

The Effects of Task Types (Corrupted Text Task) on Iranian EFL Listening Comprehension (A Study in Malayer, Iran)

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Abstract

This study aimed at exploring the role of task-based listening activities in augmenting EFL learners' listening comprehension. To this end, 120 female Iranian EFL learners in Kangavar Safir institute participated in the study. To homogenize the participants' level of proficiency, an Oxford Placement Test was employed and the participants with the intermediate level of proficiency were selected. Accordingly, the number of the participants was reduced to 30. Then, the researcher randomly selected two groups: an experimental group (N=15) and a control group (N=15). To measure the participants' level of listening comprehension a pre-test of listening from Interchange and Passages Placement Test package, which included 20 items, was selected and administered. Then the experimental group received task-based listening activities during 12 sessions of instructions, and the control group received the mainstream practices (a question-and-answer approach). Each session lasted an hour. After the treatment sessions came to an end, a direct performance-referenced test was administered to the whole participants. The results of an Independent T-Test revealed that the participants' levels of listening comprehension in the experimental groups were significantly higher than those in the control group ($P=0.05$).

Keywords: corrupted text task, listening comprehension, performance-referenced test, task-based activities

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 (see, for example, Long & Crookes, 1993). 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.

Richard and Rodgers (1986) argue that language learning depends not merely on providing students with 'comprehensive input' but in tasks that require them negotiate meaning and involve in naturalistic and meaningful communication. (Richard & Rodgers, 1986, pp. 223-224).

For teachers, listening tasks provide opportunities for task-based course designed for low-proficiency learners. Simple listening tasks can be designed that can be done with zero competence in L2 (see, for example, the beginner tasks described in Prabhu, 1987) and thus cater for 'silent period', which shows the early stages of acquisition for some learners (Krashen, 1981).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Importance of Task-Based Teaching

One of the most important things about Task-Based Teaching (TBT) is that it increases learners' confidence by providing them with a lot of opportunities to use language in classroom without being afraid of making mistakes (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.2). They (2007) assume that once students have enough words they begin to communicate. In other words, TBT is designed to help learners use language in real world even if the language is grammatically incorrect.

Willis & Willis (2007) argue that task is not a substitute for a good topic but it increases learners' motivation and involvement (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.1). It provides a framework for the classroom activities.

Another positive aspect of TBT is that any teacher who has basic classroom skills – the ability to motivate learners and organize activities in the classroom, and the ability to explain important language features – can do task-based teaching (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 3). So an experienced teacher who already has these skills will start with an advantage. But the most important thing in TBT is the willingness to engage with learners in communication and give them the freedom to use the language. Some experienced teachers find it hard because they are accustomed to controlling learners in order to avoid mistakes. TBT requires a willingness to surrender some of that control, though. Sometimes teachers who don't have confidence in their own English control learners strictly: they predict almost everything will happen in the classroom. But if learners always

controlled, they will never learn to use language freely. Students need an English-speaking model. And who is better than their teacher whom they respect (Willis & Willis, 2007, P. 3).

The third important facet of task-based teaching Willis & Willis (2007) add is related to the roles of learners. A number of specific roles for learners are assumed in current proposals for TBI (task based instruction). These are: Group participant, monitor, and risk-taker and innovator.

B. Definition of a task

Task has been defined in a variety of ways. Nunan (1989) explains task in this way: It is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 4).

Long (1985) defines a task as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward ... in other words, by a task it is meant the hundred and one thing people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. Tasks are things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.

Prabhu (1987) limits the notion of a task as an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process.

Skehan (1996) continues this with a definition of a task as an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real word; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.

C. Task Features

The task variables based on Ellis (2003) that we will consider here are: (1) required vs. optional information exchange, (2) types of required information exchange, (3) expected task outcome, (4) topics, (5) discourse domain, and (6) cognitive complexity (Ellis, 2003, p.86).

Required vs. optional information exchange: From the psycholinguistic perspective, the main difference between these two is that, in required information exchange, the exchange of information

is necessary. In contrast, in optional information exchange, the exchange of information is optional (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993).

Information gap: one-way vs. two-way: One-way tasks and two-way tasks are required information exchange tasks that are distinguished in terms of whether the information to be shared is split one-way, i.e. held by a single person as listen and do tasks or it is held by two or more participants, i.e. two-way, as in same-or-different tasks (Ellis, 2003, p. 88).

Tasks outcome: open vs. closed tasks: Ellis (2003) argues that, open tasks refer to those tasks where the participants know there is no clear outcome, like surveys, debates, and, so on, whereas closed tasks refer to those tasks where the participants know there is a predetermined, single, correct outcome, like same-and-different task.

Topic: Ellis (2003) assumes that it is logical to imagine that the topic of a task will also affects learners' tendency to negotiate meaning. Obvious factors to consider are topic familiarity and topic importance.

Discourse mode: Ellis (2003) continues that discourse mode is likely to influence the specific linguistic forms the student uses in performing a task. For example, a storytelling task is likely to result in the use of past tenses while a description task will lead more naturally to the use of present tenses.

Cognitive complexity: Ellis (2003) assumes that cognitive complexity is an umbrella term, covering many factors that affect the task difficulty. There is an agreement among researchers that identifies context-dependency as a major factor determining cognitive complexity.

D. The Importance of Listening in Language Learning

Until quite recently listening comprehension has been neglected with regard to its place in second or foreign language teaching methodology and the development of techniques and materials for use in the classroom (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 69).

Celce-Murcia (2001) argues that listening is the center of language learning nowadays. To develop second language competence, an appropriate aural comprehension is necessary at all levels of instructions. Aural comprehension is the bases for development of oral language within the 'speech chain' of listening and speaking (Denis & Pinson, 1963, p. 1).

Celce-Murcia (2001) assumes that in particular, listening comprehension lessons are an instrument for teaching elements of grammatical structure and new vocabularies to be contextualized in within the body of communicative discourse.

E. Task Listening

The objective for this model is to process spoken discourse; to listen and to do something with the information, i.e. to carry out real tasks using the input. The instructional materials are activities that require students to listen and to do something with received information (i.e. 'listen and do'). Students are asked to use the oral language input to complete a task which is mediated through language in a context in which success is judged in terms of whether the task is performed (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 71). She argued that the value for this model is to focus on teaching that is task-oriented not question-oriented. The purpose is to involve learners in using input presented in oral discourse, not just answering a set of questions about it

F. Research Question and Hypothesis

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

Q1: Does a 'corrupted text task' 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 hypotheses presented here:

HO1: The 'corrupted text task' does not have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants for this study were chosen among the intermediate EFL learners of Safir English Institute in Kangavar. One hundred and twenty students were chosen as the population of the study. Participants were reduced to thirty students and then they were divided into two groups randomly.

The experimental group was assigned to task-based teaching and the control group was taught traditionally, i.e., question and answer activity; the second model (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 71).

All participants were female, and differed in terms of age. They range from 16 to 19 years old. None of them had ever lived in a foreign country or traveled to an English speaking country. The classes were conducted in the afternoon twice a week and 60 minutes a session.

B. Instrumentation

The following instruments were utilized in order to gather data: (1) The Oxford Placement Test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. It provides information about a person's language level. This test is comprised of 60-item test: 5 items are reading comprehension, 30 multiple-choice items are vocabularies and grammar, and 25 items are in a form of close test. The test is reliable (consistently grading test takers at the right level) and valid (having a strong theoretical basis and having been through a rigorous test design, pretesting and piloting stage). The reliability of the test was estimated by the researcher, and the reliability was 0.77 (2) Interchange and Passages Objective Placement Test as pre-test: The test of listening as pre-test for the study was extracted from "Interchange and Passages Objective Placement Test". The test includes 20 items. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was nearly 0.76 which indicated that the test was reliable enough. (3) Task based assessment (Direct performance-referenced test) as post-test: 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). Brindly (1994) identifies a number of specific advantages of what he calls 'task-centered assessment': it results in both language teachers and learners regarding language as a tool. It has a positive wash-back effect; it enables assessment to be more easily integrated into the learning process; it provides learners with useful diagnostic feedback on progress and achievement; it enables the results of an assessment to be reported in a way that is intelligible to non-specialist.

C. Procedure

The study was conducted at the start of the semester. In order to determine the participants' level of language proficiency, Oxford Placement Test was administered. Those students whose scores were

1 SD below and above the mean were considered intermediate. Then the participants were divided into two groups. One group was randomly assigned to task-based instruction while the other group was selected as a control group. Afterward, all participants were given pre-test of listening comprehension. The test was extracted from Interchange / Passages Objective Placement Test. The questions were in the form of the multiple choices; the next phase of the study started with some treatment sessions. Corrupted text task to experiment group while the control group received traditional training i.e., question and answer sessions (Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 71). The treatment lasted for twelve sessions (two sessions a week). After the treatment sessions came to an end, Task-based assessment (performance-referenced test) was given to the students in the all participants in order to see whether there is any significant difference between students' scores on the acquisition of task instruction before and after treatment or not (pretest and posttest). 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 types teaching (corrupted text) on Iranian EFL learners listening comprehension intermediate Kangavar. To fulfill the purpose of the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used.

As mentioned above, 120 learners participated in this study. The participants were female studying English at Safir Institute in Kangavar. Some statistical analyses were run to prove the homogeneity of the participants:

Table 1. Language Proficiency Test (Oxford Placement Test)

Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Range	Minimum	Maximum
35.2417	120	8.83746	36.00	19.00	55.00

All the data including mean, maximum score, minimum score, range, and so on were shown in Table 1. The mean of this test was 35. 24; the standard deviation was 8.837, so the variance was calculated at 78.092. The minimum and maximum scores obtained by the participants were 19 and 55, respectively. The range is 36. That is, the difference between the largest and lowest score is 36.

Table 2. Reliability Measures of language Proficiency Test (Oxford Placement Test)

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.774	60

The reliability measure of the Oxford Placement Test is shown in Table 2. The reliability of the test was estimated by the researcher on the basis of coefficient Alpha. It was .77 percent, which shows the test was highly reliable. The table also shows the number of the participants in the study, who were 120 learners and the number of the items. There were 60 items in the test.

A. Independent Sample T-Test as the Pre-Test

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 3. Descriptive data for two groups in pre-test.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
control	15	8.00	7.00	15.00	11.3333	2.76887	7.667
Corrupted text	15	6.00	8.00	14.00	11.1333	1.64172	2.695
Valid N (listwise)	15						

Table 3 provides useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. As you can see the mean for corrupted text group is 11.13. Standard deviation is 1.64. The minimum score is 8 and the maximum score is 14, so the range would be 6. In the second group, the mean for control group is 11.33. The standard deviation is 2.76. The minimum score is 7 and the maximum score is 15, so the range would be 8.

Table 4. Output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis for two groups in pre-test.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
pret Equal variances est assumed	9.389	.005	-.241	28	.812	-.20000	.83114	-1.90251	1.50251
Equal variances not assumed			-.241	22.761	.812	-.20000	.83114	-1.92034	1.52034

Table 4 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. As can be seen in this table the significance level is .812 (p=.81) which is above 0.05, therefore, there is not statistically significant differences between groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could not be rejected. The other data indicated in the table was the degree of freedom between groups (28).

Table 5. Descriptive data for two groups in post-test.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
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control	15	5.00	11.00	16.00	12.9333	1.94447	3.781
Corrupted text	15	4.00	13.00	17.00	14.6000	1.40408	1.971

Table 5 shows useful descriptive statistics for two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. As you can see the mean for corrupted text group is 14.60. Standard deviation is 1.40. The minimum score is 13 and the maximum score is 17, so the range would be 4. In the second group, the mean for control group is 12.93. The standard deviation is 1.94. The minimum score is 11 and the maximum score is 16, so the range would be 5.

Table 6. Output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis for two groups in post-test.

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
task Equal variances assumed	7.056	.013	2.691	28	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39815	2.93518	
Equal variances not assumed			2.691	25.479	.012	1.66667	.61927	.39248	2.94086	

Table 6 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. Since you can see in this table the significance level is .012($p=.012$) which is below 0.05, therefore, there is statistically significant differences between groups. Therefore, the null hypotheses could be rejected.

It means that task-based instruction was effective.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of task-based instruction on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 30 EFL learners studying English at Safir institute in Kangavar. The research question addressed in the present study was whether task-based teaching 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 (based on SPSS version 22) for this study. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in listening comprehension due to the effect of task-based instruction.

One of the most important things about this 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.3). Once they have stock of words they can begin to communicate. And once they begin to communicate, the teacher can help them shape their language so that it becomes more complex and more grammatical. So the more we try to control the language that learners produce, the more learners are likely to be concerned with form rather than meaning, and the less task-like the activity becomes.

Regarding to the research question: "if corrupted task has any effect on listening comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, that the task was very for a few reasons: First of all it is worth noting that this task accompanied by some written texts, texts that some elements from which were omitted or the order of sentences or paragraphs were changed and learners were asked to restore the original texts based on the listening text. In other words, one can say it was an integrated task- a combination of listening and reading task. However, it was very convenient for learners to perform the task, because the outcome was closed i.e., all students decided on the same answers. Furthermore, it reduces pressure from learners in case when they run into a misunderstanding from spoken text, they recourse to the written text.

In order to help students promote their listening comprehension, the researcher asked his students to listen to the gist of the topic once or twice first then he gave them the blanked or jumbled written text, and asked them to restore the original text based on the text they had just listened. One of the shortcomings of this task was that it was much more a language-focused than the other tasks, for example prediction task, or matching tasks. Whereas the prediction task led into a listening activity which mirrored the way we listen in real life, the listening here is much more artificial. It is simply

a preparation for the gap-filling activity. Another shortcoming of this task was that learners were not as creative as the prediction task.

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 of "corrupted text" 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. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that the participants who were taught based on task generally tended to score higher in listening comprehension.

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