Enhancing Argumentative Skills through Active Listening: An Experimental Study of Postgraduate English Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of active listening on the development of oral argumentative skills among postgraduate English students at COMSATS University, Islamabad. A cohort of 100 students participated in a structured intervention designed to enhance active listening abilities. Utilizing a pre-test/post-test experimental design, the research assessed improvements in five key dimensions of oral argumentation: organizational structure, coherence, lexical range, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation. Statistical analysis using ANOVA revealed significant gains across all dimensions, demonstrating that active listening training substantially contributes to learners' communicative competence—particularly in contexts requiring academic debate and critical discourse. The findings underscore the pedagogical value of integrating active listening strategies into language instruction to foster critical thinking, enhance mutual understanding, and improve the articulation of complex ideas.

Keywords: Active Listening, Argumentative Skills, Communicative Competence, Postgraduate Students, Oral Argumentation

Introduction

Active listening is a fundamental component of effective communication and plays a pivotal role in language acquisition, particularly within educational and EFL/ESL contexts. Far beyond the passive act of hearing, active listening involves the attentive reception, processing, and thoughtful response to spoken messages. It requires cognitive engagement, empathy, and an ability to interpret meaning in context. Educators and linguists such as Field (2010) and Kline (2015) emphasize that listening must be taught deliberately as both a cognitive and interactive skill—one that involves mental effort and active participation rather than passive reception.

In the domain of language learning, especially in second language (L2) classrooms, active listening enables learners not only to decode linguistic input but also to build interpersonal understanding, enhance critical thinking, and respond effectively in spoken discourse. It transforms the learner from a silent recipient into an engaged conversational participant. This transformation is essential for fostering oral proficiency and communicative competence—core goals in language pedagogy.

Despite its importance, listening remains one of the most underemphasized and challenging language skills to develop. Learners often struggle due to various internal and external barriers, such as cognitive overload, limited vocabulary, anxiety, and environmental distractions (Kuo et al., 2017). In many classroom settings, listening is approached as a passive activity, resulting in minimal instructional emphasis compared to speaking, reading, or writing. Hargie (2016) underscores those teachers who practice and model active listening foster environments marked by mutual respect, psychological safety, and learner motivation—all crucial for effective learning.

While considerable research has been conducted on the relationship between speaking and communicative competence, the specific connection between active listening and oral argumentative skills remains relatively underexplored. Argumentation requires clarity of thought, coherent structure, accurate language use, and strategic use of vocabulary—all of which can be enhanced through refined listening practices. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the impact of structured active listening activities on the development of oral argumentative skills among postgraduate English students. It specifically aims to assess improvements in argument structure, coherence, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation within academic communication contexts.

This study is situated within the broader framework of communicative language teaching (CLT), which emphasizes meaningful interaction as both the means and goal of learning a language. In this framework, listening is not an isolated skill but a dynamic process interconnected with speaking, thinking, and responding. As academic settings increasingly prioritize collaborative learning, classroom discussions, and critical dialogue, the ability to construct and defend arguments orally becomes essential. However, effective argumentation depends not only on speaking proficiency but also on the capacity to listen critically to opposing viewpoints, analyze information, and formulate reasoned responses.

Furthermore, the development of argumentative skills is closely aligned with higher-order thinking abilities such as evaluation, analysis, and synthesis, as outlined in Bloom's taxonomy. Active listening serves as the foundation for these skills by enabling learners to accurately interpret claims, detect logical fallacies, and assess the strength of evidence presented by others. Without this receptive competence, students may struggle to engage in meaningful academic debates or respond to questions with clarity and coherence.

Several scholars argue that listening deserves a more prominent role in curricula designed to enhance academic speaking (Rost, 2011; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Yet, in many language classrooms, active listening is either overlooked or taught implicitly, with limited attention to its strategic and metacognitive dimensions. There is a pressing need to transition from viewing listening as a passive background skill to treating it as a productive, purposeful, and trainable competency that supports spoken argumentation and overall communicative success.

In light of these theoretical considerations, the present study aims to empirically explore how focused instruction in active listening can improve the oral argumentative performance of postgraduate students. The research adopts an experimental design to evaluate measurable changes in five critical areas of argumentation: logical structure, coherence, vocabulary range, error reduction, and pronunciation accuracy. By doing so, it contributes to a growing body of work that calls for integrated approaches to listening and speaking instruction in advanced EFL contexts.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide both pedagogical insights and practical strategies for language instructors who aim to develop not only fluent speakers but also thoughtful listeners capable of engaging in academic reasoning and persuasive discourse. The outcomes of this study have implications for syllabus design, classroom practice, and the broader goal of cultivating critical, articulate, and socially responsive language users.

Research Questions

1.   How does active listening influence the oral argumentative skills of university students?

2.   What is the effect of active listening on specific components of argumentation such as confidence, body language, concreteness, information retention, and multidimensionality?

Research Objectives

1.   To evaluate the effect of active listening on the overall development of oral argumentative skills in university students.

2.   To assess the improvement in individual components of oral argumentation—confidence, body language, concreteness, information retention, and multidimensionality—after active listening intervention.

Literature Review

To a great extent, the act of listening in language learning involves far more than the passive reception of sounds; it requires a complex, active cognitive process of decoding, understanding, and interpreting the speaker's message within its linguistic, contextual, and cultural frames. In the context of second language acquisition (SLA), listening plays a foundational role in developing communicative competence—a multidimensional construct that encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. According to Field (2010), students must first be

taught how to "learn to listen" effectively before they can use listening as a tool to "learn" from interaction. This distinction highlights the need to explicitly teach listening as a skill that can be practiced, monitored, and refined.

What underlies the concept of active listening is not simply attentiveness, but the learner's capacity to extract meaning from discourse, synthesize information, and evaluate the intent and reliability of what is being said. In this sense, active listening is instrumental in fostering deeper cognitive engagement, aiding in the development of critical thinking, and preparing learners for effective academic dialogue and real-world communication. It supports metacognitive awareness, allowing learners to reflect on their understanding and make adjustments to their interpretation strategies during the listening process.

Kline (2015) defines active listening as a deliberate and conscious process that integrates attentiveness, empathy, and respect in receiving and processing a speaker's message. It entails an openness to the speaker's ideas, a willingness to suspend premature judgment, and the ability to respond thoughtfully—all of which are crucial for engaging in reasoned argumentation. In communicative settings, particularly those involving debates or structured academic discussions, this kind of listening becomes indispensable. It not only enhances comprehension but also supports the formulation of logical responses, thereby contributing directly to the learner's argumentative proficiency.

Moreover, scholars such as Rost (2011) and Vandergrift and Goh (2012) argue that listening should be understood as both an input and interaction skill, intertwined with speaking in a reciprocal cycle. Without active listening, students may fail to fully grasp the nuances of arguments presented to them, limiting their ability to respond coherently or persuasively. As such, integrating active listening instruction into language curricula has the potential to strengthen learners' overall communicative competence and empower them to participate more meaningfully in academic and professional conversations.

It's not just absorbing information: it involves paying attention to the speaker's verbal and non-verbal cues, making an appropriate response, and being genuinely interested. This form of active engagement turns communication from a one-way delivery system into a dynamic, two-way channel. Miller and Rollnick (2013) pointed out that this level of engagement creates an atmosphere conducive for collaboration and solutions, allowing for an environment where all participants are valued and empowered.

According to Hargie (2016), education is thus internalized as an effective communication process for smooth transmission of knowledge and the construction of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, active listening increases the quality of instruction and student-teacher interactions. It is noted by Miller and Rollnick (2013) that showing such attention, empathy, and responsiveness by educators creates a setting in which students feel heard, respected, and motivated to participate.

Teaching of listening skills in second language (L2) classrooms is a demanding yet important aspect of language acquisition. Listening itself is not just receptive; it is crucial to the development of learners' communicative competence as well as their overall language proficiency (Walker, 2014; Rehena, 2020).

Yet active listening involves facing some challenges. There are numerous internal and external factors that block effective listening. Kuo, Yu-Chen, Chu, Hui-Chun, and Tsai, Meng-Chieh (2017) mention some obstacles to active listening as internal distractions (e.g. anxiety, fatigue, preoccupations with unrelated thoughts) and external ones (e.g. noise, poor acoustics, speaker- related factors (e.g. monotonous delivery or poor articulation). Listening to individuals trust human relationships and build good interpersonal relationships, which promote teamwork and improve performance. Listening enhances the quality of communication between people; it is important in both educational and workplace environments.

Regions of active listening in relation to verbal argumentation have remained largely unexplored, and the advancement of this study constitutes an important contribution towards establishing a relationship between active listening and the development of oral argumentative culture.

Methodology

In terms of the study sample, 100 students from the Master's in English program at COMSATS University Islamabad participated in the research. The sample was selected through convenience sampling, which is a one of the non-probability sampling techniques and which is a way of selecting participants from the target population based on ease of access (Golzar, Jawad & Tajik, Omid & Noor, Shagofah, 2022).The selected participants were already familiar with academic debates and linguistic theory, which made them an ideal population for evaluating the impact of active

listening on oral argumentation. This sample ensured that the participants had the necessary background knowledge to engage in academic discussions and debates, thus providing a strong foundation for assessing the effectiveness of the active listening intervention.

Research Design

The research employed experimental design (pre-test & post-test) to investigate the impact of active listening on the oral argumentative skills of university students. The experimental group underwent a structured intervention aimed at

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Structure	Between Groups	17.369	5	3.474	15.28	0
	Within Groups	21.359	94	0.227		
	Total	38.728	99			
Coherence	Between Groups	23.424	5	4.685	17.51	0
	Within Groups	25.076	94	0.267		
	Total	48.5	99			
Vocabulary	Between Groups	22.476	5	4.495	19.47	0
	Within Groups	21.684	94	0.231		

enhancing their active listening abilities through targeted exercises and activities. The oral argumentative skills of the sample were assessed by the linguists, before and after the experiment. Assessment of oral argumentative skills was based on following variables:

Structure: Structure, sequence and multidimensionality of the arguments.

Coherence: Connectivity and logic among the components of the arguments.

Vocabulary: Usage of proper register and suitable words while argumentation.

Error Reduction: Avoiding and eliminating errors during the course of argumentation. Pronunciation: Utterance or the way of speaking words to present the arguments.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: One-way ANOVA (Pretest and Posttest data)

		Total	44.16	99			
Error Reduction		Between Groups	18.769	5	3.754	16.365	0
		Within Groups	21.561	94	0.229		
		Total	40.33	99			
Pronunciation		Between Groups	25.852	5	5.17	21.182	0
		Within Groups	22.945	94	0.244		
		Total	48.797	99			

ANOVA shows that all the groups were statistically different on each of the variables-Structure, Coherence, Vocabulary, Error Reduction, and Pronunciation. The significance is shown through the attained p value equal to zero for all the studied variables.. If the p-value is less than or equal to the alpha level (typically 0.05), it indicates that the result is statistically significant. This means that the observed effect is unlikely to have occurred by chance alone, providing support for the significance of the induced intervention (Triola, 2018).

The same applies to Structure (F=15.288, $p<0.05$), showing a difference in how well such people structure their arguments. Likewise, it showed highly significant values for Coherence (F = 17.561, $p < 0.05$) and Vocabulary (F = 19.487, $p < 0.05$), indicating active listening has a positive relation with the coherence and vocabulary breadth during arguments.

Results on Error Reduction (F = 16.365, $p < 0.05$) mean that better listening gives fewer errors in speech. This, therefore, indicates the relationship between listening skills and preciseness in argumentative language.

The one-way ANOVA of the pre-test and post-test data unequivocally proves the significant effect of active listening on several critical dimensions of oral argumentative abilities. The statistical results are negative in that, all items investigate to highlight clear improvement across aspects in argumentation with p-values of 0($p < 0.05$) showing such occurrences as very statistically significant. This goes on to show that active listening puts a very significant effect not only in communication but also in improving quality and depth of arguments.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of variables recorded pre-test

	Structure (1-5)	Coherence (1-5)	Vocabulary (1-5)	Error Reduction (1-5)	Pronunciation (1-5)
N	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	2.36	2.29	2.12	2.17	2.12
Std. Error of Mean	0.00177	0.00106	0.00064	0.000137	0.000640
Std. Devi Ation	0.01771	0.01068	0.00640	0.00137	0.00640
Varia nce	0.00031	0.00011	0.000986	0.000895	0.000986

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 describe the pre-test evaluation of five variables using a Likert scale (1-5). The mean scores indicate overall low outcomes, with "Coherence" and "Structure" (2.29) and (2.36) respectively, scoring highest and "Pronunciation" (2.12) lowest. The standard deviations are relatively low, suggesting consistent responses among participants, with the highest variability in "Pronunciation and Vocabulary" (0.000986) and the least in "Coherence" (0.00011). The standard errors of the means are minimal, reflecting reliable averages for the sample size (N=100). Variances are standard across variables, showing balanced distributions. Overall, the data suggests a normally low performance pre-test with slight variations across evaluated aspects.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of variables recorded post-test

	Structure (1-5)	Coherence (1-5)	Vocabulary (1-5)	Error Reduction (1-5)	Pronunciation (1-5)
N	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	3.735	3.7	3.72	3.849	3.727
Std. Error of Mean	0.06254	0.06999	0.06679	0.06383	0.07021
Std. Devi Ation	0.62545	0.69993	0.66788	0.63826	0.70207
Variance	0.391	0.49	0.446	0.407	0.493

The descriptive statistics in Table 3 summarize the post-test evaluation of five variables using a Likert scale (1-5). The mean scores indicate overall positive outcomes, with "Error Reduction" (3.849) scoring highest and "Confidence" (3.635) lowest. The standard deviations are relatively low, suggesting consistent responses among participants, with the highest variability in "Error Reduction" (0.70207) and the least in "Structure" (0.62545). The standard errors of the means are minimal, reflecting reliable averages for the sample size (N=100). Variances are moderate across variables, showing balanced distributions. Overall, the data suggests a good performance post-test with slight variations across evaluated aspects.

FINDINGS

The current study was designed to investigate the effect of active listening on the oral argumentative proficiency English students studying at COMSATS University Islamabad. Convenience sample of 100 students underwent active listening intervention. Oral argumentation quality was scored both before and after the treatment aimed at increasing active listening skill.

All five attributes (Structure, Coherence, Vocabulary, Error Reduction, and Pronunciation) were found to be low performing, as recorded in the descriptive statistics of the pre-test (Table 4) on a 5-Likert point scale. The structure of the sets with the highest mean was Structure (M = 2.36) and Coherence was considered to be highest when pair (M = 2.29), and Vocabulary and Pronunciation were noted to be lowest (M = 2.12). Standard deviations were very low, indicating little variability in, and high consistency of, participants' performance prior to the intervention.

In the post-test measures (Table 5), a significant increase was observed for all five variables. The greatest gains were in Error Reduction (M = 3.849), closely followed by Vocabulary (M = 3.72), Structure (M = 3.735), and Coherence (M = 3.7). The variances and standard deviations also continued to be moderate, which indicated that changes were uniform to all of the respondents.

The one-way ANOVA analysis showed significant differences between all the five variables, in the active listening treatment condition:

Structure: $F(5, 94) = 15.288$, p =.000 3.

Coherence: $F(5, 94) = 17.561$, p = 0.000

$F(5,94) = 19.487$, p = 0.000 for vocabulary.

Error Reduction: $F(5, 94) = 16.365$, p =.000.

Pronunciation F= 21.182, p $F(5, 94) = 21.182$, p < 0.000

p-value < 0.05 (in all cases), meaning a significant effect due to the intervention. These results, particularly in terms of their structuring, logic, language (i.e., absence of mistakes and pronunciation), and criteria for building the argumentation, help to confirm that the active listening intervention had a positive impact on oral argumentative skills.

Final Thoughts

The statistically significant differences observed between the pre-test and post-test performance of participants offer compelling evidence in support of the central hypothesis: active listening plays a vital role in enhancing oral argumentative skills among postgraduate learners. These findings affirm that active listening is not merely a passive linguistic function, but a dynamic, cognitive process that facilitates the acquisition and application of complex language structures essential for academic communication.

Notably, the development observed across all five key dimensions of argumentation—namely argument structure, coherence, vocabulary, error reduction, and pronunciation—suggests that listening comprehension is foundational to effective spoken discourse. As students improve their ability to decode spoken input, understand speaker intent, and engage empathetically with diverse perspectives, they become more accurate in articulating arguments, more coherent in structuring their ideas, and more expressive in presenting their viewpoints.

These improvements are particularly meaningful in academic settings, where oral communication is increasingly valued as a mode of assessment, collaboration, and critical engagement. The ability to participate confidently in academic discussions and debates requires not only fluency but also the capacity to listen, process, and respond with intellectual and rhetorical precision. Active listening, therefore, contributes not only to linguistic competence but also to the cultivation of analytical reasoning, mutual understanding, and respectful dialogue—skills that are essential for both academic and professional success.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the pedagogical importance of incorporating structured active listening activities into language curricula, particularly at the postgraduate level where the demands of critical thinking and oral argumentation are high. The outcomes underscore that fostering active listening is not an ancillary practice, but a core strategy for empowering learners to become effective communicators and thoughtful contributors in academic discourse communities.

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