

The Effects of Task Features (Topic Importance) on Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension (A Study in Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of task features (topic importance) on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. To accomplish the purpose of the study, the researcher used dictogloss reconstruction task for both the control and the experiment group. The whole population in this study was consisted of 160 EFL learners studying English as a foreign language at eight different classes in high schools in Kangavar, Iran. Since the researcher selected two intact groups (N=40), a quasi-experimental design was utilized for the present study. A test from the Interchange/Passages Objective Placement Test Package was administered as the pretest of listening comprehension. After that, both the experimental and control group received task-based instruction including important topics for experimental group while control group received task-based instruction with topics that were not important for them. Treatment lasted 15 sessions – a semester. Finally direct performance-referenced test (task-based assessment) was administered as the posttest of the study. The results of Independent pair T-test confirmed the superiority of the experimental group to the control group.

Keywords: listening comprehension, task-based instruction, dictogloss reconstruction task, topic importance

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of tasks has received more support from some researchers in second language acquisition (SLA), who are interested in developing pedagogical applications of second language acquisition

theory (e.g., Long & Crookes, 1992). Interest in tasks as the basic unit of second language teaching began when researchers turned to tasks as SLA research tools in the mid-1980s. Thus, SLA research has focused on the strategies and cognitive processes used by second language learners. The research has reassessed the role of form- focused teaching. It is assumed that there is no evidence that formal grammar teaching leads to the ability to communicate outside the classroom. Engaging learners in tasks provides a better context for the activation of learning processes than formal grammar teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 223).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Research on Task

Over the past thirty years, proposals for task-based language teaching (TBLT) have drawn on a variety of claims about processes thought to promote successful language acquisition. Many important contributions to task-based learning research addressing these claims have appeared in language learning throughout this period (e.g., Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torrez, & Fernandez, Garcia, 1999; Platt & Brooks, 2002; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Yule, Power, & Macdonald, 1992).

For the past 20 years, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has attracted the attention of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, curriculum developers, teacher trainers and language teachers. To a great extent, the introduction of TBLT into the world of language education has been a 'top down' process. The term was coined by language educators in reaction to teacher-centered, form-focused activities. In their seminal writing, Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987), among others, supported an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that induce them to focus on meaning exchange and to use language for real world, non-linguistic purposes. Some twenty years later we plenty of research on tasks are being published (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005).

Whereas variability research was directed at examining learner production, another branch of SLA research in the eighties focused on the input which students were given and the kinds of interactions learners involved in (Ellis, 2003, p. 23). In this respect the works of Krashen (1981, 1985, 1994) and Long (1981, 1983a, 1996) are prominent. Krashen's Input Hypothesis claims that language acquisition is input-driven, that is, learners acquire an L2 incidentally and subconsciously when they are able to comprehend the input they are exposed to. He suggests that input becomes comprehensible when it is contextually embedded and fine-tuned to the learners' level of

proficiency. Long (1981,1983) has advanced Interaction Hypothesis, which places similar emphasis on the role of input claims that the best input for language acquisition is that which arises when students negotiate meaning in exchanges where a communication problem has happened.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to determine the effect of dictogloss reconstruction task on the learners' listening comprehension. To achieve the goal of this quasi-experimental study, the following research question was posed:

Q. Does employing dictogloss reconstruction task affect Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension?

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research question, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

H0. Employing dictogloss reconstruction task does not significantly affect Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension.

B. Task Definition

Skehan (1996a) defines task as 'an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome' (as cited in Ellis, 2003, p.4).

Lee (2000) believes that a task is '(1) a classroom activity or exercise that has: (a) an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans' (as cited in Ellis, 2003, pp. 4-5).

Breen (1989) explains task in this way: Task is 'a structured plan which provide opportunities to refine knowledge and capabilities in a new language and using it during communication'. Breen believes that a 'task' can be 'a brief practice exercise' or 'a more complex work plan that entails spontaneous meaning conveyance'.

C. Lesson Design

The design of a task-based lesson involves consideration of the stages or steps of a lesson that has a task as its principle component (Ellis, 2003, p. 243). The first phase is 'pre-task' and involves the

various activities that teachers and students undertake before they start a task; such as whether the students are given time to plan the performance of the task. The second phase, 'during task' centers around the task itself and provides different teaching options, including whether students are required to operate under time pressure or not. The final phase is 'post-task' phase which concerns procedures for following up the task performance. Ellis (2003) assumes that only 'during task' phase is obligatory in task-based instruction. Activities selected from the 'pre-task' and 'post-task' phases are optional but, they have an important role in ensuring that the task performance is highly effective for language learning (Ellis, 2003, p. 243).

Table 1: A framework for designing task-based lessons

Phase	Examples of options
A: Pre-task	Framing the activity, e.g. establishing the outcome of the task, planning the time, doing a similar task
B: During-task	Time pressure, number of participants
C: Post-task	Learner report, conscious raising, repeat task

Note. Adapted from "Task-based Language Learning and Teaching" by Ellis, 2003, p. 244.

D. Dictogloss Reconstruction Task

With dictogloss, after a pre-task stage where the topic is introduced, the researcher plays the audio once only at a normal speed, without pausing, and students write as much as they can to jog their memories. Then they work together to reconstruct it as near to the original text as possible.

E. Topic Importance

It is reasonable to suppose that that topic of a task will also impact on learners' propensity to negotiate meaning (Ellis, 2003, p. 91). Obvious factors to consider are topic familiarity and topic importance. Zuenger and Bent (1991) compared performance on tasks that differed with regard to the relative importance of the topic to the learners. They found that when the topic held little importance to the interactants, for example, talking about food, the learners functioned as active 'speakers' and the native speakers as active 'listeners' but the roles were changed when the topic was

important, for example, talking about a topic in their shared field of expertise, with the native speakers becoming more dominant.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 160 male EFL language learners at the intermediate level studying English at high schools in eight different classes in Kangavar, Iran. Then the researcher selected two classes (N= 40) randomly from Imam and Darolfonoon high schools. The classes were conducted in the morning twice a week and 60 minutes a session.

B. Instruments

Two instruments were utilized to collect the data in the present study: (1) A test from the Interchange and Passages Placement Test Package as the pre-test, which included 20 multiple-choice items. (2) Direct performance-referenced test (Task-based assessment) was utilized as the post test of the study. Assessment tasks are viewed as devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning focused and directed towards some specific goal (Ellis, 2003, p. 279).

In order to ensure the reliability of the pretest, the researcher used coefficient Alpha reliability analysis, and according the formulae, the reliability was nearly 0.76 which indicated that the test was reliable enough.

C. Procedures

In summary, the present study was a quantitative research and a quasi-experimental design, because the researcher selected intact classes randomly but he did not choose all the members randomly.

After sampling, all participants were given a pre-test of listening comprehension. The questions were in the form of the multiple choices; the next phase of the experiment started with some treatment sessions that included dictogloss instruction task with important topic to the experimental group and dictogloss instruction task with lack of importance topic to the control group. After the treatment sessions came to an end, direct performance-referenced test (Task-based assessment) was

utilized as the post test of the study. Finally, the results of both pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

IV. RESULTS

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of task features (topic importance) on listening improvement of intermediate high school students in Kangavar, Iran. To fulfill the purpose of the study, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequency counts) and inferential statistics (independent t-test) were applied.

The present study tried to answer the question raised about the effects of topic importance on listening comprehension.

Q1: Does topic importance have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

To reveal the purpose of this study, the researcher tried to find the confirmation or rejection of null hypothesis presented here:

HO1: The topic importance does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

First of all it is worth noting that Independent Pair t-test is used to determine whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since there were two groups in the present study, the researcher used Independent Pair t-test to compare the means of different groups.

Table 2: Descriptive data for both groups in the pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
control	20	10.70	1.65	2.74
experiment	20	10.85	1.34	1.81
Valid N (listwise)	20			

Table 2 provides useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, and the variance. As you can see the mean for experimental group is 10.85, while the mean for control group is 10.70.

Table 3: Output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis for two groups in pre-test

Groups	N	Mean	S.D	T	DF	Sig. (P)
Control	20	10.70	1.65	.317	38	.755
Experiment	20	10.85	1.34			.755

Table 3 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups in pre-test. Since you can see in this table the significance level is 0.75 ($p=0.75$) which is above 0.05, therefore, there is not statistically significant differences between groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could not be rejected.

Table 4: Descriptive data for two groups in post-test

Groups	Descriptive Statistics		Post-Test	
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
control	20	11.85	1.03	1.06
experiment	20	15.05	1.76	1.81
Valid N (listwise)	20			

Table 5 shows useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, and the variance. As you can see the mean for experimental group is 15.05, but the mean for control group is 11.85.

Table 5: Output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis for two groups in post-test

Groups	N	Mean	S.D	T	DF	Sig. (P)
Control	20	11.85	1.03	-6.99	38	.000
Experiment	20	15.05	1.76			.000

Table 5 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any statistically significant difference between the means of two independent groups in post-test. Since you can see in this table the significance level is .000 ($p=.000$) which is below 0.05; therefore, there is statistically significant difference between groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could be rejected. It means that task-based instruction with important topic was effective.

V. DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of topic importance on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The research question addressed in the present study was whether topic importance can lead Iranian EFL learners to greater increase in L2 listening comprehension or not. To analyze the data the researcher used pre-test and post test scores on listening comprehension test and he ran independent T-test using SPSS software (SPSS Inc., 2014) for this study. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in listening comprehension due to the effect of task-based instruction with familiar topic.

Zuenger and Bent (1991) compared performance on tasks that differed with regard to the relative importance of the topic to the learners. As might be expected, they found that the topic importance had a clear effect on comprehension. It also influenced the amount of negotiation work that took place, with less important topic leading to less negotiation.

One of the most important things about task is that it promotes learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making any mistakes (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.2).

Regarding to the research question: "if topic importance has any effect on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, the task was very effective for a few reasons: the topic importance had a clear effect on comprehension since it provided sufficient

background knowledge for learners to process the input which reduces the linguistic and cognitive demanding. It also influenced the amount of negotiation work that took place, with less important topic leading to less negotiation. Finally it increased motivation and the researcher assumed that it provided safer environment for the learners.

Generally speaking, according to the obtained results, the listening-comprehension skill in EFL students tended to improve through exposure to task-based input. Specifically, the task type with topic importance not only affected the listening comprehension of the participants and improved it but also the researcher assumes that this task corresponds to advanced level of language proficiency and it would be suitable for all participants at that level.

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