which in turn directly impacts their academic performance. Accordingly, a strategic investment in this regard can be indispensable.

As Field (2008) put forward, EFL teachers should understand that if EFL learners are to become effective listeners, more emphasis must be placed on purposeful and systematic L2 listening instruction that explicitly teaches skills and strategies to promote effective listening behaviors. TBLT can be invaluable in this regard. It can engage learners in the listening

process by providing them with a specific task that clearly demonstrates the outcome of learning, and can also develop students' critical thinking and self-evaluation skills.

Moreover, EFL teachers and teacher educators can make use of such experiential learning models to provide opportunities for students to participate in a learning experience. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory seems to have a lot to offer within EFL educational settings. However, although Dörnyei (2005) postulated different learning styles should be considered in any classroom instruction, too much emphasis on initial abilities and states of the learners and "characterizing them as types" (Ellis, 2012, p. 333) would be counterproductive.

Although the study demonstrated the effectiveness of such task-based instruction for lower proficiency level students in an EFL context, it had its own limitations. For practical reasons, the researchers were obliged to include only male participants; they had no control group, and the duration of the instruction was short. These would certainly pose some threats to the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the actual implementation of listening strategies such as note-taking strategies in future academic contexts cannot be solely inferred from the learners' perceptions, rather some in-depth research should be initiated to cater for that.

Further research can target the actual implementation of the experiential learning in English teaching methodology. Research can also be executed on other academic skills and learning styles to shed more light on the legitimacy of TBLT. Besides, as Butler (2011) rightfully put forward, to come to a better understanding of the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic effectiveness of TBLT, especially in EFL contexts, more diverse research approaches are needed. Finally, a word of caution is inevitable here. As Ellis (2012) cautioned us, we have to be a bit conservative about the applicability and effectiveness of such instruction unless teachers receive appropriate training in implementing TBLT. Moreover, as Sheen (as cited in Ellis, 2012) argued it may be dangerous to advocate new methods such as TBLT on solely theoretical foundations, rather long-term comparative method studies can provide us valuable insights in this regard.

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Appendix

A mini lecture sample (The audio can be downloaded from

<http://www.english-test.net/toefl/listening/lectures.html>

Narrator:

Now answer the following questions. You may use your notes to help you.

1). What aspect of USA Today does the professor mainly discuss?

- (A) how it changed the newspaper industry
- (B) why its circulation has kept growing
- (C) the type of people who read the paper
- (D) how the paper gets late sports scores

Narrator:

Listen again to part of the passage and answer the following question.

2). What can be inferred about the professor when he says this: "Some of you might recognize it as the topic of this week's reading assignment."?

- (A) He knows that all the students are familiar with the subject.
- (B) He is angry at the students because he thinks they are lazy.
- (C) He thinks many students have not yet read the assignment.
- (D) He doesn't think that any students have read the assignment.

3). Why does the professor mention McDonald's?

- (A) to compare the quality of its food with the quality of USA Today's stories
- (B) to compare the design of its restaurants with the look of USA Today's pages
- (C) to compare the great success of McDonald's with the success of USA Today
- (D) to compare the early years of McDonald's with the early years of USA Today

4). What is a key feature of USA Today mentioned in the lecture?

- (A) lots of international news
- (B) color photos and graphics
- (C) stories about crime and killing
- (D) stories that jump from page one

5). Why does the professor imply when he says this: "They replaced quote unquote serious news with feature stories."?

- (A) that USA Today does not know what serious news is
 - (B) that other papers shouldn't have copied USA Today
 - (C) that people have different definitions of serious news
 - (D) that USA Today changed the style of other papers
- 6). What can be inferred about circulation?
- (A) It measures the number of people who buy each issue of the paper.
 - (B) It measures the number of people who read each issue of the paper.
 - (C) It measures how many people buy and read each issue of the paper.
 - (D) It measures neither how many people buy nor read each issue of the paper.