

Does Open Task Outcome Affect Speaking Skills of Pre-Intermediate High School Students? (A Study in Malayer, Iran)

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Abstract

The present research was conducted to investigate the effect of open task outcome on speaking improvement of high school students. To achieve this, 60 female high school students, in Malayer, Iran, participated in the study. To homogenize the participants' level of proficiency, the NELT Placement Test was employed and the participants with the pre-intermediate level of proficiency were selected. Accordingly, the number of the participants was reduced to 40. To measure the participants' level of speaking at the pre- and post-tests, open questions (8 items) was applied. Then, the participants were randomly divided into two groups: experimental (N=20) and control (N=20). The experimental group received task-based speaking activities during the 19 sessions (30 minutes) of instructions, and the control group received the traditional practices (a question-and-answer approach). The results of an independent t-test revealed that the participants' levels of speaking fluency in the experimental group was significantly higher than those in the control group (P=0.05).

Keywords: task, speaking task, fluency, task-based language teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, English has become the most important foreign language in the world. At present, English is the language for international communication; science; commerce; advertising; diplomacy and transmitting advanced technology. It has also become a "lingua franca" among speakers of languages that are not mutually intelligible (Willis, 1996, a and Coury & Carlos,

2001). A large percentage of world's language learners study English in order to develop proficiency in speaking. The ability to speak a second language well is a very complex task (Richards & Renandya, 2002). The importance of English has improved in all around the world especially in Iran. Nowadays, learning English is very important and it is formally the first foreign language taught in most schools in Iran. English is important for Iranian students, because it is an international language of science, technology, commerce, tourism and communication. It is taught in our schools from the first year at guidance school, and there is strong pressure from many parents to start learning English earlier even at the age of four or five. Some parents are worried about their children's low level of English, and try to look for solutions to this problem. However, many students have some problems in learning English. Many students don't have contact with English-speaking immigrants in other places. Therefore English language is a foreign language for many students. It is the second language that they study at schools in Iran. Speaking is one of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). It is the means through which learners can communicate with others to achieve certain goals or to express their opinions, intentions, hopes and viewpoints. In addition, people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language. Furthermore, in almost any setting, speaking is the most frequently used language skill. As Rivers (1981) argues, speaking is used twice as much as reading and writing in our communication. Speaking has usually been compared to writing, both being considered "productive skills", as opposed to the "receptive skills" of reading and listening. Speaking also is closely related to listening as two interrelated ways of accomplishing communication. Every speaker is simultaneously a listener and every listener is at least potentially a speaker (Oprandy, 1994, p.153 & EL Menoufy, 1997, p. 9). In addition, speaking requires that learners understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language ("sociolinguistic competence") (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Cohen, 1996 and Harmer, 2001). A good speaker hence synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

The researcher focused on speaking skills through social interaction. This is because speaking skills are very important. The purpose of the current study is to find out whether inserting open task speaking activities into conventional speaking courses can improve learners' fluency in speaking sub-skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses on the ability to perform a task or activity without explicit teaching of grammatical structure. The task in TBLT is considered central to all of

instructional design process, from the identification of learner needs to the measurement of student achievement. A distinction is made between target tasks, which are tasks as they occur in everyday life, and pedagogic tasks, which are derived from the target task sequenced to form the task-based syllabus. It is the pedagogic tasks that teachers and students actually work on in the classroom (Long, 1989).

(1) Definition of Task

Here is some definition of task which the outcome of a task is important in these definitions:

Task is an activity in which the target language is used by the learners for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome (Jane Willis, 1996). A Work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed.(Ellis,2003): A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by “task” is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists. Brown (2001) compares the task and technique. According to his point of view, in some cases the task and the technique might be synonymous. But in other cases, a task may be comprised of several techniques (for example, a problem solving task that includes grammatical explanation, teacher-initiated questions, and a specific turn-taking procedure). Tasks are always bigger in their ultimate ends than techniques. He provides some criteria for examining communicative tasks such as: achieving communicative goals, including problem solving elements and going beyond forms to real world context.

(2) Dimensions of Tasks

The definitions of tasks address a number of dimensions of tasks, like: *a) Scope: Should* the term 'task' be restricted to activities where the learners' attention is primarily focused on message conveyance or should it include any kind of language activity including those designed to get learners to display their knowledge of what is correct usage? Nunan incorporates any kind of language activity, including 'exercises'. His definition seems synonymous with the term 'activity'. *b)*

Perspective: It refers to whether a task is seen from the task designer's or the participants' point of view. Learners change the task to suit their own purposes. The task can be task as a work plan and task as a process. In task as a work plan, instructions or rubric are essential parts of the task work plan. *c) Authenticity*: It refers to whether a task needs to correspond to some real world activities or achieve situational authenticity. *d) Language skills*: What linguistic skills are involved in performing a task? Any skill can be focused. *e) Cognitive processes*: Tasks involve cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing, transforming information, deducing new information, and evaluating information. *f) Outcome*: It refers to what learners arrive that when they have completed the task. For instance, whether learners can tell a story based on pictures or not.

(3) Task-based Activities and Interaction

As Nunan (2004) asserts, emphasizing interaction and communication in the target language is the main characteristic of a task-based approach. He believes that the focus of TBLT is on meaning and it engages learners in "comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language" (as cited in Oura, 2001, p. 71). The use of language is the principal way of promoting language and it is the main reason for applying more communicative tasks (Prabhu, 1987, as cited in Brandl, 2007). In fact, it seems that the primary goal of L2 learners is to be able to interact easily with the target language speakers. Actually, the significant part of interaction is that it presents and makes receiving feedbacks available "from the listener to the interlocutor in order to classify meaning, social understanding, or advanced conversation" (Vandergift, 1997, p. 494).

Contrary to the traditional and conventional activities which are designed based on a pedagogical point of view and mostly overlook authenticity and real life situations (Izadpanah, 2010), a task-based approach, by providing classroom experiences that are similar to the demands of authentic language use, copes with the real and on-line communication more directly (Newton, 2001). Indeed, task-based activities via facilitating using language in meaningful contexts can have profound influence on promoting learning process.

B. Speaking Skill

Reviewing previous research related to defining speaking, it was noticed that two main approaches are adopted to define speaking, the bottom-up and the top down approach Nunan (1996) mentioned a basic distinction when considering the development of speaking skills: distinguishing between

dialogue and monologue. The ability to give an uninterrupted oral presentation is quite distinct from interacting with one or more other speakers for transactional and interactional purposes. While all native speakers can and use language interactional, not all native speakers have the ability to extemporize on a given subject to a group of listeners. Nunan (1996) added that one can apply the bottom-up/top-down distinction to speaking. The bottom up approach to speaking suggests that speakers start with the smallest unit of language, i.e. individual sounds, and move through mastery of words and sentences to discourse. The top-down view, on the other hand, suggests that speakers start with the larger chunks of language, which are embedded in meaningful contexts, and use their knowledge of these contexts to comprehend and use correctly the smaller elements of language.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to determine the effect of open task outcome on the learners' speaking fluency. To achieve the goal of this quasi-experimental study, the following research question was posed:

Q. Does employing open outcome speaking activities affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners 'speaking fluency'?

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

H0. Employing open outcome speaking activities does not significantly affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners 'speaking fluency'.

C. Tasks and Speaking

Reviewing the previous task classifications, it becomes evident that some of them categorize tasks according to their purpose or according to the distribution of information among participants. Others consider how much freedom of turn taking and negotiation learners are allowed. However, what is obvious in all these classifications is the general overlap between different types of tasks; most of the previously explained tasks can fall under more than one category (O'Brein, 1996). As far as second language speaking tasks are concerned, Bygate (1987), drawing on Brown and Yule (1983), makes a distinction between factually-oriented talk and evaluative talk. Factually-oriented talk is further divided into four task types: description, narration, instruction, and comparison. Evaluative talk is also further divided into four task types: explanation, justification, prediction, and decision. There is some other taxonomy of tasks based on particular task features such as one-way vs. two-way tasks. While this 'feature classification approach' has shed light on current understandings of their impact upon language learning and the nature of classroom interaction, it is

the recent work of Skehan (1998, 2001, 2009) and Robinson (2001, 2007, 2010) in which explicit links have been made between particular ‘task type’ characteristics or conditions and their impact on task difficulty. Speaking task is an activity that requires learners to participate in a non-threatening environment, emphasis is on meaning, to arrive at an outcome but the outcome is not that important, involvement in the process of learning is important. Task is not a substitute for a good topic but it increases motivation and involvement. It provides a framework for the classroom activities. Recently, some syllabus designers have suggested that syllabus content might be specified in terms of learning tasks and activities. They justify this suggestion on the ground that communication is a process rather than a set of products.

D. Task Outcome

The design of a task will, to some extent at least, determine the nature of the ‘product outcome’. We will consider a number of factors related to this aspect of tasks- whether the outcome required of a task is open or closed the degree of inherent structure in the required outcome, and the discourse mode the task is designed to elicit. The outcomes of a language learning task can be closed or open. Closed outcomes are when there are only certain correct outcomes or solutions, as in many problem-solving tasks. Role-play and interviews have open outcomes. Closed tasks encourage meaning negotiation, open tasks, if they are convergent, and promote accuracy and complexity. Outcome refers to what learners arrive at when they have completed the task. For instance, whether learners can tell a story based on pictures or not. Open tasks vary depending on whether the speakers are required to ‘converge’ on a single outcome or allowed to ‘diverge’, i.e. maintain different viewpoints. Duff (1986) found that tasks with divergent goals, i.e. debates, led to longer turns and more complex language use than tasks with convergent goals, i.e. decision-making discussion. However Duff’s results can also be explained in terms of differences in the discourse mode elicited by the two types of tasks. Outcome refers to what learners arrive at when they have completed the task. For instance, whether learners can tell a story based on pictures or not. Aim of a task, on the other hand, is the pedagogic purpose of the task. Two studies have investigated the effects of closed/open tasks on production. Brown (1991) also found that an ‘interpretative task’, which was open in nature, resulted in more complex language use, i.e. more ‘hypothesizing’, than closed decision-making tasks. This involves careful attention to the writing of learning outcomes (what do we want our students to learn), designing appropriate activities (how do we want our students to learn) and considering appropriate assessment to effectively measure the achievement of the learning outcomes (how do we know our students have learned?). Although an important part

of an outcomes based approach is the consideration of 'what the student will do' in terms of active learning,, teachers often describe the challenges of getting students to discuss topics, concepts or issues in class. Both teachers and researchers acknowledge the necessity of samples of meaningful language use that represent learners' performance when attending to accuracy. While to researchers, tasks are valuable sources to do tasks. He proposed the first syllabus consisted of a set of tasks. The framework of my research is effect of open task outcome on improving speaking in class both in fluency.

III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 60 female EFL language learners at the Pre-intermediate level studying at Enghelab and Fatemiyeh high schools in Malayer, Iran. The results of test of homogeneity reduced the number of the participants to 40. The experimental group included 20 participants and the control group included 20. The participants' age varied between 15 and 16 from high school.

B. Instrumentation

The following instruments were utilized in order to gather the data. (1) Proficiency test: Nelson English Language Test (NELT) was used to homogenize the learners regarding their language proficiency level, (2) the speaking tests skills: These tests constructed by the researcher, includes 20 items according to language functions in English Book one, assessing speaking fluency of the participants. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was. 0.72. The purpose of employing such questions was to compare the participants' levels of speaking fluency before and after the treatment.

C. Procedure

To determine the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study, NELT was administered. Based on the results of the test, the researchers reduced the number of participants to 40 females. The course lasted for 19 sessions, three days per week.

All participants received closed questions before the study began. During 19 sessions (in a time limitation of 20-25 minutes), the experimental group was treated through task-based speaking activities, including different kinds of speaking tasks such as filling the gaps, multiple choice, interactive activities, etc. They were allowed to check their answers by listening again to the tape; in contrast, the participants in the control group were taught through the traditional approach to speaking. That is, the learners listened to the tape for one or two times and then were asked to answer the teacher's questions. In the end, students could ask all their questions and problems regarding vocabulary, grammar, etc. After the treatment was over, the speaking open questions were again administered to the both groups.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of task outcome on speaking improvement of Pre-intermediate high school students in Malaya. To fulfill the purpose of the study, descriptive statistics (concentration, dispersion and distribution indexes) and inferential statistics (independent t-test) were applied. To homogenize the participants, NELT was conducted and those whose level of proficiency was at the pre-intermediate level were selected for the study. To test the learners' open questions were applied before and after the treatment. To determine the participants' levels of fluency, the results of the questionnaires were analyzed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the fluency scores in the control and experimental groups at pretest.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Fluency Scores for the Control and Experimental Groups at the Pretest

	Control group	Experimental Group
N	20	20
Mean	45.12	46.74
Std. Deviation	7.461	7.702

As Table 1 illustrates, there is no significant difference between the participants' mean scores for fluency in the control and experimental groups at the pretest ($M_{Cont} = 45.12$; $M_{Exp} = 46.74$). The results indicate that the participants were rather homogeneous on the part of their speaking fluency at the outset of the study.

H0. Employing open outcome speaking activities does not significantly affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners 'speaking fluency.

To compare the speaking fluency mean scores of the control and experimental groups at pretest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 2 displays, there is no significant difference between the control and experimental groups regarding their fluency in speaking [$t(45) = -.800, p = .417 > .05$] at pretest.

Table 2. Results of T-Test Analysis for Comparing the Speaking Fluency Mean Scores (Pretest)

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Cont.	20	45	.127	.491	-.800	.417
Exp.	20	46	.747	.703		

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups at the posttest. As this table indicates, there is a considerable difference between the participants' speaking fluency mean scores in the control and experimental groups at the posttest.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Fluency Scores for the Control and Experimental Groups At Posttest

	Control group	Experimental Group
N	20	20
Mean	48.76	53.43
Std. Deviation	6.413	7.067

To compare the speaking fluency mean scores of the control and experimental groups' at posttest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 3 indicates, a significant difference emerged between the control and experimental groups [$t(46) = -2.440, p = .015 < .05$] at the posttest.

It means that teaching listening via task-based method has significantly ameliorated the learners' speaking fluency in the experimental group (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of T-Test Analysis for Comparing the Speaking Fluency Mean Scores (Posttest)

Groups	N	M	SD	T	Df	P
Cont.	20	48.76	6.413	-2.440	46	.015

Exp.	20	53.43	7.067	3.25	46	.001
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Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is supported, that is, employing of open speaking activities in English classroom has a significant effect on the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' fluency in speaking.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of open speaking activities on the improvement of speaking fluency among EFL pre-intermediate learners. The results showed that the experimental group, in which open speaking activities were applied, benefited significantly from the treatment. The performance of learners in each group at the post-test was compared through the t-test formula. The comparison between the mean values of the two groups demonstrated a significant change in the improvement of speaking fluency.

Therefore, it can be concluded that through using open speaking activities, the development of learners' speaking will be facilitated and this method is preferable to the traditional method of teaching listening which is based on merely asking and answering questions.

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