

A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Convergent versus Divergent Tasks in Task-based Teaching of Reading

Behtash Fazli^{1*}

1. English Department, Farhangian University, Shiraz, Iran.

* Corresponding Email: Fazli_2016@ yahoo.com

Abstract – The aim of this study was to make comparison of the effectiveness of convergent versus divergent tasks in the task-based teaching of reading. The researcher worked in two English institutes in Shiraz, Iran. The participants consisted of 75 EFL learners of the same gender (male) at the intermediate proficiency level. First, the students were categorized randomly into the three groups a control, a convergent, and a divergent group. Second, each group was divided into two subgroups. Results showed that convergent and divergent tasks had significant effects on reading performance ($p < 0.01$). The mean of the scores for reading performance in different groups had significant differences so that the convergent group had the highest performance and the control group had the lowest performance.

Keywords: convergent tasks, divergent tasks, task-based teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a very important part of improving students reading comprehension ability is always one of the important goals of foreign language teaching. The improvement of reading ability cannot be done without the guidance of a well-grounded theory and a systematic approach and training (Johnson, 2008).

With the beginning of the communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s and much emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, the term task-based instruction, or TBI (also known as task-based teaching) was widely used in the field of second language acquisition with the purpose of designing communicative tasks to encourage learners' actual language use. Task-based teaching is a methodology which claims that the best way to create interaction processes in the classroom is to use specially designed instructional tasks (Richards, 2006).

Task-based teaching is an approach which offers students material to engage actively in the processing of them in order to achieve a goal or complete a task. Much like regular tasks that we perform everyday such as making the tea, writing an essay, talking to someone on the phone (Ellis, 2003).

The terms convergence and divergence are derived from Kolb's experiential learning theory which states that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of four distinct modes of experience: concrete experience (CE), active

experimentation (AE), reflective observation (RO), and abstract conceptualization (AC) (Carless, 2007).

Convergent tasks are those tasks that require true justified knowledge, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. They allow for collaboration in meaning negotiation of where a single goal is needed. Thus, collaborative work is required. Convergent questions require only one correct answer, allow collaborative work with short answers of which are not highly cognitively demanding, and so require no reference making .

Divergent tasks are those tasks that require new significant knowledge and have various outcome options with possibly more than one goal. These types of tasks allow independent works which individuals can perform differently according to their cognitive styles and which might lead to different outcomes. Questioning in divergent tasks will encourage students to generate questions with more than one correct answer. The questions are cognitively demanding such as making inferences (Farahani, 2009).

It is believed that there are significant differences in terms of learning achievement between these two types of learning styles. There has been generally a growing awareness of the necessity to change and improve the preparation of students for productive functioning in the continually changing and highly demanding environment. In confronting this challenge it is necessary to consider the complexity of the education system itself and multitude of problems that must be addressed. Clearly, no simple, single uniform approach can be applied with the expectation that significant improvements of the system will occur in task-based learning, it is based on the principle that learners may study more efficiently when their minds are focused on the task, rather than on the language they are using. So Task-based learning is advantageous to the students because it is more student-centered, allows for more meaningful communication, and often provides for practical extra-linguistic skill building.

Moreover, it is believed that there are significant differences in terms of learning achievement between divergent and convergent learning styles. Convergent learning style learners seem to do best in situations where there is a single best answer or solution to a question or problem. Divergent learning style learners perform better in situations with alternative ideas and implications, such as 'brainstorming' activity. Divergent learners are interested in people and tend to be imaginative and feeling-oriented. They can view concrete situations from many perspectives. Tasks where this kind of learning strategy is encouraged may lead the divergent learning style learners to achieve better learning outcomes (Kolb, 1984). Also it is believed that there are differences in terms of learning achievement between task-based techniques and traditional methods in teaching reading. One of the most important roles that a task can play is providing comprehensible input and promoting communicative interaction among the learners. Task-based teaching that combines insights from communicative language teaching offers a change from the traditional method in which learners may have failed to learn to communicate. It creates a real purpose for language use and provides a natural context for language study.

As the tasks are likely to be familiar to students, students are more likely to be engaged, which may further motivate them in their language learning. So this study can help

us find the above-mentioned features of the task-based method. Doing so can guide teachers for better teaching methods.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning strategies have been differentiated into three categories, which are cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies (O'Melly & Chamot 1990). Cognitive strategies are applicable to tasks like rehearsal, organization, elaboration and inference process. Meta-cognitive strategies involve selective attention, planning for organization and monitoring comprehension. Social and affective strategies involve ideational control over effect and include tasks like cooperation and clarification. Learning strategies are complex procedures, which are applied to various tasks. They may be represented as procedural knowledge acquired through cognitive, associative and autonomous stages of learning. It may be conscious at early stages and later may be performed without the person's awareness. Rabinowitz and Chi (1987) suggest that strategies must be consciously applied. A person applying unfamiliar strategy to a demanding task has difficulties in processing which can be anticipated from performing complex tasks. Teaching new strategies with cognitive tasks, therefore, becomes difficult. According to Anderson (1983), the transfer of strategies is based on pattern matching conditions where the learner recognizes similarities between tasks. Writers have commented on the difficulty of strategy training and of furthering strategy transfer (Derry & Murphy 1986). They make a distinction between detached training where strategies are used independent of the context and embedded training where strategy use is in specific subject area. Among other issues, Second language research, in fact, focuses on reading strategies. Reading strategies suggest how readers view interaction with written text and how strategies are related to text comprehension. Reading strategies reveal ways in which readers manage to interact with written texts and how strategies are related to text comprehension. Reading strategies encompass skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, critical reading, inference and recognizing text structure.

In certain studies of descriptive nature, think-aloud has been used to view the difference between reading strategies among successful and unsuccessful reader (see Ruddell, Ruddell, and Singer, 1994). Block (1986) suggested that the differences between successful and less successful readers were in the following aspects:

1. Integration
2. Recognition of aspects of text structure
3. Use of general knowledge, personal experiences and associations
4. Response in extensive vs. reflexive modes.

In case of extensive mode, readers make attempts to deal with the message conveyed by the author, focus on understanding the author's ideas and do not relate the text to them affectively or personally. In case of reflexive mode, readers relate the text to themselves affectively and personally, directing their attention away from the text and focus on their own thoughts and feelings rather than on the information in the text. Block further divides

unsuccessful readers into a hierarchy of integrators and non-integrators where the former integrated information and were aware of text structure, while the latter failed to integrate and tended not to recognize text structure.

First language reading has investigated different aspects of relationship between meta-cognitive ability and effective reading. Flavell (1979) recognizes two dimensions of meta-cognitive ability, namely, knowledge of cognition and regulation of cognition. The former includes the reader's knowledge about his cognitive resources, i.e. his conceptualization of the reading process: how the reader conceptualizes what he/she is doing in reading, and the latter suggests monitoring between the reader and the reading situations. Both these dimensions basically tantamount to suggesting that if a reader is conscious of what is required in performing effectively, then it is possible to take steps to meet the demands of a reading situation more effectively. On the other hand, if the reader is not conscious of his/her own limitations as a reader or of the complexity of task at hand, then to expect that the reader would take preventive actions to anticipate or recover from problems would not be possible.

Second language reader's conceptualizations about their reading in second language have been investigated by Devine (1984), which suggests that younger and less proficient readers tend to focus on reading as decoding process. Numerous competing definitions of tasks exist. Many of these definitions focus on different aspects of what constitutes a task. Below you will find three different interpretations of the word task, each of which highlights different nuances of the term. One of the most widely quoted definitions for task is offered by Long (1985). He refers to a task as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some rewards. Thus examples of tasks include filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone across the road. In other words, by "task" is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, etc.

Another well-known definition is provided by Nunan (1989). He considers a task as any 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. More recently, Skehan (1998) summarizes the parameters for a task activity in the following way: "(a) meaning is primary; (b) learners are not given other people's meanings to regurgitate, (c) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, (d) task completion has a priority, and (e), the assessment of tasks are done in terms of outcome". From these definitions, despite the various interpretations, several common design features can be identified. These features include: All three definitions emphasize the importance of focus on meaning. This criterion supports the notion that conveying an intended meaning is the essence of language use (see Principle 4 for further discussion). Long (1985) and Skehan's (1998) definitions emphasize the use of real-world tasks or activities that are comparable to authentic task behavior. Performing real-world tasks also necessitates the use of real language to accomplish these tasks. Skehan (1998) further suggests that task performance often involves achieving a goal or an objective, or arriving at an outcome or an end product. Meanwhile, Nunan's (1989) definition makes specific

reference to the classroom environment and points out that task performance may entail employing a single skill or a combination of several skills. His description recognizes the pedagogical needs for focusing on skills in isolation in language learning.

The name of task-based approach derived from the Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project established by N.S. Prabhu. Prabhu's version of task-based learning was built around a syllabus that contained a series of tasks in the form of problem-solving activities. Since its syllabus, according to Paul Knight, "contained no linguistic specifications", and in the syllabus "there existed no rationale, grading and sequencing of tasks appear arbitrary (Long & Crookes 1992-37)". Then in the 1980s, linguists carried the TB approach further. Breen and Candlin (1980) outlined their own TBL proposals, which were based on educational and psychological principles rather than psycholinguistic principles. Its aim was "to increase the student capacity for communication rather than declarative knowledge about the target language." Its syllabus was born through negotiation "between teachers and learners selecting the content of the course built upon social and problem-solving interaction." Since the TB approach is still being experimented, we can see that applied linguists in different parts of the world adopt it, fit it in with their own actual situations.

Kolb (1978) describes the characteristics of the four basic learning styles based on both research and clinical observation of the patterns of learning style Inventory scores which involve convergent, divergent, assimilation and accommodative learning styles. The convergent learning style relies primarily on the dominant learning abilities of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The major strength of this approach lies in problem-solving, decision-making, and the practical application of ideas. This learning style has been called the "convergent" because a person with this style seems to do best in situations like conventional intelligence tests where there is a single correct answer or solution to a question or problem. In this learning style, knowledge is organized in such a way that through hypothetical-deductive reasoning it can be focused on specific problems. Convergent individuals are controlled in their expressions of emotion; they thus prefer dealing more with technical tasks and problems than social and interpersonal issues. Consequently, professions with technical or scientific bases (e.g. accounting, engineering, medicine, and to a lesser degree, management) have people with a primarily convergent learning style. The divergent learning style has on the other hand the opposite learning strengths from convergence, emphasizing concrete experience and reflective observation. The major strength of this orientation lies in imaginative ability and awareness of meaning and values. The primary adaptive ability of divergence is to view concrete situations from many perspectives and as such the emphasis is adaptation by observation rather than by action. This learning style is called "divergent," because an individual of this type performs better in situations that call for generation of alternative ideas and implications such as a "brainstorming" session. Those oriented toward divergence are interested in people and therefore tend to be imaginative and feeling-oriented. The divergent learning style is hence associated with the personal type having introversion and feeling as the dominant process.

TBLT was produced under the backgrounds of communicative teaching used extensively in the 1980s. The innovations of task-based language teaching (TBLT) have never stopped. When it comes to TBLT, the first thing we need to do is to decide just what we mean by the term “task”. Task-based language education starts from the basic idea that students learn a language by performing tasks (Branden & Machteld, 2006). “Task” is the significant and key part in TBLT. So it is firstly necessary to see what it is meant by task. They are listed as follows in different dimensions. As Long and Porter (1985) defined: “a task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some words. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between”. This definition is quite a variety within the field of second language teaching. The tasks Long and Porter set out above are target tasks. They are the sorts of things that individuals typically do outside the classroom. This definition is a non-technical, non-linguistic one.

Nunan (1989) also suggests a pedagogical definition of “task”. He says that in general, he considers the communicative task as 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. In addition, he thinks that the task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end. According to this definition, we can think of some examples of classroom tasks including listening to a weather forecast and deciding what to wear, responding to a party invitation, completing a banking application form, and describing a photograph of one’s family. In agreement with Nunan, Willis (1996) suggests a more brief definition. She says that tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. It is obvious that she emphasizes activities and communicative purpose here.

Generally speaking, TBLT refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. Some of its proponents present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching, since it draws on several principles that formed part of the communicative language teaching movement. The purpose of using tasks is to design satisfactory pedagogic activities and outcomes. There are several effective frameworks for creating a task-based lesson. In a comprehensive framework suggested by Jane Willis (1996), three stages were considered for each lesson.

First, pre-task stage which consists of an introduction to the topic and the task. The teacher presents what is expected of the students in the task phase, and gives clear instruction on what they will have to do at the task stage. The pre-task stage includes a model of the task. This can be done by presenting a picture or audio, video demonstrating the task. This stage results in partial, tenuous knowledge which trigger a reorganization of existing structures in the learners’ inter language system. This stage can lead learners to interpret tasks in more fluent and accurate ways and increase elaboration of new lexical and grammatical structures.

Second, during the task phase in which the students complete a task, depending on the type of activity. For example, the students get into groups, pretend order or role-play with

each other, and use their language resources. The teacher is the observer or counselor in monitoring the tasks. So the methodology is more students centered. Then the students prepare either a written or oral report to present to the class. They practice the report in their groups. The instructor takes equations and monitors the students.

Finally, the students present their reports to the class and the teacher or the other students provide written or oral feedback. Third, in the language focus stage, the teacher reviews what happened in the task with regards to language and highlights relevant parts for the students to analyze. It may be language forms used by the students, problems that the students had, or forms that need to be covered more and were not used sufficiently. Then the teacher selects language areas to practice, based upon the needs of the students. Students do practice activities to increase their confidence and make a note of useful language.

In this model the students are free of language control and they use their language resources to develop a natural context from their experiences with the language. They have more exposure to language, lexical phrases, collocations, patterns and language forms and can spend a lot of time communicating. They can adjust their language for the report stage. This approach is enjoyable and motivates students to use the target language as often as possible, in order to benefit from exposure and use.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there any significant difference in reading comprehension ability between the two groups of students who have experiences either in divergent or convergent task-based approaches?
2. Are convergent and divergent reading tasks significantly more efficient than traditional methods in teaching reading?

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Participants

The participants of this study were selected from two English institutes in Shiraz, Iran, 75 male English learners who were at the intermediate level of proficiency. Intermediate language learners had experienced at least 3 years of English learning and had passed the first three books of Interchange series (Intro, 1, 2 volumes). First a pre-test was administered. Then, the students were categorized randomly into three categories, as the control, convergent and divergent groups of the study.

4.2. Instruments

For gathering data, a pre-test was administered to the groups before the treatment This reading test was from a book with the name of Active 1. Then, the two experimental groups (i.e. the convergent and the divergent groups) were taught according to task-based teaching

and the control group received the effect of the treatment. This test also was from a book with the name of Active 1.

4.3. Data Collection Procedure

As expressed before, subjects who studied at similar levels of the two previously introduced institutes were divided into three groups of control, convergent and divergent groups. At the very first session of the term, one reading examinations was conducted on some reading tasks for those who were practiced during the term, as the pre-test and as the reading proficiency certification of the students or as a proxy which determines extremers (those whose performances result in large variances). Those students of the experimental group who received one-fourths or below of the total mark, were determined as extremers but were not separated from the others. In order to avoid the effect of large variances, their post-test results were not considered. At the end of the treatment, a post-test composed of divergent and convergent reading tasks was administered to the students of the experimental groups and the control group, reading examinations were conducted as the post-test.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

The participants of this study were 75 intermediate-level students. There were 25 students in each group. Participants were male. The mean score of reading performance in pre- test and post -test for 3 groups (convergent, divergent and control) are shown in Table 1. The numbers of participants for each group are 25. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for each group. As you see in the table skewness and kurtosis were less than 5, so data distribution was normal in each group.

Table 1: Reading performance results in pre-test and post-test.

Student	Pre Test Results			Post Test Results		
	Convergent	divergent	control	Convergent	divergent	control
1	17	15	16	20	17	17
2	15	15	15	19	17	15
3	15	15	14	18	17	15
4	14	14	13	18	15	14
5	13	13	13	17	15	15
6	13	13	12	17	15	14
7	12	13	11	18	18	13
8	11	11	11	16	15	15
9	11	11	11	16	14	12
10	11	10	11	15	16	13
11	10	10	10	14	13	10

12	10	10	10	15	13	11
13	10	10	10	15	13	12
14	10	10	9	15	12	10
15	10	10	9	15	11	11
16	9	10	9	15	12	9
17	9	9	8	14	10	9
18	9	9	8	13	11	11
19	8	9	7	13	10	10
20	8	8	6	12	10	6
21	7	7	6	11	9	7
22	7	7	6	12	10	9
23	7	7	6	12	9	8
24	7	7	6	11	9	8
25	7	7	6	11	9	8
Mean	10.54	10.4	9.72	14.88	12.8	11.28

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test of reading performance

Statistics	Pre Test				Post Test			
	Convergent	divergent	control	group	Convergent	Divergent	control	group
N	25	25	25	75	25	25	25	75
Mean	11.2500	11.1791	10.7068	11.0453	15.7559	13.6968	12.0464	13.8330
Std. Error of Mean	.58215	.51971	.59345	.32312	.49647	.58733	.59223	.36999
Median	10.8300	10.8000	10.8300	10.8300	15.8300	13.1650	12.0850	14.1700
Mode	9.17(a)	10.00	6.67(a)	9.17	15.00(a)	10.00(a)	15.00	15.00
Std. Deviation	2.73051	2.43764	2.78354	2.62503	2.32865	2.75480	2.77780	3.00580
Variance	7.456	5.942	7.748	6.891	5.423	7.589	7.716	9.035
Skewness	.643	.388	.253	.387	.016	.084	-.125	-.152
Kurtosis	-.195	-.776	-.503	-.481	-.894	-1.178	-.563	-.543
Minimum	7.50	7.50	6.67	6.67	11.67	9.17	6.67	6.67
Maximum	17.50	15.83	16.67	17.50	20.00	18.33	17.50	20.00
Sum	247.50	245.94	235.55	728.99	346.63	301.33	265.02	912.98

5.3. Homogeneity Test

Before variance analysis, test of homogeneity of variances between reading performance scores of learners in different groups was performed. The results of the test are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Test of homogeneity of variances

Test	Levine Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Pre- test	0.160	2	72	0.853
Post- test	0.661	2	72	0.520

As shown in table 3, differences of variances between reading performance scores of learners in different groups was not significant, so the variances of different groups was homogeneous. The effect of variances difference was removed.

5.4. Variance analysis

To investigate the significance of convergent and divergent task on reading performance in the different groups, variance analysis was performed.

Table 4: Variances Analysis of reading comprehension results in different groups

The Variation Source	df	Post- test	
		Mean Square	F
Replication	24	19.058	2.758
Group	2	75.990 *	10.998
Error	48	6.909	

As table 4 shows, convergent and divergent task had a significant effect on their reading performance ($P < 0.05$). Namely, at least one of these task had a significant effect on their reading performance.

5.5. Mean Comparison

To find out which type of learning has the higher performance for reading performance, mean comparison was performed between the groups. Mean comparison was performed in the probability level of 0.05 and with the method of Scheffe. As Table 5 shows, the mean scores for reading performance in different groups have significant differences, so that the convergent group had the highest performance and the control group had the lowest performance.

Table 5: Mean comparison in different groups*

	Reading performance test results	
Group	Pre- test	Post- test
Control	10.706 ^a	12.046 ^c
Divergent	11.179 ^a	13.696 ^b
Convergent	11.250 ^a	15.756 ^a

Scheffe Test ($\alpha=0.05$) *

5.6. ONE WAY ANOVA

To find out the significance of each method in reading performance, ONE WAY ANOVA was used for the results of pre-test and post-test.

Table 6: ONE WAY ANOVA results and reading comprehension means comparison in the 3 groups.

model	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Inter-groups	2	1.885	942	3.752	0.028
Intra-groups	71	20.594	251		
Total	73	22.478			

To understand the differences between the performances of the three groups tukey hoc test was used.

Table 7: Tukey hoc test results for means comparison in 3 groups

First group	Second group	Mean group	Sig
Divergent task	Control group	-47.45	0.0001
Convergent task			

Results showed that there were no significant differences between divergent and convergent groups, but these groups had significant differences with control groups ($\text{sig} < 0.01$). It means that divergent and convergent task statistically have similar effect on reading performance that is higher than control groups. Also the results show that task-based teaching has positive effect on reading performance.

6. CONCLUSION

Analysis and discussion of the data collected in this study entail the following conclusions:

- 1- Convergent tasks had significant effect on reading performance and showed the highest performance.

- 2- Divergent tasks had significant effect on reading performance and showed no significant differences with convergent task.
- 3- These two groups (Convergent and Divergent) have significant differences with control groups.

There have been criticisms that task-based learning is not appropriate as the foundation of a class for beginning students. The major disadvantage for beginning students is that the focus of task-based language learning is on output, when beginning language learners often go through a silent period requiring massive amounts of comprehensible input. Others claim that students are only exposed to certain forms of language, and may be neglected by others. Teachers may want to keep these in mind when designing a task-based learning lesson plan. Task-based teaching that combines the best insights from communicative language teaching, offers a change from the traditional method which learners may have failed to learn to communicate. It creates a real purpose for language use and provides a natural context for language study. The aim of a task-based class is stimulating language use, activating whatever language the students have, and providing learning opportunities for students. The cycle of task-planning report can stimulate a natural desire in student to improve the language and the language focus component can enables learners to systematize their knowledge of language structure. The design of tasks should be based on the students' interest and their own experience. Especially in the phase of pre-reading, interest should be paid more attention to. There has been a great deal of research and theorizing in the last approximately fifteen years on the use of tasks in language teaching, particularly tasks which involve interaction between learners (e.g., Breen, 1987; Crookes, 1986; Crookes & Gass, 1993; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987).

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