

The Effect of Information-gap vs. Opinion-gap Tasks on Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract – The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of information-gap and opinion-gap tasks on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. To accomplish the purpose of the study, quasi experimental design was utilized. That is, after selecting three intact groups, they were randomly assigned to a control group and two experimental groups. The experimental groups received special treatment by using two different tasks while the control group received question-answer activity. Treatment lasted 12 sessions or about two months. The results of the pretest and posttest in data analysis through statistical procedure such as One-Way ANNOVA confirmed the superiority of the experimental groups to the control group, and task based instruction helped to improve reading comprehension. Therefore, it is recommended to apply task-based instruction in teaching other skills especially to listening skill.

Keywords: task-based instruction, information-gap tasks, opinion-gap tasks

I. INTRODUCTION

'Both second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers want to elicit samples of language use from learners .The researchers need these samples to find out how second language learning takes place. In the case of teachers, these samples are important because they serve as the means to help learners to learn and as evident that successful learning is taking place' (Ellis, 2003, p. 1). He adds researchers and teachers know that the samples they elicit can vary according to the extent to which learners focus on using language correctly or using the language to communicate a message. For example, blank-filling exercises are likely to reflect the learner's attention to accuracy whereas some kinds of communicative activities are more likely to reflect how learners use the L2 to convey message.

He continues that researchers and language teachers both accept the need to get samples of language use as a representation of how learners perform when they don't pay attention to accuracy. It is believed that these samples show learner's ability to use L2 language in real-time communication. But how such samples of meaning focused language use are obtained? The means that both researchers and language teachers have employed are ' tasks'.

Notions of task have developed out of communicative teaching and material development. Johnson defines task-oriented teaching as teaching which provides "actual meaning" by focusing on tasks to be mediated by language, and success is judged in terms of whether the tasks are performed (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979, P. 200).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Research on Task

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the central unit of planning and teaching in language teaching. Some of its advocates (e.g., Willis, 1996) present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching since it draws on several principles that formed part of communicative language teaching from 1980s (Richard & Rodgers, 1986, P. 223)

In fact, CLT is not a monolithic and uniform approach (Ellis, 2003, P. 28). Howatt (1984) distinguishes a 'weak' and a 'strong' version'. A weak version of CLT which is manifest in the proposals for functional /notional syllabuses developed by Wilkin (1976) and Van Ek (1976) drew on assumption that the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught. In this respect, a weak version of CLT does not involve a basic departure from earlier methods. Thus, instead of teaching learners the structural properties of language, a weak version of CLT proposes they be taught how to realize the notions of language such as 'time' and 'possibility', and functions such as 'inviting' and 'apologizing' (Ellis, 2003, P. 28).

In contrast, a strong version of CLT claims that 'language is acquired via communication' (Howatt, 1984, P. 279). That is, learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication but rather actually discover this system while they participate in communicative activities. The strong version of CLT provides opportunity for learners to experience how to use language in communication. The strong version is apparent in Krashen and Terrell's (1983) natural approach and also in proposals for teaching centered on the use of tasks (Candlin, 1987).

B. Some Theoretical Rationales for Task-Based Learning Research

The Procedural Syllabus: The first large-scale attempt to realize TBLT and to develop a theoretical rationale for it occurred in India, between 1979 and 1984, and is described in Prabhu (1987). Prabhu argued that: task-based teaching operates with the concept that, while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning content, a subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstract, or acquire some of the linguistic features embodied in those entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules (as cited in Robinson, 2011, P.10). Prabhu's cognitive rationale for TBLT is compatible with Krashen's (1982) claim that

comprehensible input is necessary for learning and working out meaning-content promotes incidental learning of tacit or implicit knowledge.

Since it has been demonstrated that teaching a descriptive grammar does not help learners to communicate, explicit teaching in grammar in the project was avoided. So tasks were designed with the primary focus was on meaning. (Prabhu, 1987, PP. 70-71)

The interaction hypothesis and focus on form: In contrast to Prabhu (1987), Long (1981, 1989) argued that the interaction is important, it not only makes the input comprehensible but also serves as a context for attending to problematic forms in the input and output during task-work. Long (1981, 1989) places similar emphasis on the role of input, he claims that the best input for language acquisition is that which arises when students negotiate meaning in exchanges where a communication problem has happened. In other words, he emphasizes the importance of meaning negotiation to provide comprehensible input.

The output hypothesis: Swain (1995) argues that comprehensible input is necessary but it is not sufficient (Swain, 1995, PP. 125-126). She claims that productive output is also critical for language acquisition. Tasks provide both the input and output processing necessary for language acquisition. Tasks are believed to increase processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the center of language learning. She (1995) adds, attention to output, is a facilitating role, since in producing the target language ...students may notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say, leading them to find out what they do not know, or know only partially.

C. 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).

Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) consider a task as 'an activity, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning to attain an objective' (as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 5).

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

D. Information-gap vs. Opinion-gap Tasks

An *information-gap task* is a technique in language teaching where students are missing information necessary to complete a task or solve a problem, and must communicate with their classmates to fill in the gaps (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, P. 148). She claims that it is often used in communicative language teaching and task-based language learning. One example of an information gap task is a spot-the-difference activity. Another is an activity where one student is given a picture, and must describe it to another student, who creates a drawing from the description. Further examples are students sharing information to complete a class timetable, and an activity where students must share information about their families and then draw each other's family trees.

Opinion-gap activity, on the other hand, involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. Information gap tasks are contrasted with opinion gap tasks, in which all information is shared at the start of the activity, and learners give their own opinions on the information given.

E. The Importance of Reading in Language Learning

Celce-Murcia (2001) defines reading comprehension as 'the ability to read-taking general comprehension as the example-requires that the reader draw information from a text and combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has. This interaction of information is a common way to explain reading comprehension (Celce-Murcia, 2001, P. 188). Reading is a dynamic activity that involves a number of perceptual, linguistic and cognitive processes related to both text and reader variables. Skilled processing of written discourse is an individual cognitive activity that involves the construction of meaning through interactions with the printed text, more specifically , with the distribution of information in the text and he reader's integration of this information with his/her own knowledge.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

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

Q1: Does an 'information-gap task' have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Q2: Does an 'opinion-gap task' have any effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension?

Based on the stated research questions, two null hypotheses were formulated:

H01: An 'information-gap task' has no effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension

H02: An 'opinion-gap task' has no effect on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension

B. Participants

All participants participated in this study were 120 students. A total number of Iranian EFL students who were studying English at Nashr institute in eight different classes in Kermanshah, Iran were selected in this study. 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

C. Instruments

Three instruments were utilized to collect the data in the present study: (1) An Oxford Placement Test which measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. (2) teacher-made Tests (reading-comprehension tests) as the pre-test and the post-test. The reliability of the teacher-made tests were estimated on the bases of Coefficient Alfa, they were 0.71 and 0.73 respectively.

D. Procedures

In summary, the present study was a quantitative research and a quasi- experimental design, because the researchers selected intact classes randomly but he did not choose all the members randomly. After selecting the whole population (N=120), the Oxford Placement Test was administered. Based on the result of this test, 3 groups (classes) whose scores were one standard deviation above or below the population mean were selected out of 8 classes as target groups (participants) for the study. The number of participants for each group was 15 learners. Two groups were randomly chosen as the experimental groups and the third group was selected as a control group of the study. Afterward, all participants were given pre-test of reading comprehension to measure current level of their reading comprehension. The next phase of the experiment started with some treatment sessions that included two different tasks to experimental groups. Information-gap tasks to one group, and opinion-gap tasks to another group, while the control group received traditional training i.e., they answer the comprehension questions after they read a text (Celce-Murcia, 2001, P. 71). After the treatment sessions came to an end, parallel reading comprehension test (post-test) was given to the students in all three groups in order to see whether

there is any significant difference between students' scores before and after treatment or not. Finally, the results of both pretest and posttest were compared for data analysis.

IV. RESULTS

This section outlines the entire technical and statistical procedures involved in the study. It describes all the steps taken by the researchers in the analysis of the relevant data and elaborates on the results. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics encompassed the means, standard deviations. Inferential statistics comprised the application of a one-way ANOVA to test the null hypotheses at the .05 level of significance.

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 Mean of 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.

A. One-way ANOVA in Pre-test

First of all it is worth noting that the one-way ANOVA is used to determine whether there are any significant differences among the means of three or more independent groups. Since there were three groups in the present study, the researchers used one-way ANOVA to compare the means of different groups.

Table 2 Descriptive data for three groups: pretest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Information-gap	15	11.0667	1.57963	.40786	10.1919	11.9414	7.00	13.00
Opinion-gap	15	11.6667	1.71825	.44365	10.7151	12.6182	8.00	14.00
control	15	11.3333	2.76887	.71492	9.8000	12.8667	7.00	15.00
Total	45	11.3556	2.05775	.30675	10.7373	11.9738	7.00	15.00

Table 2 provides useful descriptive statistics of pretest for all groups that the researchers compared including the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. As can be seen the mean for corrupted texts group is 11.06. The standard deviation is 1.57. The minimum score is 7 and the maximum score is 13, so the range would be 6. In the second group i.e., student as question master group, the mean is 11.66. The standard deviation is 1.71. The minimum score is 8 and the maximum score is 14, and the range is 6. Finally, the mean for control group is 11.33. The standard deviation is 2.7. The minimum score is 7 and the maximum score is 15, so the range would be 8.

Table 3 Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons- pretest

	(I) tasks	(J) tasks	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	Information-gap	Opinion-gap	-.60000	.76345	.714	-2.4548	1.2548
		control	-.26667	.76345	.935	-2.1215	1.5881
	Opinion-gap	Information-gap	.60000	.76345	.714	-1.2548	2.4548
		control	.33333	.76345	.901	-1.5215	2.1881
	control	Information-gap	.26667	.76345	.935	-1.5881	2.1215
		Opinion-gap	-.33333	.76345	.901	-2.1881	1.5215

Table 3 indicates that, there were no statistically significant differences among groups as determined by one-way ANOVA. A Tukey post-hoc test revealed the mean differences among all groups were not significant. In other word, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean of information-gap group and student as opinion-gap group ($p = .71$). There was no statistically significant difference between the mean of information-gap task group and control group ($p = .93$). There was no statistically significant differences between the mean of student as opinion-gap group and control group ($p = .90$).

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of Post-test for all Tasks: post-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Information-gap	15	14.8667	1.50555	.38873	14.0329	15.7004	12.00	17.00
Opinion-gap	15	16.4667	1.12546	.29059	15.8434	17.0899	15.00	18.00
control	15	12.8000	1.85934	.48008	11.7703	13.8297	11.00	16.00
Total	45	14.7111	2.12798	.31722	14.0718	15.3504	11.00	18.00

Table 4 provides useful descriptive statistics for all groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores.

A. Testing the Null Hypotheses

Following the descriptive statistics of this study, discussed thoroughly above, the hypotheses were put to confirm or reject the relationship between the variables. In order to test the null hypotheses, some steps were taken: To see if task-based instruction had significant effects on listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners, one way ANOVA was run on post-test.

Table 5 the output of the ANOVA analysis- post-test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	101.378	2	50.689	21.753	.000
Within Groups	97.867	42	2.330		
Total	199.244	44			

Table 5 shows the output of the ANOVA analysis and whether there were any significant differences among the means of three independent groups. As can be seen in this table the significance level is .000 ($p=.0$) which is below 0.05, therefore, there were statistically significant

differences among groups and the null hypotheses could be rejected. The other data indicated in the table was the degree of freedom between groups (2) and within groups (42).

Table 6 Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons in post-test.

	(I) reading comprehension	(J) reading comprehension	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	Information-gap	Opinion-gap	-1.60000*	.55739	.017	-2.9542	-.2458
		control	2.06667*	.55739	.002	.7125	3.4209
	Opinion-gap	Information-gap	1.60000*	.55739	.017	.2458	2.9542
		control	3.66667*	.55739	.000	2.3125	5.0209
	control	Information-gap	-2.06667*	.55739	.002	-3.4209	-.7125
		Opinion-gap	-3.66667*	.55739	.000	-5.0209	-2.3125

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

C. Reporting the output of the one-way ANOVA in Post-Test

There were statistically significant differences among groups as determined by one-way ANOVA. A tukey post-hoc test revealed, the mean differences among all groups were significant. In other word, there was statistically significant differences between information-gap group and student as question master group ($p = .017$). There was statistically significant difference between information-gap group and control group ($p = .002$). There was statistically significant difference between student as opinion-gap group and control group ($p = .000$). It can be concluded that there were statistically significant differences among all groups. Therefore, null hypotheses would be rejected. In other words task based instruction was effective.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effects of task-based instruction on reading comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 45 EFL learners studying English at Nashr institute in Kermanshah, Iran. They were divided into 2 experimental groups and one control

group. For doing this study, parallel tests of listening comprehension were used as the pretest and posttest of this study.

The research questions addressed in the present study were whether task-based teaching can lead Iranian EFL learners to greater increase in L2 listening comprehension or not. Using pre-test and post test scores on listening comprehension test and utilizing the results of one-way ANOVA, the researchers analyzed the data obtained from this study. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in listening comprehension due to the effect of task-based instruction. The decision 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.

One of the most important things about these tasks is that they promote learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making any mistakes. 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 (Willis and Willis, 2007, P.3).

Regarding to the first question i.e., "if the information-gap task has any effect on reading comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researchers found, that the task was very effective for a few reasons: First of all it is worth noting that this task accompanied by some oral texts. In this activity one person held all the information while other learners listened to the information and draw pictures. In one of the tasks the researchers applied was one student talked about her family and her relatives while her partner draw a family tree for the information being heard. Finally the researchers asked students to compare their friends' family trees with the written information given to them. 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. Furthermore, it reduces pressure from learners. In order to help students to perform the task successfully, the researchers asked the students to listen to the gist of the topic once or twice first then they were supposed to draw each other's family tree.

It was really surprised to see how dynamic the class was as learners started to ask and answer questions about the number of people in her partners' family, about how many sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, nephews, or nieces she has.

Regarding to the second question i.e., "if an opinion task has any effects on reading comprehension improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researchers found, that the task was more effective than the information-gap task for a few reasons: The researchers claimed that he observed real personal involvement, with an accompanying increase in confidence and fluency. It was really surprised to see how students talked about their opinions and preferences while at the same time wanted to convince their partners that their idea is the best idea. Since learners had different opinions, the outcome of the task was open.

In one of the tasks utilized by the researcher, learners were supposed to decide on going to a holiday destination. First there was a lot of interaction on the place to spend their holidays then they interact about what food or drinks to take, finally they talk about how to get there. There were a lot of interaction and fun. Sometimes a student wanted to be quick in suggesting her opinion but she was criticized by her classmates. It really promoted a sense of competition. Afterwards, the learners were asked to compare their decision with the written text provided for them.

In brief, implementing aural task-based materials in the language classroom exposed EFL students to real-language use from the beginning of language study. 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 types of "student as question master and corrupted text task" not only affected the listening comprehension of the participants and improved it but also the researchers assumes that these tasks correspond to advanced level of language proficiency and they would be suitable for all participants at that level.

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