

# **The Power of Suggestion to Alter the Performance of EFL Students in a Listening Exercise**

**Ana María Alcántara Ramos** (52.944.535-F)

Tutor: Ignasi Navarro Ferrando

Master's Degree for Secondary Education, Vocational Training and Language  
Teaching. Specialty: English Language

JAUME I UNIVERSITY (Castellón de la Plana, Spain)

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NB: This paper has been written in American English, hence it obeys to the spelling rules of the English language native to the USA.

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the study of the influence of suggestion on B2.2 learners of English as a Foreign Language (henceforth, EFL) when doing a common listening exercise, showing the power of suggestive statements to alter their results. It demonstrates the connection between suggestion, one's expectations and self-efficacy beliefs and how it is possible to obtain changes in EFL students' experience and outcomes in class by means of such connection.

The results of this research demonstrate the benefits of neutral and positive suggestive statements to improve students' listening skills. These results also prove the detrimental effects negative suggestions exert on students' achievements in a listening exercise.

Key words: suggestion, autosuggestion, hypnosis, response expectancy, self-efficacy belief, subconscious mind, imagination, will, Stroop effect, Pygmalion effect.

## **Introduction**

A profuse number of scientific studies have proven the power of suggestion to foster certain outcomes on individuals in different fields of research, such as Lynn et al (2015); Kumar (2013); Coué (1922); and Baudouin (1921). And according to the nature of the results obtained, different investigators have not only indicated the advisability of applying suggestion to the educational sector but also demonstrated the benefits this resource provides to the learning process and the improvement of students' performance, like Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968); Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016); Alguacil (2013); and Luzardo-Zschaeck (2002).

The present work investigates the influence of suggestive statements on B2 EFL students and aims to give valuable keys to promote better results in the training process of language learners.

## **Hypothesis**

The present study intends to prove whether suggestive statements influence students' performance on a listening exercise. The question this work answers is:

***Is it possible to alter the performance of EFL students by manipulating their expectations on the difficulty of a common listening exercise?***

This question gains significance for the fact that such listening exercise is two levels higher than the level of competence of the English language the students who have participated in the study held in that moment. If the hypothesis set is proven to be true, suggestion could be considered as a really powerful tool to enhance students' performance potential. In this specific case, suggestion would help students to improve their listening skills and, consequently, their results in an exercise beyond their expected proficiency. Additionally, it could show whether the effects of negative suggestion in the English class are harmful.

## **Objectives**

### **GENERAL OBJECTIVES**

- To observe the influence of suggestion on students' performance in a listening exercise that could be extrapolated to other types of pedagogical activities.
- To study thoroughly the connection between suggestion, expectations, self-efficacy beliefs and performance results.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- To promote positive suggestive statements in education to produce better academic results and increase students' motivation towards a particular subject.
- To learn about the scope of damage negative suggestion can do.
- To contribute to dismiss negative suggestive statements in education.
- To encourage educational agents to increase their awareness when producing suggestive output.
- To strengthen the affectional relationship between teacher and students by means of boosting their self-efficacy beliefs.

## **Justification**

According to various investigators, like Atkinson (1909) and Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016), suggestion occurs frequently in the classroom, many times in a spontaneous way. Evidence shows that suggestion, when conveyed by an authoritative figure -for instance, a respected teacher-, may affect people's behavior. (Lynn et al., 2015; Luzardo-Zschaeck, 2002; Llovet-Barquero, 2009)

The present project aims to study the influence of conscious, intended suggestions to explore the potential that positive and negative output could have on students' behavior and performance and, as a result, offer a helpful, easy tool to increase learners' capabilities, motivation, self-confidence and engagement in class.

Therefore, the justification of this research lies on the advisability of taking advantage of suggestion and profit from its benefits to improve and boost the teaching-learning process. Likewise, it is also highly recommendable that teachers are aware of the harmful impact negative suggestive statements may have on students. This study contributes to this awareness and, therefore, to eliminate negative suggestion from educational activity in case it is proven harmful.

Another important fact that justifies this study is the scarce number of investigations that have been done on the power of suggestion in the classroom, as authors like Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016) state. This is perhaps due to the prominent psychological aspect of suggestion, which operates in the subconscious domain, according to investigators like Lynn et al. (2015), Luzardo-Zschaeck (2002), Llovet-Barquero (2009), Baudouin (1921) and Coué (1922).

The justification of this work could be summarized in two main ideas:

- To contribute to the educational community with a deeper knowledge on the potential of suggestion.
- To offer a pedagogical resource that could be useful to educational agents to foster students' learning.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Evidence on The Power of Suggestion**

The power of suggestion has been proven in various hypnosis studies by which their conductors reached the conclusion that similar results can be achieved without the need of immersing the individual into a hypnotic state. “All behaviors seen in hypnosis can also be obtained without hypnosis.” (Kirsch, 1999: 100) In that study, Kirsch also mentions Clark Hull (1933: 391): “No phenomenon whatever can be produced in hypnosis that cannot be produced to lesser degrees by suggestion given in the normal waking condition. [...] These data implicates that suggestion, rather than hypnosis, is the fundamental phenomenon on which we should focus.” Coué (1922: 24) also reached this conclusion after doing several hypnotic experiments.

Lynn et al. (2015: 315-316) talk about the noticeable high correlation between responsiveness to certain suggestions in hypnosis and the same suggestions without the induction of hypnosis. “We propose that the ability to respond to imaginative suggestions depends on the ability to experience or translate the suggested sensations and imaginings into credible and compelling subjective experiences and actions.” In other words, the ability to internalize and visualize results is crucial to obtain a change in experience, regardless of the fact that there is hypnosis induction or not. They also affirm that “impressive changes in the brain activation can be observed as a product of suggestion that is akin to those produced by real perceptual experiences (Szechtman, Woody, Bowers, & Nahmias, 1998; Woody & Szechtman, 2000).”

In an experiment carried out by Young and Cooper (1972), a group of subjects was told that hypnotized people experience spontaneous amnesia, whereas a second group was told that hypnotized subjects do not experience spontaneous amnesia (Kirsch, 1999: 100):

“The subjects were later tested for their beliefs about hypnosis. [...] When later hypnotized and tested for the so called *spontaneous* amnesia, 37% of the subjects in

the first group displayed it, compared to only 10% of the second group. Thus, the occurrence of amnesia was hardly *spontaneous*. This is further confirmed by another interesting finding in these data. Across both groups, 75% of the subjects who expected amnesia experienced it, whereas none of those who did not expect amnesia experienced it.”

Lynn et al. (2015: 319) quote themselves from their 2008’s study: “An altered state is not necessary to explain hypnotic responses. The small advantage for hypnosis in increasing suggestibility may be a function of enhanced motivation and expectancies that often accompany the induction of hypnosis.”

Apparently, in hypnotic-like sessions, suggestion and the response expectancy created on suggestion are decisive to vary the resultant experience or behavior. “Expectancies often -but not always- determine both when responses will occur and the nature of those responses.” (Lynn et al., 2015: 320). And here they express such idea more blatantly: “The experience of hypnotic suggestions occurs not so much by a process of dissociation or via a radically altered state of consciousness, but by active engagement with suggestions.” (Lynn et al., 2015: 320)

On the basis of research evidence, it seems that suggestions and their acceptance by the subjects are the key to understanding the results of hypnotic and non-hypnotic exposure. “Such experiential involvement accompanies a response set to embrace a suggested thought or idea –a so-called *preparedness to respond* (Sheenhan & McConkey, 1982)- in which experiences have an effortless or involuntary quality, *as if they happened by themselves* (Tellegen, 1981: 222).” “The experiential set is itself prepared or primed by positive attitudes, beliefs and expectancies regarding hypnosis and facilitated by rapport with the hypnotist.” (Lynn et al., 2015: 320)

Since suggestions have to be accepted by the subject to alter his / her experience towards a preset outcome, it seems logical that a cordial relationship between the subject and the conductor could facilitate such acceptance.



Moreover, Lynn et al point out an observation included in their 1990's work about the automaticity of the responses: "In hypnosis, the goals and strategies that people adopt are shaped and primed by suggestions, and the key response set may operate outside of immediate awareness." (Lynn et al., 2015: 321).

In addition, research has proved that there are high and low suggestible subjects and such degree depends on, among other variables, motivation, expectancies and fantasy-proneness, according to Lynn et al. (2015: 322), citing Lynn, Kirsch, Knox, & Lilienfeld (2006).

As an example of this phenomenon, Raz et al. (2002) carried out a study of Stroop<sup>1</sup> performance in which they demonstrated that "highly suggestible individuals are able to completely eliminate Stroop interference following a post-hypnotic suggestion to see the words in a foreign language. In contrast, low-suggestible individuals displayed no such ability." (Lynn et al., 2015: 324).

Proving once again that suggestion, and not hypnosis, is the key to obtaining influenced responses, a further study on Stroop effect took place in Kirsch's laboratory (Raz, Kirsch, Pollard, & Nitkin-Kaner, 2006), in which "the same suggestions Raz et al. (2002) used, when not presented in the context of hypnosis, also significantly reduced Stroop conflict." (Lynn et al., 2015: 324).

And the latter study has not been the only one to prove the power of suggestion to eliminate the Stroop effect on highly suggestible people. Other similar studies have been conducted by Nordby, Jasiukaitis, & Spiegel (1999) and Sheehan, Donovan, & MacLeod (1988), in which experimenters just provided "attention-focusing instructions" (Lynn et al., 2015: 324).

According to Baudouin (1921: 298), Bernheim also demonstrated that suggestion can produce hypnosis unaided. This author talked as well about the

<sup>1</sup>In psychology, the *Stroop effect* is a demonstration of interference in the reaction time of a task. When the name of a color (e.g., *blue*, *green*, or *red*) is printed in a color not denoted by the name (e.g., the word *red* printed in blue ink instead of red ink), naming the color of the word takes longer and is more prone to errors than when the color of the ink matches the name of the color. The effect is named after John Ridley Stroop, who first published the effect in English in 1935. (This definition is based on *Studies of Interference in Serial Verbal Reactions* (Stroop, 1935) and is published on Wikipedia).

efficacy of suggestion to cure some physical conditions, underlining the huge potential of suggestion: “Great number of organic affections, even those which physical methods of treatment have failed to relieve, have yielded to the power of suggestion.” (Baudouin, 1921: 322)

For instance, Coué (1922: 24-25) explained: “If a doctor after examining his patient, writes a prescription and gives it to him without any comment, the remedies prescribed will not have much chance of succeeding; if, on the other hand, he explains to his patient that such and such medicines must be taken in such and such conditions and that they will produce certain results, those results are practically certain to be brought about.”

Likewise, Brown (1928: 28) talked about numerous cases of patients who had to undergo surgery and who were more frightened of anesthesia than the surgery itself, and they overcame this fear thanks to suggestion treatment.

In this research work, four groups of EFL students with a B2 competence level had to tackle a C2 listening exercise without them being aware of the real level of difficulty of the exercise, as they assumed it was a regular exercise similar to the ones they had done in previous classes. This B2-C2 gap could seem generally impassable. This research tested if the exposure to suggestion assisted or, by contrast, blocked the students in their attempt to bridge the gap.

### **Definitions of the Term *Suggestion***

Before continuing expanding the information about previous studies and findings related to the power of suggestion, it seems proper to define the term *suggestion*.

According to Kirsch (1999: 101), a suggestion is a communication indicating that an individual will experience a particular response. “It is a stimulus that conveys information that a nonvolitional response will occur.” And he asserts that the previous phase to expecting that the suggested idea or event will occur is the acceptance of such suggestion by the subject (Kirsch, 1999: 102). Thus, the importance of accepting the information contained in the suggestion in order

to obtain a certain result in experience is embodied in the definition of the term itself, and it appears as a common axiom in all research on the matter.

Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016: 43), in their definition of the term, emphasize the importance of the authority and prestige of the person who exerts the influence on another or others:

“El término sugestión viene del latín *suggerere*” (colocar debajo, insinuar, dejar entender). Está presente en todos los contextos de la vida cotidiana y profesional en que se desarrolla la comunicación interpersonal oral [...] en un nivel predominantemente afectivo que logra influir en la subjetividad de los demás, sin necesidad de un proceso de argumentación racional y muy influido por la autoridad y el prestigio del que sugestiona”.

This premise about the authority and prestige attached to the personality of the conductor appears to be another fundamental concept on which all researchers agree unanimously for suggestions to be first accepted and then reflected on experience.

Predvechni & Sherkovin (1981) offer a definition of suggestion based on the power of influence exerted on the audience due to a lack of criticism towards the information received. “Es el modo de influencia comunicativa calculado para la percepción no crítica de las informaciones de las cuales se afirma o se niega algo sin demostración.” Mulet (2006), Andrieva (1984) and Grenet & Martínez (1985) have reached similar conclusions. Sherkovin (1982) and González (1989), accordingly to Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016), also highlight the prestige of the source so that the suggestion is meaningful to the audience. (Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres, 2016: 44)

Atkinson (1909: 6-7) offered similar definitions: “The introduction of anything in the mind of the other, in an indirect and non-argumentative manner.” And Lynn et al. (2015: 319) also mentioned the importance of conveying the suggestion clearly.

According to Kirsch (1999: 101), a suggestion differs from an instruction or a command. “*Take this medication* is an instruction. In contrast, *It will help you sleep* is a suggestion because it suggests to the person that taking the pill will automatically induce sleep”. He adds: “Statements are often interpreted as suggestions, rather than commands, because the response is not experienced as being under direct volitional control”, as the response is originated in the unknown realm of the subconscious mind, as a number of researchers claim (Baudouin, 1921; Coué, 1922; Luzardo-Zschaeck, 2002; Llovet-Barquero, 2009; Brown, 1928; Tellegen, 1981, Lynn et al., 2015).

Emile Coué was the first psychologist to introduce the concept *autosuggestion*, seconded immediately by Charles Baudouin, and he explained that to understand properly the phenomena of suggestion, or to speak more correctly, of autosuggestion, it is necessary to know that two absolutely distinct selves exist within us. “Both are intelligent, but while one is conscious the other is unconscious. [...] The unconscious is credulous and accepts with unreasoning docility what it is told.” (Coué, 1922: 5 – 7).

When a suggestive statement is accepted, such suggestive information is held by the subconscious mind, which apparently has the power to start a process of non-rational changes in the individual which are aimed at providing the experience suggested. That would explain why suggestions can be so powerful to alter individuals’ experiences.

Coué would be followed by others who agreed on the term *autosuggestion*, like Brown (1928: 29), who affirmed that “all suggestion seems to be, in essence, auto-suggestion, since it must be accepted by the patient if it is to work at all.” Moreover, Coué (1922: 11) affirmed:

“Suggestion does not indeed exist by itself. It does not and cannot exist except on the sine qua non condition of transforming itself into autosuggestion in the subject. This latter word may be defined as *the implanting of an idea in oneself by oneself.*”

This is what he meant when he talked about autosuggestion, in contrast with heterosuggestion, which in his opinion does not exist by itself. And not only Brown (1928) would coincide with Coué on this; also contemporaneous authors do, like González (1989).

Coué (1922: 12-13) defined autosuggestion quite simply: “The influence of the imagination upon the moral and physical being of mankind.”

### **How Suggestion Works**

Coué (1922: 21) summarized in these lines the way his method of autosuggestion works for our own benefit: “By considering the thing easy it becomes so for you, although it might seem difficult to others [...] whereas if you had considered it as difficult or impossible it would have become so for you, simply because you would have thought it so.”

This reflection is the fundamental idea which the present study relies on. EFL students with a B2 English competence faced a C2 listening exercise ignoring its real level of difficulty as they assumed it was a B2.2-like exercise. This assumption was taken as an advantage to complement the effect of suggestion. Additionally, by means of the different type of suggestion provided to each group, the participants were expected to have a certain attitude towards the level of difficulty of the listening exercise that would influenced their response expectancy. Those who received positive suggestion were, according to the evidence gathered, supposed to believe they could surpass the task without any kind of added effort. However, those who were exposed to negative suggestion, were expected to tackle the exercise as a challenge.

According to Coué (1922: 21), the way we model our mindset will determine how we will experience certain events in life. When we make a judgment, we activate the power of autosuggestion in a way in which our thoughts, words, deeds and capabilities are focused on reaching an outcome that confirms our previous judgment.

On the basis of this procedure, teachers could make good use of suggestion by implementing an attitude of success on the students' mind and foster their capabilities.

### **Suggestion vs. Will**

Considering Coue's reflections about how suggestion works, one may think that such process does not differ much from the way will works. Baudouin (1921: 326) clarified the difference between these two concepts: "Whereas a voluntary act is one of which consciousness is aware, the mechanism of a suggested act remains essentially subconscious". Thus, the main difference between outcomes achieved by means of will and those achieved by means of suggestion is awareness.

Moreover, Baudouin (1921: 326) acknowledged the concept *suggestion* as one of a kind and he claimed its own category: "In the psychology of the schools it is customary to distinguish three types of mental activity: instinct, habit, and the will. Suggestion is not reducible to any of these categories. It is an activity *sui generis*, and must be henceforward allotted its place in psychology side by side with the other three."

### **Response Expectancy and Self-Efficacy Theories**

In order to understand deeply the power of suggestion to create changes in experience, it is necessary to consider the connection between suggestion, response expectancy and self-efficacy beliefs.

In order to have a clear concept of what Response Expectancy and Self-Efficacy Theories are, here I expose some academic definitions of these theories developed by Kirsch and Bandura respectively which reveal their critical role in the suggestive practice.

## **RESPONSE EXPECTANCY THEORY**

According to Kirsch (1999: 102), response expectancies are “expectancies for the occurrence of nonvolitional responses, such as pain, alertness, fear, sadness, and joy.” And he sets an example: “Being told that a drug has a particular effect or observing its effect on others can produce an expectation of that effect when the drug is ingested.”

The experiment presented in this work is partly based on the principle of the Response Expectancy Theory: If students are told that a listening exercise is easy or it is hard, in relation to this theory they will generate an according response expectancy.

Kumar (2013: 273) describes a study by Colagiuri, Livesey, & Harris –also mentioned by Garry et al. (2012)- related to students’ performance in which a group of participants had to find a rotated T among several distracters. Just before carrying out the task, the subjects sniffed a cotton pad. On half of the trials, the pad was scented, and on the other half it was unscented. Subjects were told that the scented pad would improve their performance, that it would hurt their performance, or that it would have no effect on their performance – and that is exactly what happened in every case. Kumar labels these outcomes influenced by suggestions as “response expectancies”. Consequently, he thinks that that experiment “demonstrates that suggestions can affect implicit learning abilities either in a useful or a detrimental manner.” Additionally, he claims that suggestions can also “lead people to increase cognitive effort and memory performance”. Citing Garry et al. (2012) and Kirsch (1985; 1997) he writes:

“There is reasonable research evidence now to show that expectancies can directly alter our subjective experience of internal states. As a result, we also modify our behavior to produce a particular outcome when we anticipate it. This is called Response Expectancy Theory.”

In 1965, Rosenthal and Jacobson conducted a study in a public elementary school to study the Pygmalion effect<sup>2</sup> in the classroom. In such study, several teachers received fake reports about the IQ of some students at random. These false reports showed that certain students had exceptionally elevated IQs. The experiment consisted of observing if the high expectations the teachers had on these so-called smarter kids influenced in any way their academic performance and results. In the final conclusions, Rosenthal & Jacobson say: “When teachers expected that certain children would show greater intellectual development, those children did show greater intellectual development.” (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968: 21)

Garry et al. (2012: 151) explain the phenomenon by which expectations influence cognitions and behaviors using Kirsch’s findings (1997; 2004): “When we expect a particular outcome, we automatically set in motion a chain of cognitions and behaviors to produce that outcome.” And citing Stewart-Williams & Podd (2004), the authors above say that “although expectancies can develop in many ways, they are often the product of suggestion.”

## **SELF-EFFICACY THEORY**

Bandura (1977) formally defined perceived self-efficacy as “personal judgments of one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals.” (Zimmerman, 2000: 83).

Kirsch (1999: 102) sees similarities between the two theories: “Response expectancies are somewhat similar to self-efficacy expectations, and in some circumstances the two constructs overlap considerably (Kirsch, 1985).”

The present study is an example of what Kirsch announced in his 1999’s work about the feedback between both theories. In order to study the effects of suggestion, it is also necessary to observe how the students’ response

<sup>2</sup> The Pygmalion effect is a type of self-fulfilling prophecy where if you think something will happen, you may unconsciously make it happen through your actions or inaction. It occurs in the workplace when a manager raises his or her expectations for the performance of workers, and this actually results in an increase in worker performance. (Grimsley, 2016)



expectancies and self-efficacy beliefs modulate their experience, as in this case both construct overlap: obtaining a certain result in the listening exercise not only implicated to create a response expectancy to the suggestion provided but also to deal with one's self-efficacy beliefs.

Zimmerman (2000: 82-83) observed the effect of self-efficacy beliefs in academic performance in his paper *Self-Efficacy: An Essential Motive to Learn*, in which he claims: "Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to be sensitive to subtle changes in students' performance context, to interact with self-regulated learning processes, and to mediate students' academic achievement." In this work, the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in academic performance is supported by Bandura's (1986) contribution: "Although self-efficacy and outcome expectations were both hypothesized to affect motivation, he (Bandura) suggested that self-efficacy would play a larger role because the types of outcomes people anticipate depend largely on their judgments of how well they will be able to perform in given situations."

Bandura pointed out the virtue of rating self-efficacy before tackling the task: "Self-efficacy judgments specifically refer to *future* functioning and are assessed before students perform the relevant activities. This antecedent property positions self-efficacy judgments to play a causal role in academic motivation." (Zimmerman, 2000: 84).

In this study, response expectancy and self-efficacy beliefs were assessed before facing the experimental listening exercise. A simple questionnaire with three questions was handed to the participants in order to gather information about both constructs and, consequently, measure the impact of the different types of suggestion received.

The aim of this work is to prove if suggestion can create certain expectations that lead students to a result in conformity with the type of suggestion given.

The students participating in the experiment had, at the moment, a B2 level of competence of the English language. However, the listening exercise of the study has a C2 level of difficulty. Conventional wisdom could make us think that a C2 listening exercise is a challenge beyond B2.2 students' competence.

Hence, I created this frame to put the power of suggestion and the theories of response expectancy and self-efficacy to the test and, subsequently, verify if suggestion can actually affect student's listening skills.

### **Placebo Effects**

Benson & Friedman (1996) defined the placebo effect as "any outcome that is not attributed to a specific treatment but rather to an individual's mindset." (Praganich & Erdal, 2014: 857).

Interestingly, placebos produce a similar effect on individuals to suggestion and response expectancy. Kirsch (1997: 70) reflected this resemblance by stating that "placebos generate response expectancies, and response expectancies generate changes in experience", exactly the same way suggestion works.

The medicine field is fairly aware of placebo effects on patients and use them to treat certain health conditions, taking advantage of the power of the mind to alter one's attitude and behavior in order to obtain the predicted results. However, the educational field has yet to profit from suggestion effect in a precise, methodological way.

### **Application of Suggestion in a Pedagogical Context**

In order to apply suggestion in the classroom, it is first advisable to consider some reflections made by other researchers about suggestion in an educational context.

Atkinson (1909: 41) claimed that education is "largely a matter of suggestion". "The suggestion of authority is one of the first forms that make its impress upon the youthful mind. The statements, views, opinions and actions of those to whom the child looks for authority are impressed strongly and deeply upon the child mind".

The authority factor is a sine qua non condition to obtain the pursued effects of suggestion, regardless of the age of the students. Notwithstanding the fact that

younger individuals may be more impressionable, the conductor must project respect and prestige on the learners as a prior stage to work with suggestive statements.

Coué (1922: 5) remarked: “Autosuggestion is an instrument that we possess at birth, and in this instrument, or rather in this force, resides a marvelous and incalculable power, which according to circumstances produces the best or the worst results. Knowledge of this force is useful to each one of us, but it is peculiarly indispensable to doctors, magistrates, lawyers, and to those engaged in the work of education.”

Baudouin (1921: 309-311) said: “Induced suggestion is not a violation of the subject’s individuality; it is a means of training the subject’s powers of autosuggestion. This training, far from reducing the subject’s energy, seems, in virtue of its peculiar mechanism, to enhance that energy. [...] The suggestive method cannot properly be regarded as merely a minor weapon in the pedagogical armamentarium. It can be made the auxiliary of all training and of all instruction.”

Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016: 42) regret the fact that suggestion has not been taken much into account as a psychological phenomenon in the educational field due to prioritizing other more rational phenomena as persuasion, despite the fact that, according to them, suggestion occurs in the class constantly and alternatively along with persuasion. They also claim the necessity of being able to assess the impact of suggestive statements.

“Los profesores están combinando constantemente los recursos de la persuasión y la sugestión en el logro de su labor formativa, ya que no todas sus intervenciones e influencias orales están sustentadas en argumentos racionales. Hay afirmaciones que carecen de ellos y tienen un impacto positivo en los alumnos por su autoridad, prestigio y la función que cumple como docente, aunque habría que cuestionarse si lo hacen de manera intuitiva o planificada y si promueven el efecto educativo deseado.”

In that same work, these authors (Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres, 2016: 43) corroborate the benefits of suggestion in the classroom by exposing some empirical evidence of the value of suggestion in university lessons as a sociopsychological resource in the communication between professor and pupil.

Nevertheless, Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres (2016: 48 – 49) affirm that the data obtained about suggestion in the process of college teaching-learning are not sufficient and are incipient, facing the fact that this is a process of investigation still in progress. Therefore, it is necessary to continue the research on this field to attain wider scientific certainty of suggestion as a significant resource of communication in class in order to make an effective use possible.

Lozanov, quoted in Alguacil (2013), states:

“Las sugerencias negativas son fuente de inhibiciones y disminuyen la capacidad real del individuo, pero ayudándole a que se libere de las limitaciones sugeridas por su entorno desde su infancia, se consiguen grandes mejoras en la personalidad y en la conducta y se elevan también significativamente los niveles de aprendizaje.”

According to Lozanov, positive suggestions contribute to increase noticeably students' learning levels. In fact, Lozanov defines suggestion as the key that opens the reserves of the mind to make the acceleration of learning possible. (Luzardo-Zschaeck, 2002).

Luzardo-Zschaeck (2002) talks about Suggestology -a term introduced by Lozanov to refer to the science of suggestion-, to explain that positive suggestion applied to education enhances the capacity of memorizing and learning:

“La Sugestología -a diferencia de la hipnosis- utiliza mecanismos emocionales y sub-sensoriales periféricos que afectan positivamente la capacidad para memorizar y aprender. Esta particularidad es de gran valor para explicar la influencia de la actividad psíquica del subconsciente bajo condiciones ordinarias, sin hipnosis ni sueño.”

And this author, mentioning Johnson, 1982; Kurkov, 1977, & Schuster, 1978, asserts that it has been proven that these sub-sensory reactions benefit intellectual activity and work capacity. Not for nothing Lozanov applied Suggestopaedia (a branch of Suggestology used in Pedagogy) to learning foreign languages. In fact, the capacity of suggestion that teachers have is the basis of the methodology developed by Lozanov et al. (1994) in the book *Las tareas de enseñar*. (Luzardo-Zschaeck, 2002).

Moreover, González (1989) regards suggestion as a didactic resource, and Maturana & Varela (2003) refer to research results from the application of suggestopaedia on teaching Spanish as a second language when assuring better results in learning as one of the benefits. (Paz-Leyva & Ortiz-Torres, 2016: p. 45).

Finally, I will mention Llovet- Barquero (2009: p. 68) saying, in reference to the Pygmalion effect, that teachers determine in a decisive way their students' success or failure.

The power of suggestion to improve intellectual performance has been long reported by investigators of last and present century. One proper contribution of this research could be to draw attention to the benefits of suggestion in the educational domain and promote its application in a precise, methodological fashion.

## **Methodology**

This work is an empirical investigation based on the experimental method whose objective is to answer the following question:

*Is it possible to alter the performance of EFL students by manipulating their expectations on the difficulty of a common listening exercise?*

I executed this experiment on four groups of B2.2 EFL students who were studying English at the Official School of Languages of Castellón (Spain). There was a control group<sup>3</sup>, who did not receive any type of suggestion, and three experimental groups who received positive, negative and neutral suggestion respectively. The experiment took place in their respective classrooms.

To do the research, I used a [listening exercise](#)<sup>4</sup> (see *Appendices*), and I also used a simple questionnaire<sup>5</sup> (see *Appendices*) to measure the students' self-efficacy and response expectancy rates<sup>6</sup>.

3 The control group in this experiment was significantly smaller than the experimental groups due to the fact that the precise day the experiment was going to take place, the teacher of the group was sick and canceled the class; then she restored the class in two-hour advance but most students did not learn about this last-minute change so only three students came to class that day.

4 The listening exercise used in this experiment has been provided by the training school Audio Gil (Castellón, Spain)

5 This questionnaire gathered information to rate the students' self-efficacy beliefs, and it has been adapted from a scale that assesses student beliefs about personal abilities to complete schoolwork successfully devised by remarkable researchers like Bandura (1997), Patrick, Hicks and Ryan (1997), Roeser, Midgley and Urdan (1996), and Ryan and Patrick (2001). ([www.performwell.org](http://www.performwell.org))

6 The questionnaire measured the students' self-efficacy belief, their expectancy on the difficulty of the listening exercise and their response expectancy to it, corroborating Kirsch's (1999: 102) words: "Response expectancies are somewhat similar to self-efficacy expectations, and in some circumstances the two constructs overlap considerably (Kirsch, 1985). For example, [...] a hypnotic response expectancy is closely related to the belief that one is capable of experiencing a suggested effect." (Kirsch, 1999: 102). In the current project, both constructs are closely related and depend on one another due to the skilled nature of the exercise

The level of difficulty of the listening exercise is C2<sup>7</sup>, whereas the participants' level of competence of the English language was B2<sup>8</sup>.

The methodology of the listening exercise was based on autonomous, individual work. The exercise was composed of three different tasks: a word/short-phrase-completion task, a three-option multiple-choice question task and a true-or-false task.

proposed. Citing Kirsch (1985), in this case, both constructs would overlap.

7 According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the C2 level of competence of a language is characterized by the following abilities: "I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent." (The Council of Europe, 2004: 27)

8 According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the B2 level of competence of a language is characterized by the following abilities: "I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect." (The Council of Europe, 2004: 27)

## **Description of the Study**

The experimental phase consisted of giving each of the four groups of students different types of suggestion about the level of difficulty of the listening exercise they were about to do. Before receiving such suggestions, the students were informed that all the recordings of the exercise had been extracted from real sources, such as radio interviews, Internet commercials, answering machine messages, celebrities' speeches... Such information was delivered just as a simple indication of the nature of the recordings in the exercise except for the group of students who received negative suggestion. In that case, that information was deliberately conveyed and naturally received as a warning of its difficulty.

GROUP OF STUDENTS	TYPE OF SUGGESTION	SUGGESTION
Control group	None	
Experimental group n. 1	Positive	You will have no difficulty in doing this exercise. You know all the vocabulary you are going to hear. Listen carefully and you will be able to do it without any kind of trouble.
Experimental group n. 2	Negative	The coming listening exercise is quite difficult. It is harder than those you are used to doing in class because the recordings contain real audio material and it goes at fast, real speed. But listen carefully and try to do your best. Don't panic and don't worry if you find it too hard. Continue listening and trying until the exercise finishes.
Experimental group n. 3	Neutral	As all the recordings contain real input, it may seem hard at first, but actually this exercise has the same level of difficulty as the listening exercises you normally do in class. Listen carefully and you will be able to do it without any kind of effort.

Afterwards, and in order to make it possible to measure the impact of such suggestions, they completed a simple, anonymous questionnaire in which they had to rate their own self-efficacy beliefs regarding their general listening skills



and their expectations on their own performance in the following listening exercise. Such results were observed and compared with the type of suggestion received and the actual result of the listening exercise in every case once the experiment was accomplished.

As for the experimental session, it consisted of telling the students they were going to do a listening exercise. They were never informed about the actual level of the listening exercise: C2, eliciting the assumption that it was a B2-level-of-difficulty exercise. The reason why the real level of difficulty of the exercise was never revealed to the students was to assure that the results obtained were as reliable as possible. Had the students been informed about the actual level of the exercise, their performance might have been conditioned and intimidated by the fact they were facing a task beyond their current competence level and, consequently, the results could have been lessened due to negative autosuggestion. Therefore, the effect of the suggestions I provided them could have been hindered or even null and void.

## **Results**

### **Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire**

Firstly, I am going to comment the results of the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire in the four groups of study.

Starting with the first question: “Rate your usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises”, the group that marked the highest rate was the control group, with 73%, far from the rates of the experimental groups of negative, positive, and neutral suggestion, whose figures were 59.5%, 61% and 62.5% respectively (See *Table 1* and *Figure 1*). The proximity of rates among the three experimental groups is visible, with only a progressive difference of 1.5%, i.e., a difference of 3% between the lowest and the highest figures. However, the control group rated their usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises over 10% higher than the other groups.

As this first question, which asked for a relatively objective answer, was the only one in the questionnaire which was not possibly influenced by the suggestive statements, it is important to keep this data in mind in order to compare these rates with others to draw significant conclusions.

**TABLE 1: SELF-EFFICACY BELIEF QUESTIONNAIRE**

*Question 1: Usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises*

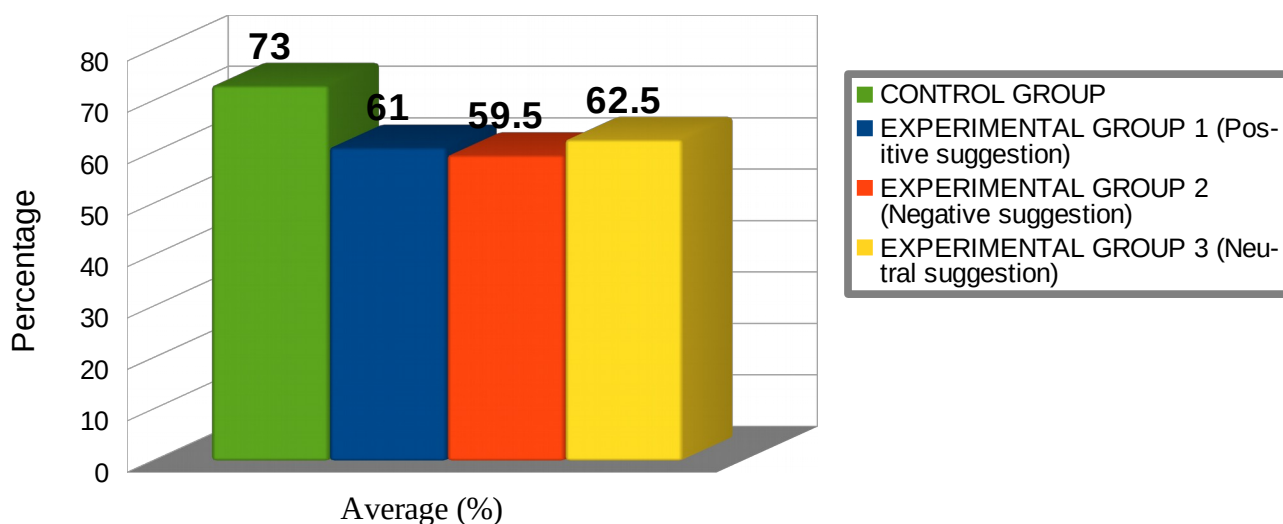
*Participants' self-efficacy belief rates regarding their oral comprehension skills.*

USUAL PERCENTAGE OF CORRECT ANSWERS	CONTROL GROUP (3 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)
Below 40%		2	2	
Between 40% and 60%	1	3	3	3
Between 60% and 80%		11	6	2
Between 80% and 90%	2		1	1
Between 90% and 100%				
<b>Average</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>59.5%</b>	<b>62.5%</b>

*The average figures have been calculated with the mean percentages<sup>9</sup> in every category*

**FIGURE 1**

**Average of Usual Percentage of Correct Answers in Listening Exercises**



*FIGURE 1: Participants' self-efficacy belief rates regarding their oral comprehension skills.*

9 Below 40% → **30%** // Between 40% and 60% → **50%** // Between 60% and 80% → **70%** //  
Between 80% and 90% → **85%** // Between 90% and 100% → **95%**

Moving on to the second question of the questionnaire: “What level of difficulty do you expect in the following listening exercise?”, the four groups estimated that the level of difficulty of the exercise was “high”, regardless of the type of suggestion received (See Table and Figure 2).

**TABLE 2: SELF-EFFICACY BELIEF QUESTIONNAIRE**

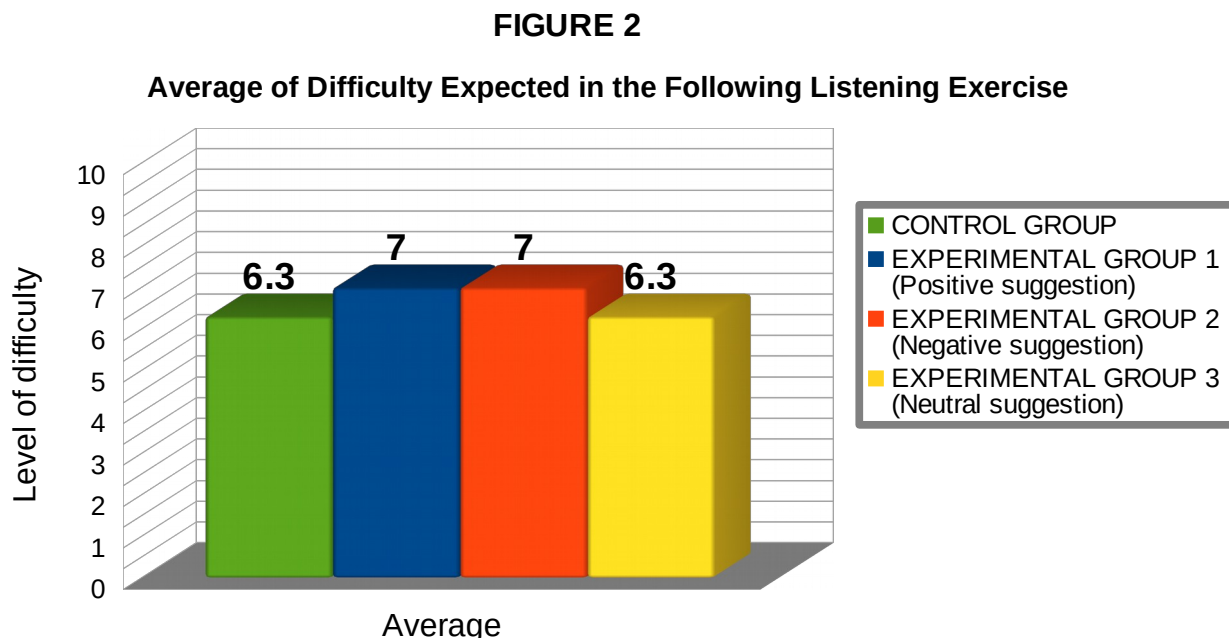
*Question 2: Level of difficulty you expect in the following listening exercise*

*Participants' rates regarding their expectation on the difficulty of the oral comprehension exercise they were going to do.*

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY EXPECTED	CONTROL GROUP (3 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)
0- 2 (Very easy)				
2 - 4 (Easy)				
4- 6 (Normal)	1			2
6-8 (High)	2	15	11	4
8 – 10 (Really high)		1	1	
Average	6.3 (High)	7 (High)	7 (High)	6.3 (High)

*The average result has been calculated with the mean numbers<sup>10</sup> in every category*

10 0- 2 (Very easy) → 1 // 2-4 (Easy) → 3 // 4- 6 (Normal) → 5 // 6-8 (High) → 7 // 8 – 10 (Really high)→ 9



*FIGURE 2: Participants' rates regarding their expectation on the difficulty of the oral comprehension exercise they were going to do.*

By looking at Table 2 and Figure 2, we can notice that, even though the four groups expected the following listening exercise to be highly difficult, both experimental groups who had received positive and negative suggestion numbered the difficulty, in a scale from 0 to 10 (considering 0 the minimum level of difficulty and 10 the maximum level of difficulty), in 7, whereas the groups who had received neutral suggestion or no suggestion coincided in labeling the difficulty in 6.3, seven tenths less than the former groups.

Regarding the third question of the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire: "How successful do you think you are going to be in doing the following listening exercise?", even though all groups were expecting to do a listening exercise with a high level of difficulty, we can observe a 10% difference between the experimental group 1 (positive suggestion) and 2 (negative suggestion) (See Table and Figure 3).

**TABLE 3: SELF-EFFICACY BELIEF QUESTIONNAIRE**

*Question 3: How successful you think you are going to be in the following listening exercise*

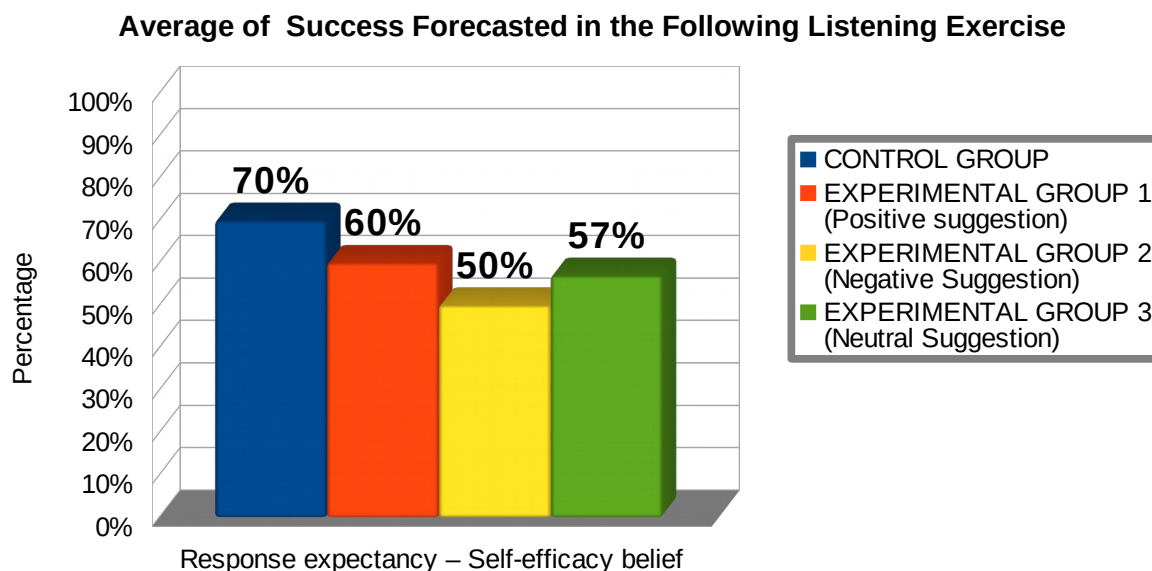
*Participants' rates regarding their response expectancy belief in the performance of the oral comprehension exercise they were going to do.*

RESPONSE EXPECTANCY- SELF-EFFICACY BELIEF	CONTROL GROUP (3 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)
Below 40%		1	3	1
Between 40% and 60%		8	5	2
Between 60% and 80%	3	7	4	3
Between 80% and 90%				
Between 90% and 100%				
Average	70%	60%	50%	57%

*The average figures have been calculated with the mean percentages<sup>11</sup> in every category*

11 Below 40% → **30%** // Between 40% and 60% → **50%** // Between 60% and 80% → **70%** //  
Between 80% and 90% → **85%** // Between 90% and 100% → **95%**

FIGURE 3



*FIGURE 3: Participants' rates regarding their response expectancy belief in the performance of the oral comprehension exercise they were going to do.*

Moreover, the average score in the control group is noticeably high: 10% higher than in group 1, whereas group 3's average value is very close to group 1's.

The reason why this value is so elevated in the control group is because there were only three participants in such group who coincidentally selected the same answer to that question. Therefore, as their answers were identical, so it was the average of that value. In contrast, since the other groups had a larger number of participants, it was more likely that there was bigger diversity in their answers, resulting in a more balanced average figure.

At this point it is possible to observe the difference between the results of the third question and the first, i.e., the difference between the percentage of correct answers they expected to reach in the following listening exercise and their usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises, in order to quantify the impact of the specific type of suggestion received. (see Table and Figure 4)

**TABLE 4: SELF-EFFICACY BELIEF QUESTIONNAIRE**

*Difference between the percentage of correct answers expected in the next listening exercise (question 3) and their usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises (question 1)*

*Result of comparing participants' rates regarding their self-efficacy belief in oral comprehension exercises and their response expectancy belief in the performance of the listening exercise they were going to do.*

	<b>CONTROL GROUP (3 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)</b>
<b>Question 3</b>	70%	60%	50%	57%
<b>Question 1</b>	73%	61%	59.5%	62.5%
<b>Difference</b>	<b>-3%</b>	<b>-1%</b>	<b>-9.5%</b>	<b>-5.5%</b>



FIGURE 4

**Difference between Question 3 (Success Expected in the Next Listening Exercise) and Question 1 (Usual Success in Listening exercises)**

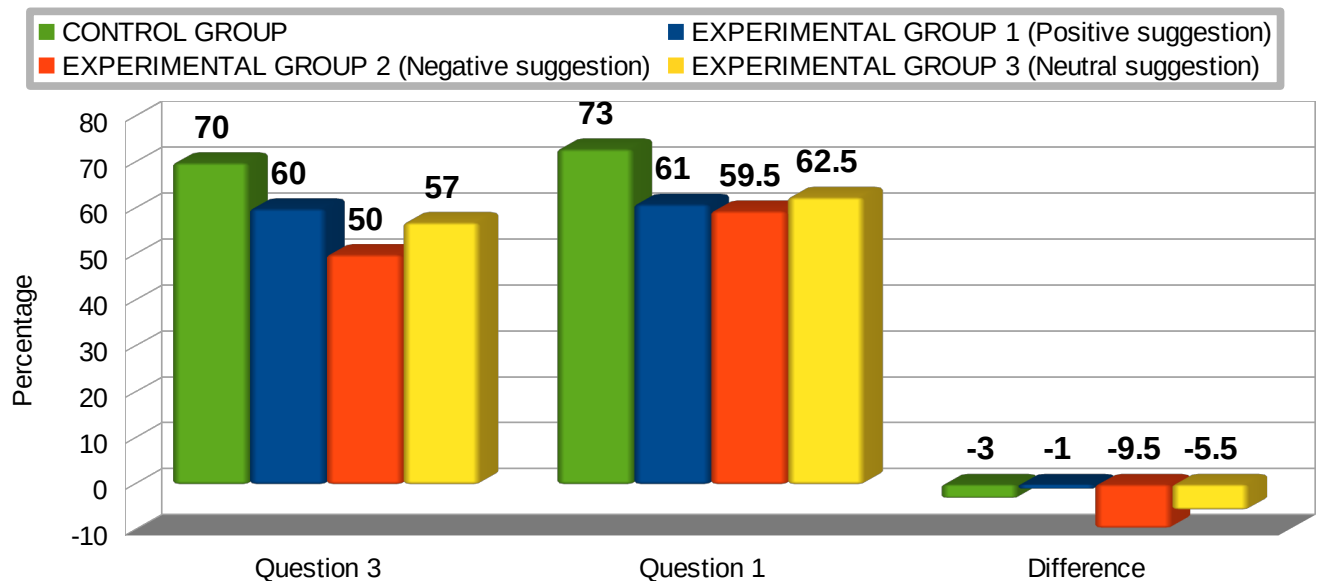


FIGURE 4: Result of comparing participants' rates regarding their self-efficacy belief in oral comprehension exercises and their response expectancy belief in the performance of the listening exercise they were going to do.

By looking at Table and Figure 4, we can find the largest gap in the group who received negative suggestion, with -9.5% variation, while the opposite happens with the group who received positive suggestion, with only a variation of -1%.

### Listening Exercise

Next I am going to expose and analyze the results of the listening exercise (See Table 5 and Figures 5 and 5.1).

**TABLE 5: LISTENING EXERCISE****GRADES**

*Resulting participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise.*

<b>STUDENTS</b>	<b>CONTROL GROUP (3 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)</b>
<b>Student n.1</b>	42%	77%	53%	52%
<b>Student n.2</b>	63%	39%	47%	47%
<b>Student n.3</b>	62%	53%	53%	62%
<b>Student n.4</b>		55%	40%	70%
<b>Student n.5</b>		45%	37%	37%
<b>Student n.6</b>		40%	40%	82%
<b>Student n.7</b>		63%	33%	
<b>Student n.8</b>		79%	27%	
<b>Student n.9</b>		47%	67%	
<b>Student n.10</b>		30%	33%	
<b>Student n.11</b>		60%	60%	
<b>Student n.12</b>		60%	50%	
<b>Student n.13</b>		80%		
<b>Student n.14</b>		50%		
<b>Student n.15</b>		50%		
<b>Student n.16</b>		60%		
<b>Average</b>	<b>55.5%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>58%</b>

FIGURE 5

## Listening Exercise: Grades (%)

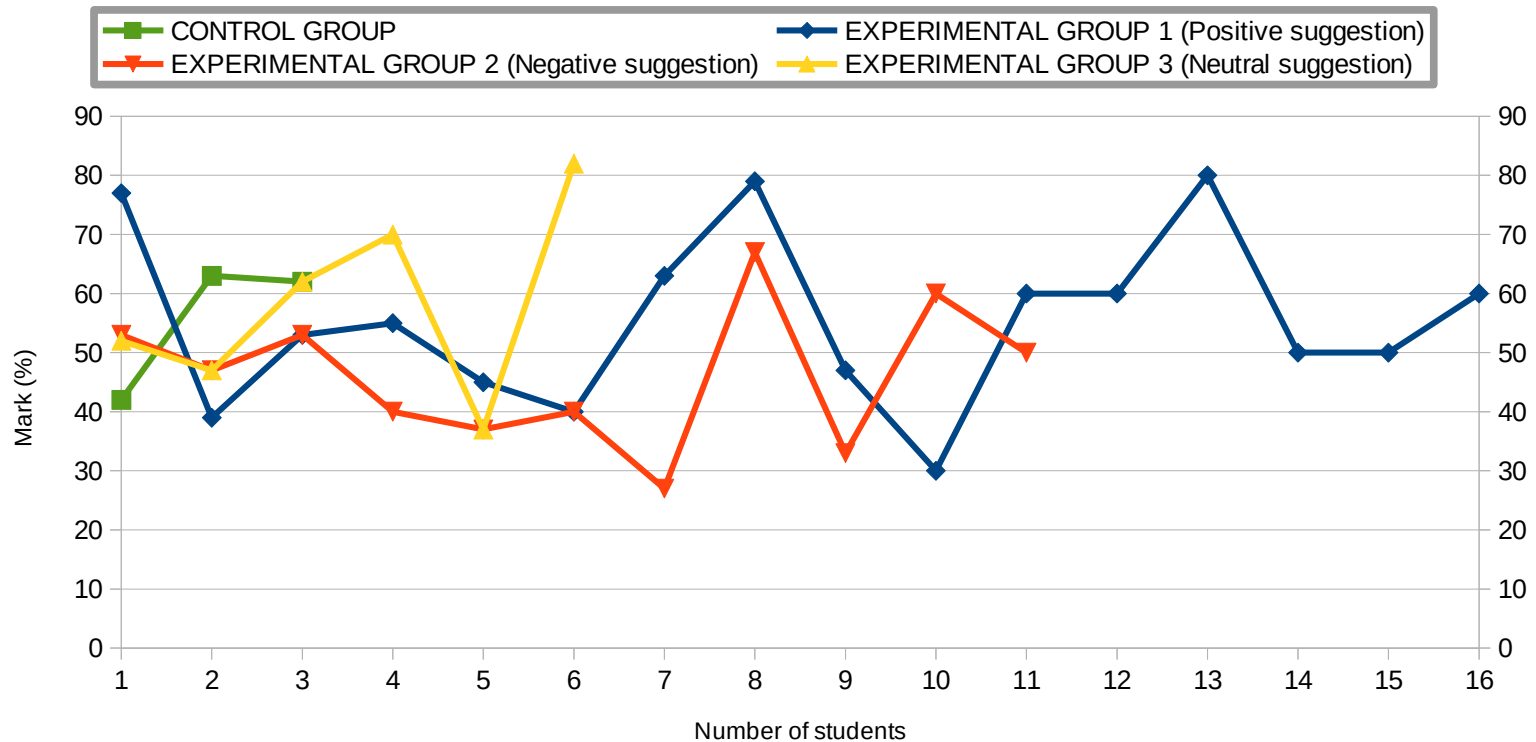


FIGURE 5.1

## Listening Exercise: Grade Average (%)

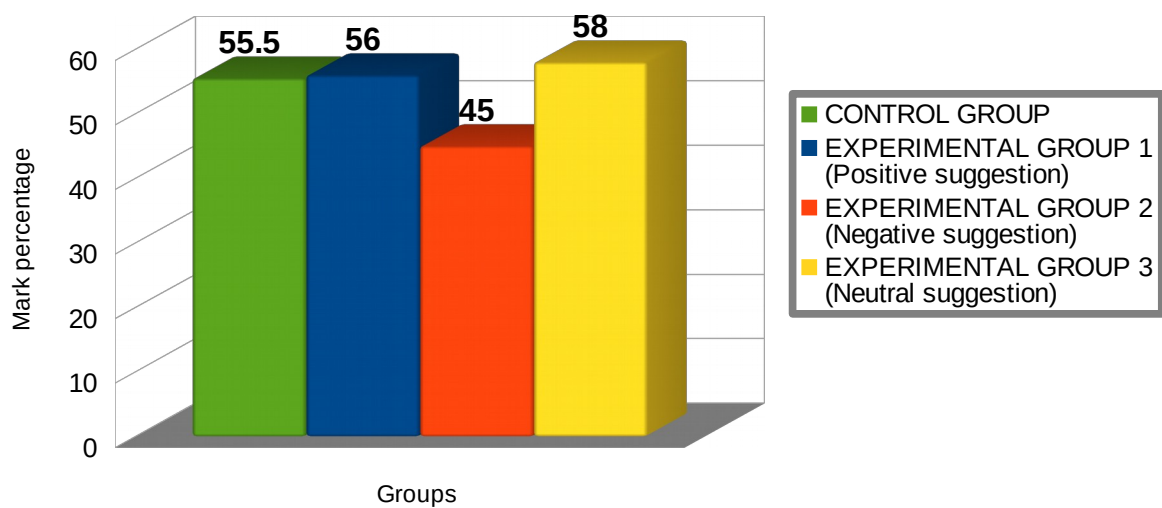


FIGURE 5 &amp; 5.1: Resulting participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise.

By analyzing the results of the four groups, we can see that the group with the highest average mark is the experimental group 3 (neutral suggestion) with 58% of correct answers, and the lowest average mark belongs to the experimental group 2 (negative suggestion) with 45% of correct answers, that is to say, a difference of 13 points. The second highest mark is held by the group that received positive suggestion, with 56% of correct answers, closely followed by the control group with an average mark of 55.5%. As we can observe, there is a significant distance between the results obtained by the experimental group that received negative suggestion and the other three.

### Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire and Listening Exercise: Comparison

It is time now to study the correlation between the results of the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire and the grades obtained in the listening exercise. Regarding this matter, I am going to compare first Tables 3 and 5 in order to scrutinize the connection between their expectations of correct answers and their actual outcomes (See Table and Figure 6).

**TABLE 6: ACTUAL GRADES VS. PREDICTED GRADES**

*Difference between the actual percentage of correct answers achieved in the listening exercise and the percentage of correct answers expected (question 3. Self-efficacy belief questionnaire)*

*Comparison between the participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise and their response expectancy belief in such exercise.*

	<b>CONTROL GROUP (3 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)</b>
<b>Actual grade</b>	55.5%	56%	45%	58%
<b>Predicted grade</b>	70%	60%	50%	57%
<b>Difference</b>	<b>-14.5%</b>	<b>-4%</b>	<b>-5%</b>	<b>1%</b>

FIGURE 6

## Actual Grade vs. Predicted Grade (%)

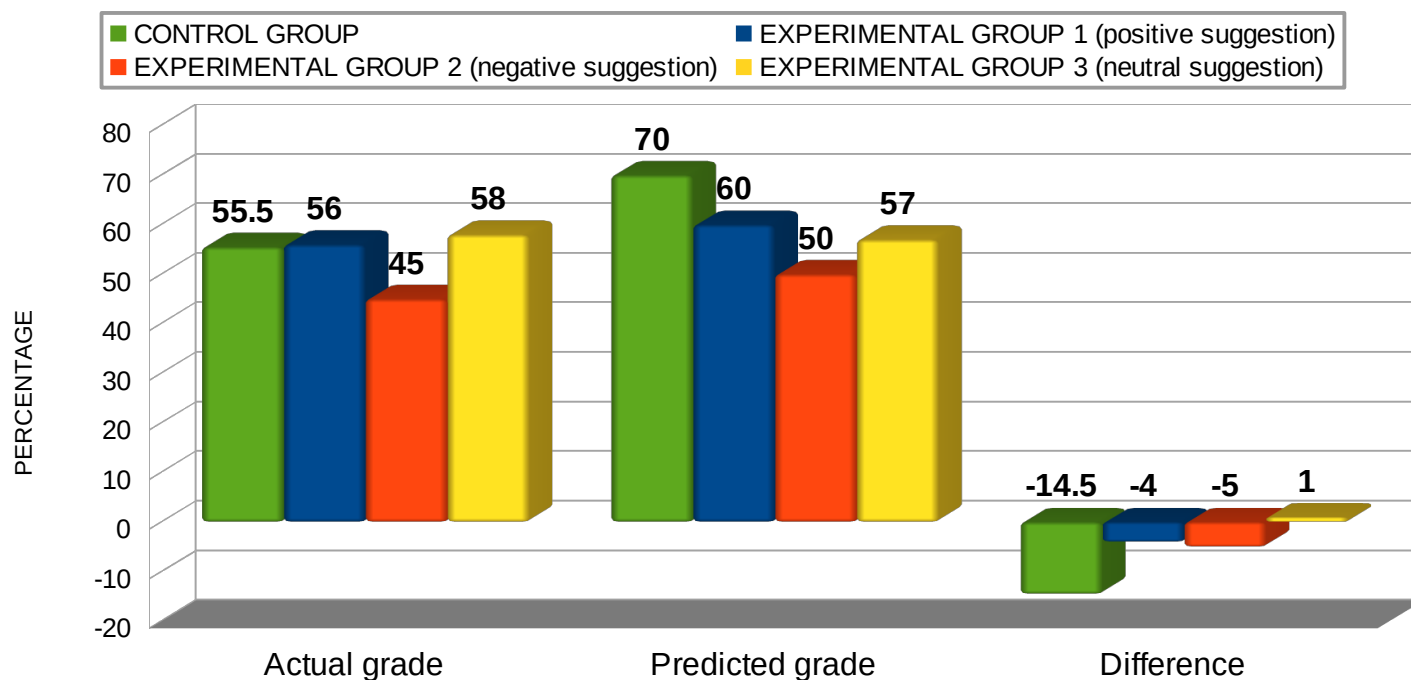


FIGURE 6: Comparison between the participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise and their response expectancy belief in such exercise.

By examining Table and Figure 6 we can detect three tendencies. On one extreme it is the control group, with a difference of -14.5 points, and on the other it is the group 3 (neutral suggestion) with only a difference of 1 positive point. So we could say that the estimation of correct answers in the listening exercise was fairly accurate in the latter group whereas it was less realistic in the former one. The other two groups are closer to group 3 and their values are quite similar: -4 points in the experimental group 1 (positive suggestion), and -5 points in the experimental group 2 (negative suggestion). Therefore, apart from the control group, with a noticeably elevated gap between their expectations and real results, the largest difference was registered in the group that received negative suggestion, although it was closely followed by the group that received positive suggestion. Also, the fact that the group 3 was the only one to obtain a difference expressed in a positive figure should be highlighted.

Finally, I am going to expose the deviation between the participants' specific results in the listening exercise done in this experiment and their usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises, gathered in the first question in the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire (See Table and Figure 7).

**TABLE 7: SPECIFIC GRADE VS. USUAL GRADES**

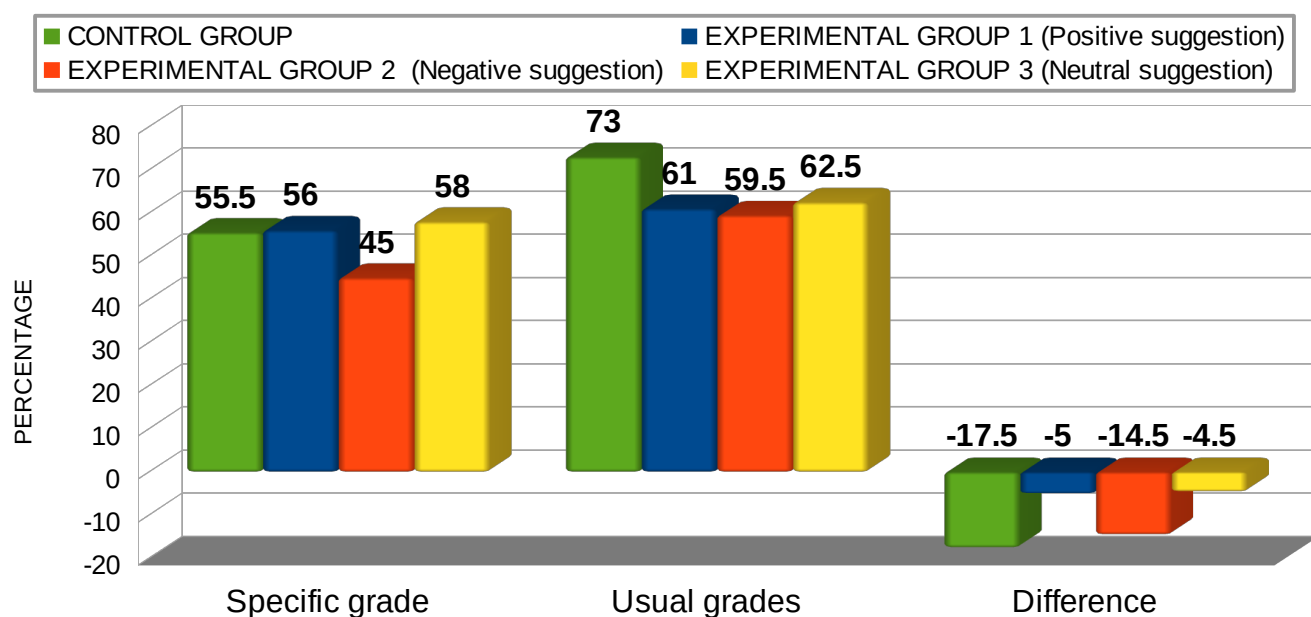
*Difference between the specific percentage of correct answers achieved in the listening exercise and their usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises (question 1. Self-efficacy belief questionnaire)*

*Comparison between the participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise and their self-efficacy belief in such type of exercises.*

	CONTROL GROUP (3 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1: positive suggestion (16 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2: negative suggestion (12 students)	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3: neutral suggestion (6 students)
Specific grade	55.5%	56%	45%	58%
Usual grades	73%	61%	59.5%	62.5%
Difference	-17.5%	-5%	-14.5%	-4.5%

**FIGURE 7**

**Specific Grade vs. Usual Grades (%)**



*FIGURE 7: Comparison between the participants' grades in the experimental listening exercise and their self-efficacy belief in such type of exercises.*

After observing Table and Figure 7, again we can see that the furthest distance between the participants' specific results in the experimental listening exercise and their usual percentage of correct answers in this type of exercises belongs to the control group, with -17.5%. The possible reason to that will be discussed below.

Setting aside the control group, we can detect two tendencies. On the one hand, the experimental groups 1 (positive suggestion) and 3 (neutral suggestion) show a small difference in the comparison "specific grade vs. usual grades": -5 and -4.5% respectively. On the other hand, the divergence of experimental group 2 (negative suggestion) in this comparison is much greater: -14.5%, around 10 points more than groups 1 and 3.

## **Discussion**

### **Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire**

In the inquiry about the usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises (question 1), the control group marked a considerable higher rate in comparison to the other groups: 73%, against 59.5%, 61% and 62.5% marked by the experimental groups of negative, positive, and neutral suggestion respectively.

Thus on the one hand, there is a clear proximity of rates among the three experimental groups, with only a difference of 3 points, being the one marked by the experimental group 2 the lowest one, and the rate marked by the experimental group 3 the highest one.

On the other hand, the control group rated their usual percentage of correct answers over 10 points above the rest of the groups. As I explained above, this discrepancy probably responds to the fact that the control group was composed of only three participants and it seems evident, from their answers in the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire, that two of them showed an elevated self-concept of their own competence in listening exercises, and as the number of components of this group was so reduced, the rate marked by the other student was not sufficient to balance the average obtained of this first question of the questionnaire. And this phenomenon will occur in posterior comparisons for the same reason.

Regarding the question about the level of difficulty expected in the following listening exercise, all the participants coincided in grading it as high. However, the groups that had received positive and negative suggestion marked it seven tenths higher than the control group and the neutral group: 7 versus 6.3 points in a scale from 0 to 10, considering 10 as the maximum level of difficulty.

One conclusion that could be drawn after looking at these data is that the control group rated the difficulty 7 tenths lower than the groups 1 and 2 possibly due to their strong self-efficacy beliefs on their listening skills, as I mentioned before.



As for the group 3, one deduction that could be made is that the neutral suggestion conveyed to these students may have made a positive impact on them by softening their perception of difficulty of the exercise and, simultaneously, freeing them from any pressure of obtaining a specific achievement.

Moreover, the groups 1 and 2 appraised the difficulty on 7 points, even though the suggestion they had received was totally opposite. A hypothetical explanation to this coincidence is that, on the one hand, the positive suggestion delivered to the group 1 might have exerted some pressure on their expectations of achieving satisfactory results. By contrast, the group 2 expected a high level of difficulty due to the negative suggestion received, which was also patent in their answer to the question number 3 of the questionnaire, expecting a mean success achievement of 50%, much lower than the other three groups, who predicted an average of correct answers of 57%, 60% and 70% corresponding to the group 3 (neutral), group 1 (positive) and the control group respectively.

In this regard, we can also detect a remarkable distance between the group control and the other three groups, showing a balanced correlation between self-efficacy and response expectancy beliefs in such group, reflected in these results: 73% (usual percentage of correct answers) and 70% (success predicted), with only a deviation of -3%.

The experimental group 1 manifests an even more balanced correlation between self-efficacy and response expectancy beliefs: 61% and 60 % respectively, while the group 3's correlation is slightly weaker: 62.5% (usual percentage of correct answers) and 57% (success predicted), with a difference of -5.5%

These data state that the most uniform correlation between self-efficacy belief and response expectancy is held by the group that was exposed to positive suggestion, with just a difference of -1% between their usual percentage of correct answers and their expectations of succeeding in the posterior listening exercise.

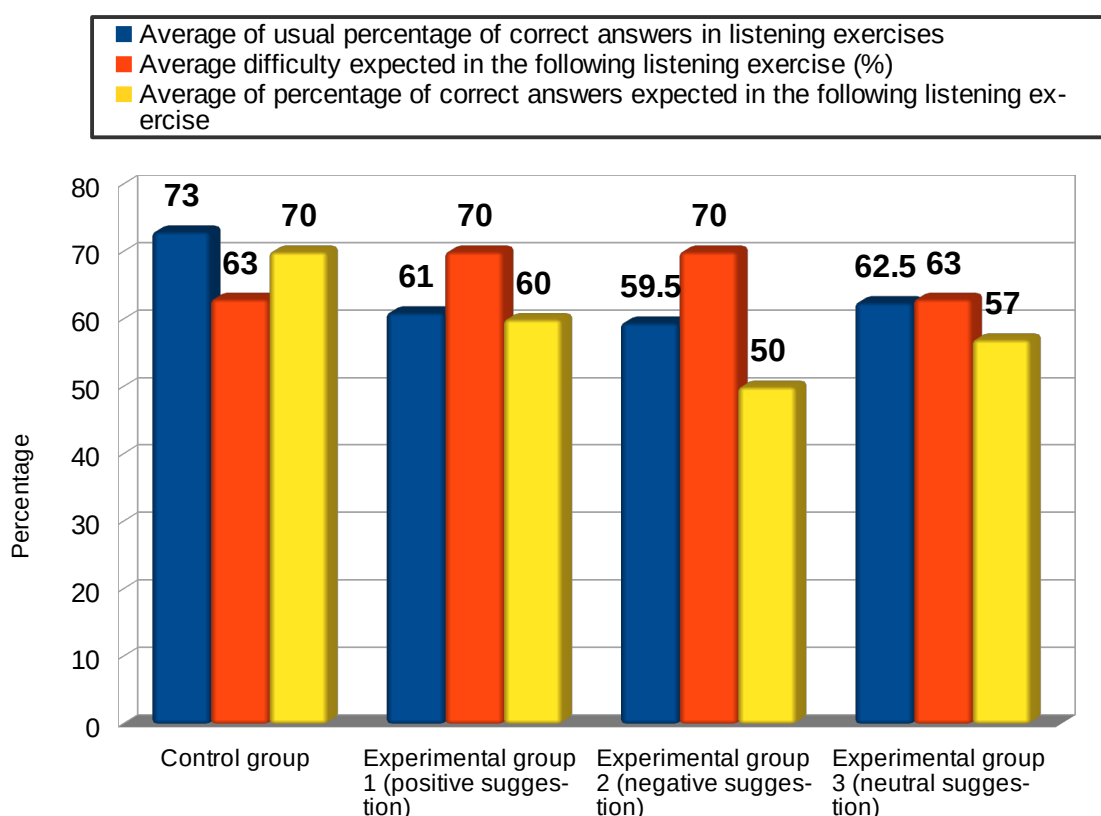
However, the group that was submitted to negative suggestion offers an asymmetrical correlation: 59.5% vs. 50%, i.e. a disparity of -9.5%.

These results clearly prove the impact of the type of suggestion received in the experimental groups 1 and 2.

In the following graph, it is possible to examine the correlation between self-efficacy belief, difficulty expected and response expectancy of the four groups who have participated in the present project.

**FIGURE 8**

**Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire: Group Comparison**



**FIGURE 8:** Participants' rates regarding their answers to the three questions in the Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire.

### **Listening Exercise**

We have already seen that the group with the highest average mark obtained in the listening exercise of the experiment is the group 3 (neutral suggestion) with 58% of correct answers, followed by the group that had received positive suggestion (56%) and the control group (55.5%). The proximity of results is clear.

By contrast, the average figure attained by the experimental group 2 (negative suggestion) is strikingly distant from the results of the other groups, offering the lowest mark in the experiment: 45% of correct answers, that is to say, 13 points less than the group 3 and 11 points less than the group 1.

These outcomes show the power of suggestion to alter the performance of students in listening exercises, especially in the case of negative suggestion.

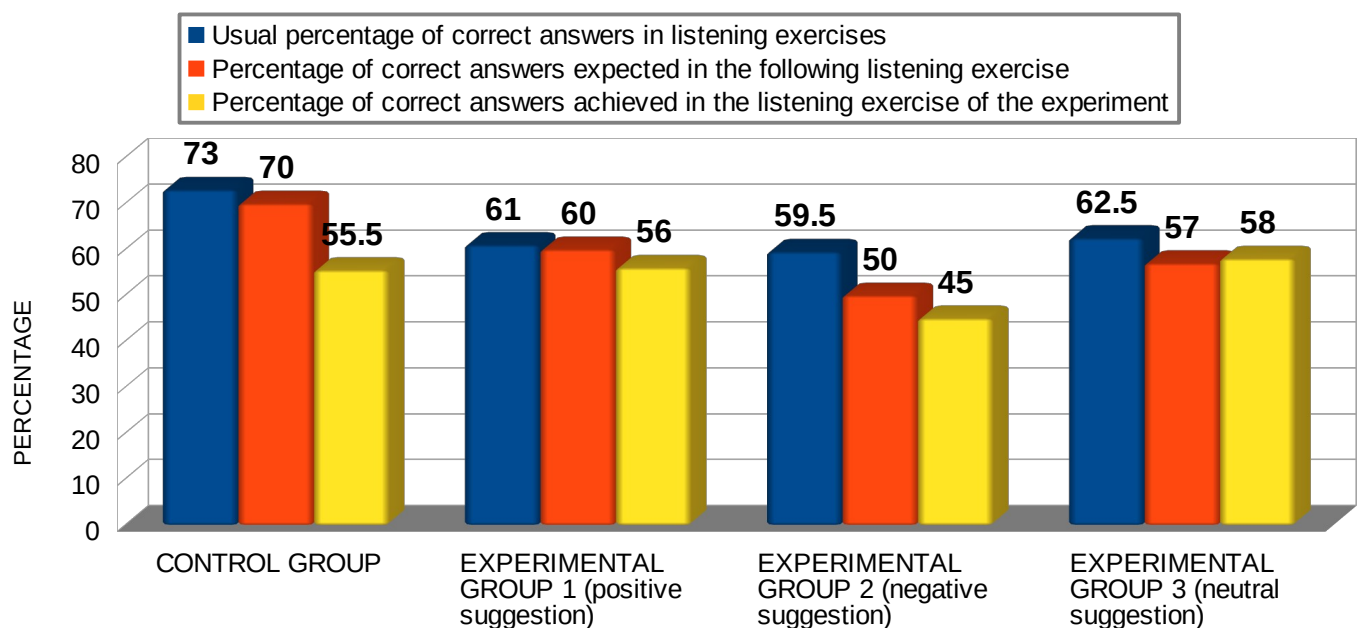
Considering the control group aside for its own peculiarity described above, in terms of performance results there is not a significant difference between positive and neutral suggestion, whereas negative suggestion makes an evident adverse impact on students.

### **Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire and Listening Exercise: Comparison**

The next obvious step is to examine if the correlation between the participants' self-efficacy and response expectancy beliefs regarding their listening skills correspond with their actual results in the listening exercise of the experiment in order to establish a broader connection between the different types of suggestion and their actual performance results. By examining Figure 9, we can observe several singularities:

- a) The tremendous gap between the percentage of correct answers predicted by the control group in the next listening exercise and their real grade: -14.5% and also between their usual rate of correct answers in listening exercises and their result in the experimental exercise: -17.5%

- b) The experimental group 3 was the only group that obtained a positive ratio after comparing the difference between their rate of correct answers predicted in the listening exercise and their actual result: 1%, i.e., this group was the only one to attain a result higher than the one predicted.
- c) Both experimental groups 1 and 2 (positive and negative suggestion respectively) offered a rather similar deviation between their prediction of correct answers in the following listening exercise and their factual outcomes: -4% in group 1 and -5% in group 2.
- d) The grades achieved in the listening exercise of the study reveal two clear tendencies: on the one hand, the experimental group 3 (neutral), the experimental group 1 (positive) and the control group obtained similar marks: 58%, 56% and 55.5% respectively. On the other hand, the results attained by the experimental group that received negative suggestion are substantially lower: 45%

**FIGURE 9****Correlation between Self-Efficacy Belief, Response Expectancy and Actual Outcomes**

*FIGURE 9: Resulting participants' rates with regard to their self-efficacy belief in their oral comprehension skills and their response expectancy belief in the experimental listening exercise compared with their grades in such listening exercise.*

## **Conclusions**

The information described above lead to a number of conclusions:

- a) Despite the fact that the control group offered such elevated rates in the first (usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises) and third question (percentage of correct answers expected in the following listening exercise) of the Self-efficacy belief questionnaire in relation to the rest of the groups, these rates did not correspond with their marks of the listening exercise of the present study, with a gap of -17.5% and -14.5% respectively, which are exponentially higher than in the experimental groups. These ratios could be explained by the unexpected abyss between their superior self-efficacy and response expectancy beliefs, compared to the participants in the other groups, and the challenging listening exercise, which had a C2 level of difficulty, considerably higher than their actual level of competence. And since they did not receive any type of suggestion, the clash between their expectations and the reality of the exercise they faced was notable, not being capable of overcoming the void between their subjective competence and the objectivity of a C2 exercise.
- b) The experimental group submitted to neutral suggestion was the only one whose marks in the exercise surpassed their prediction of correct answers, thus making patent the power of this type of suggestion in order to beat students' competence limits. The way neutral suggestion has positive effects on students is by neutralizing any possible negative beliefs or premises they could originally have and, consequently, reducing their anxiety to fail and the pressure to perform well. This neutral atmosphere, free of pressure, seems to create a beneficial, inspiring condition to enhance students' proficiency.
- c) There is evidence of the power of positive and negative suggestion to improve, in the first case, and inhibit, in the second, students' self-efficacy and response expectancy beliefs as well as their achievements in listening tasks.

In conclusion, regarding the question stated at the beginning of the present study “Is it possible to alter the performance of EFL students by manipulating their expectations on the difficulty of a common listening exercise?”, in the light of our results, the answer is unequivocally positive.

## **Further Personal Reflections**

### **Guiding results**

The results of the present study could be considered as illustrative in regard to the effects of suggestion on the performance of EFL students in listening exercises.

More similar experiments should be done to obtain confirming results and reach solid conclusions, as only one study with an unbalanced, modest representative sample of Language School students should not be reliable enough to infer conclusive results.

### **Neutral suggestion**

The unexpected outstanding results of neutral suggestion gathered in this research work could be explained by the personal hypothesis I stated in the conclusions above:

Students were only told that the type and the level of difficulty of the exercise they were going to do was exactly the same to the ones they usually did in class, and such information might have made them feel confident and relaxed, knowing they could stay in their comfort zone.

In addition, since nothing was mentioned to them about the result they were expected to get, they felt totally free of anxiety as they did not have to live up to the instructor's expectations.

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that the experimental group 3 (neutral suggestion) was composed of only 6 members, whereas the experimental group 1 (positive suggestion) had 16 participants. It is also important to remember that their results in the experiment were fairly similar. For instance, the score of correct answers in the experimental listening exercise was 58% for group 3 and 56% for group 1. Therefore, in addition to the hypothesis above, another question rises: What would have happened if the experimental group 3 had been composed of the same number of individuals as

the experimental group 1? Would a similarity in the number of participants have varied the results?

Despite this difference in the number of participants, the experimental group 1 (positive suggestion) attained the second best performance in the listening exercise. That means that this type of suggestion is also powerful to upgrade students' listening skills. Therefore, it should be considered as a useful educational tool.

### **Negative suggestion**

The figures resulting from the experimental group 2, exposed to negative suggestion, prove blatantly that this type of suggestion exerts a detrimental impact on subjects, undermining their achievements. That is why negative suggestive statements should be avoided at all times in an educational environment.

### **Weak points**

- The fact that the number of participants was so heterogeneous between the different groups decreases the reliability of the study as the statistical percentages were directly affected by this disparity.
- A greater number of participants in every group would have been more desirable in order to be able to work with larger samples and obtain more representative results.
- The control group was composed of only three participants (due to circumstances beyond my control), and after analyzing their answers I realized that two of them had strong listening skills. Consequently, their collective competence results were inevitably good. Thus, the reduced, unbalanced number of participants of this group influenced directly their average score and might have devalued the control group reference. In fact, had this group been more varied and numerous, it would have possibly attained lower results in general.



- To study the effects of suggestion on students' performance it is highly advisable that a good rapport between the instructor and the students exists. Due to the students' academical circumstances, the only contact I had with every group was during the experimental session, therefore I could not have the opportunity to create strong bonds with them. The way I tried to gain their affinity was by simply smiling and being nice and communicative with them. To create a fond atmosphere in the classroom, I first introduced myself and then I invited the students to do same. Then, after informing them that they were going to do a regular listening exercise, I encourage them to expose their impressions and feelings towards this kind of exercises and I also asked them their opinion in relation to the rest of the language skills. That way, by the time the actual experiment began, an ambiance of confidence in the classroom between the participants and I had already been created.
- Authority and prestige are other qualities the participants should observe in the conductor in order to permit suggestion to sink in. The experimental session was my only opportunity to prove I was deserving of these values. The way I transmitted authority and credibility was by proving competence and fluency in the English language and showing self-confidence not only verbally but also with body language. Moreover, just before I handed the questionnaire to the students, I explained to them that such questionnaire was anonymous and the information gathered in them would be used to do a study for the UJI. By getting the idea that I was professionally involved with the University, they conferred me a sense of prestige and credit.

### **Spanish students have trouble understanding English**

Spanish students need an efficient methodology to reach a breakthrough in oral comprehension competence. According to a number of articles published in various Spanish newspapers like ABC (2015), El País (2008) and Huffington Post (2013), oral comprehension is the hardest skill for EFL Spanish learners. The articles claim that this difficulty is mainly due to the little authentic English

exposure, since virtually all films and series in Spain are dubbed, and moreover to an inefficient educational teaching system of the English language.

Furthermore, according to the 2011 European Survey on Language Competences, 63% of Spanish students have severe problems to understand oral English by the end of secondary school (Universia España, 2012). Alluding to this same survey, Sara de la Rica (2012), professor of Economics at the Basque Country University, asserts that the worst results obtained from Spanish secondary school students in relation to their English competence are on oral comprehension.

On balance, if instructors learned about the effect of suggestion and how response expectancy and self-efficacy belief work by modifying and modulating students' behavior to produce a particular outcome, better academic results could be attained more easily and naturally. Hence, studying suggestion as a method to enhance listening performance might be appealing for the foreign language teaching community.

### **A contribution to efficient learning**

This paper aims to contribute further evidence on the power of suggestion to improve learners' results and complement the findings gathered in antecedent research on the matter. The experiment shows how students' performance on a listening exercise that is apparently beyond their competence level can be enhanced or diminished by emitting different types of suggestion.

The conclusions reached in the present study could be taken as an initial proof of the benefits of positive and neutral suggestion. In fact, this study has offered some interesting, valuable evidence which could be taken into consideration to continue the research in this field.

I personally think that, on the grounds of the data gathered in this study, further investigations in neutral and positive suggestions should be encouraged. The current research opens a window to explore the effects of those two types of suggestion on students with the aim of establishing the scope of their beneficial effects on education.

Furthermore, this and other investigations could be the seed to create and implement reliable and methodological protocols based on suggestion to empower students' minds and self-confidence on their own potential and, as a consequence, improve their academical achievements.

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## **Appendices**

### **Self-Efficacy Belief Questionnaire**

Circle the option which is closest to what is true to you. Answer sincerely and freely.

This questionnaire is anonymous.

**a) Rate your usual percentage of correct answers in listening exercises.**

1. Below 40% of correct answers
2. Between 40% and 60% of correct answers
3. Between 60% and 80% of correct answers
4. Between 80% and 90% of correct answers
5. Between 90% and 100% of correct answers

**b) What level of difficulty do you expect in the following listening exercise?**

1. Very easy
2. Easy
3. Normal
4. High
5. Really high

**c) How successful do you think you are going to be in doing the following listening exercise?**

1. Below 40% of correct answers
2. Between 40% and 60% of correct answers
3. Between 60% and 80% of correct answers
4. Between 80% and 90% of correct answers
5. Between 90% and 100% of correct answers

## Listening Exercise C2

**TASK 1.** Listen to the recordings twice and **complete the gaps** with the missing word / words. The **number of words** you will need to complete the gaps **ranges from one to five**. The word / words you will have to write in each gap must be **the exact ones you will hear** in the recording. **You have 30 seconds to read the five statements** in this task before the listening starts. The first statement has been completed for you as an example.

Example: 0) They politely ask you to contact *your international directory service*.

- 1) The number you have called has either \_\_\_\_\_  
or is \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) If you press 3, you want to listen to  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) CDC stands for  
\_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) When you visit berries.com, the microphone to click on is  
\_\_\_\_\_ of the screen.
- 5) *Saft* is a Scandinavian word which in English means  
\_\_\_\_\_.



**TASK 2.** Listen twice to an excerpt of a speech by Steve Jobs and **choose an option** to answer the following questions. **You have 45 seconds to read the questions** before the listening starts. The first question has been answered for you as an example.

Example: 0) How long did the speaker stay at university?

- a) Six months
- b) A year and a half
- c) Two years

The correct answer is c.

- 1) The speaker's biological mother...
  - a) wanted him to become a lawyer.
  - b) was dreaming about a baby girl.
  - c) has studied at university.
  
- 2) The university the speaker went to was:
  - a) more expensive than Stanford University.
  - b) too expensive for the speaker's parents to pay.
  - c) not the place he wanted to graduate from.
  
- 3) When the speaker was a university student, he...
  - a) shared a room in a dorm.
  - b) really loved taking long walks on Sundays.
  - c) struggled in his daily life.

- 4) Why did the speaker decide to take up the course of calligraphy?
- a) Because he had to prepare posters at university.
  - b) Because he had a lot of free time.
  - c) Because he wanted to include it the *Macintosh* software.
- 5) What does the speaker mean when he says “connect the dots”?
- a) That every person has to have basic calligraphy knowledge.
  - b) That there is a strong connection between what you did and its effects in the future.
  - c) That you can predict your future if you analyze the present.

**TASK 3.** Listen twice to an interview to the actor Hugh Grant and decide if the following statements are true or false. **Write true or false next to every statement. You have 30 seconds to read the questions** before the listening starts. The first one as been answered for you as an example.

Example: 0) According to the interviewer, the actor is no longer making movies.

False

- 1) Hugh Grant believes that all romantic comedies are funny.
- 2) Hugh Grant thinks that the actress he worked with in the movie found it complicated to work with him.
- 3) It was clear from the beginning of the film that the protagonist couple would end up together.
- 4) The actor is in his mid-forties.
- 5) He is considering releasing his own music record.

### **List of participants in the study**

#### **CONTROL GROUP (TUTOR: BIRGIT GOSSER)**

- [Manuel Marcos Peña](#)
- M<sup>a</sup> José Folch
- José M<sup>a</sup> Raluy

#### **EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 1 -POSITIVE SUGGESTION- (TUTOR: DOLORS VALLS)**

- [Lourdes Boronat](#)
- Raquel Bañón
- Ilenia Hernández Zamorano
- Eva Adell Milian
- José Luis Conde-Pumpido
- M<sup>a</sup> José Julián Mahiques
- Rocío Ruiz Fernández
- Rosa Martí Centelles
- Miriam García Martí
- Víctor Vilar Herrero
- Mar Blasco Ripoll
- Lydia Agut Jara
- Silvia García Alegre
- Ángela Fresneda Pérez
- Vicente Boix Gómez
- Fernando Navarro Collados

## **EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 2 -NEGATIVE SUGGESTION- (TUTOR: DOLORS VALLS)**

- [Brenda Gómez](#)
- M<sup>a</sup> Luisa Escrig
- Anna Portnaia
- Elena Casanovas Mas
- M<sup>a</sup> Pilar Jarque
- Ricardo Cortés Coleman
- Julio Carreguí Ballester
- Sonia Valls López
- Patricia Almela
- Fran Almela Centelles
- María Mateu
- Anna Lacosta Bueno

## **EXPERIMENTAL GROUP 3 -NEUTRAL SUGGESTION- (TUTOR: BIRGIT GOSSER)**

- [Anna Pallotti Romero](#)
- Yasmina Rodríguez Carcelén
- Felisa Guillamón
- Natalia Arnau Gómez
- Vanesa Herrero Gil
- Javier Peña Sanz

NB: The hyperlinks lead to samples of the questionnaire and listening exercise of one participant randomly selected in every group. In case of requiring access to the rest of this type of documents filled out by the other subjects, please contact me at [amarenabril@gmail.com](mailto:amarenabril@gmail.com)