

Closed vs. Open Type of Task and the Accuracy of Speaking

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Abstract -The present study aimed to investigate the effect of task types on the accuracy of oral production of Iranian EFL learners. To do so, thirty participants were selected from among the 100 learners who were learning English at Safir Language institute in Tehran, Gholhak branch based on their performance on Oxford Placement Test. The participants' classes of speaking were held under two various conditions. In the first phase of their speaking class, the researchers used the closed task for five sessions. The Information Gap Task was used as a sample of closed task. The next five sessions were devoted to open task where the participants focused on General Discussion. Following the implementation of both types of tasks, the participants were interviewed by the researchers about the difficulty level of each task used in the study. The participants mostly believed that the closed tasks affect the accuracy of speaking more and those who had been exposed to closed type of tasks were more focused on the accuracy of the skill.

Keywords: open task, closed task, accuracy of speaking, Safir Language Institute

1. INTRODUCTION

First of all, it seems necessary to have a background about the task and task nature. In the following parts, the definitions of task have been given from different viewpoints.

Task is defined by different researchers in a number of various ways. Ellis (2003) pointed out that there is no complete agreement in research or language pedagogy as to what constitutes a task, and also there is no consistency in the terms employed to describe the different devices for eliciting learner language. Ellis (2003) believes that different definitions address a number of delimitations: (1) the scope of the task, (2) the perspective from which a task is viewed, (3) the authenticity of the task, (4) the linguistic skills required to perform a task, (5) the psychological processes involved in task performance, and (6) the outcome of the task.

According to Richards (1990) tasks, or activity structures, refer to activities that teachers assign to attain particular learning objectives. For any given subject at any given level, a teacher uses a limited repertoire of tasks that essentially define that teacher's methodology of teaching. These might include completing worksheets, reading aloud, dictation, quick reading, and practicing dialogues.

Nunan (1989) states that a communicative task 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. As Nunan explains the task should also have a sense of completeness, which means that it should be able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right.

Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) cited in Ellis (2003) state that:

A task is an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language, i.e. as a response. For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, and listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

The present study was designed to investigate the degree of difficulty of open and closed tasks from the learners' point of view. The learners judged the difficulty of the tasks from the pedagogical point of view. In fact, the researchers of the study wanted to know which type of task seemed more difficult to the learners. The study seemed to be useful for adopting suitable tasks so that the learners would benefit from them.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

A lot of studies have been done to investigate the impact of open and closed tasks. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies have been conducted on the determining the degree of difficulty of open and closed tasks. Whether open or closed tasks are more difficult is a controversial issue. However, the trend is toward closed tasks being more difficult.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study is beneficial to researchers and practitioners in some ways. First of all, the researchers will find out which tasks, open or closed tasks, will be more difficult from the learners' points of view. This would be an important contribution of this study to task-based language teaching. The importance of this study lies within the fact that learners will judge the difficulty level of open and closed tasks.

1.4. Research Question and Hypothesis

Given the problem and the significance already illustrated, the present study sought answers to the following research question: Are closed tasks more difficult than open tasks from the learners' points of view?

Based on the above research questions, the following research hypothesis was formulated: Closed tasks are NOT more difficult than open tasks from the learners' points of view.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the researchers have reviewed some of the relevant literature to the task types. Since the topic of the study was about two types of tasks, the researchers have tried to narrow the explanation down to the topic of the study so that they would be able to tackle with the problem in a better way.

2.1. Classifications of Tasks in Language Teaching

Tasks are classified in different ways in language teaching. Tikunoff (1985) states that class tasks can vary according to three types of demands they make on learners: response mode demands (the kind of skill they demand, such as knowledge, comprehension, analysis/synthesis, evaluation); interactional mode demand, (the rules governing how classroom tasks are accomplished, such as individually, in group, or with the help of the teacher); and task complexity demands (how difficult the learner perceive the task to be).

Doyle (1983) identifies four tasks which are central to all classroom work:

- Memory task, in which students reproduce the information which was presented before
- Procedural or routine tasks, in which students use fixed procedures to generate answers
- Comprehension or understanding tasks, in which students should make inferences, recognize new versions of information previously encountered, and solve problems
- Opinion tasks, in which students state their preference for something

According to Richards (1985), tasks differ according to the type of response they require from the learner, the type of interaction they engage the learner in (either with a text or with another learner), the level of language processing they require, and the type of language production they demand. Differences of these kinds may contribute in specific ways to learning. As he says in considering the role of tasks in SLA, we are concerned with their cognitive, linguistic, and communicative dimensions. Nunan (1988) states that tasks can be classified according to whether they refer to performance in real world or the classroom. Another distinction is between product-oriented tasks which specify what learners will be able to do as a result of instruction, and process-oriented tasks, which specify the activities to be undertaken during instruction.

2.2. Open and Close Tasks

There are two types of tasks, namely, open and closed tasks. Ellis (2003) distinguishes between these two types of tasks. Open tasks are those where the participants know that there is no predetermined solution. These tasks are different in their degree of openness. Duff (1981) describes that many opinion-gap tasks, such as tasks involving making choices, surveys, debates, ranking activities, and general discussion are open in nature because learners have their say on the solution. Closed tasks are those that require students to reach a single, correct solution or finite solutions. Information-gap tasks such as the tasks in which one should find out 'sameness or difference' are considered closed in nature.

Long (1989) presents a rationale for the use of closed tasks. He states that closed tasks promote negotiation work more than open tasks because the learners will less likely give up when faced with a challenge. In case of open tasks when students face a difficulty, for example in free conversation, they can easily change the topic or work on it briefly. In contrast to open tasks which need less effort to communicate, closed tasks, as Long (1989) argues, require students to make themselves understood and this results in the effort to be more precise. This, as he states, is good for acquisition.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this part the researchers will focus on the methodology used to perform the study. They will briefly explain the participants of the study, the instrumentation, as well as the procedures used in the study.

3.1. The Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were intermediate learners. Since this study did not require random selection as well as a control group and an experimental group, the researchers selected 30 learners who were at the same level of language proficiency according to Oxford Placement Test. The language learners at the institute are usually homogeneous since they are pretested and take the placement test when entering the institute for the first time, but the researchers gave them this test to ensure of the right level of their proficiency. The participants were all female and between 23 to 26 years old. They were learning English conversation and in fact they were studying English at Safir institute in Tehran.

3.2. Instrumentation

An Oxford Placement Test was used to pick out those who were at the intermediate level. This test consisted of sixty items which took half an hour to be answered completely. Another instrument to be used in this study was an interview, which was administered to collect data concerning the learners' judgements on the degree of difficulty of the open and closed tasks. The interview process was designed by the researchers and was assessed by the university instructors who were all assistant professors at Islamic Azad University, Malayer Branch.

3.3. Procedures

The study consisted of these steps. First the learners had to perform two types of tasks. The tasks were either open or closed. This phase was the productive phase of the study in which the participants had to produce either a closed or an open task. Following the production of the two tasks, the learners were interviewed and asked which task was more difficult not linguistically but pedagogically. The researchers did the interview themselves in order to make sure of the reliability of the questions in the interview. They could have more control over the interview procedures since they directly monitored the interview. Finally, the interview talks were recorded for later analysis. The researchers then carefully listened to the recorded voices in the interview and based on the content of the interview judged on the results of this study.

3.4. Design

This research used a single shot design done in one session (Mackey & Gass, 2005), and it did not involve any treatment. Unlike many studies in Iran, this research did not involve having a control and experimental group. The researchers had the learners perform two tasks, one open and another one closed. Then, they analyzed the pedagogical difficulty of the tasks from the learners' points of view through an interview administered by the researchers themselves. The results of the interview will be discussed in the following section of the article.

4. CONCLUSION

As it was stated in the previous sections of the article, the researchers qualified their study using an interview to assess the learners' views about the type of suitable tasks. Their argument was that because it is the language learners who want to decide on their learning task, they should decide which type of task may fulfill their learning needs. The interview question was the same for all and it was "In your opinion, was the open task more difficult or the closed one? Why?"

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is believed to promote language acquisition by: (a) providing learners with opportunities to make the language input they receive more comprehensible, (b) furnishing contexts in which learners need to produce output which others can understand, and (c) making the classroom closer to real-life language situations.

The present study investigated the effect of closed versus open tasks on the accuracy of the accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' oral production. The goal of this study was to identify a useful task for enhancing the speaking skills of language learners. The research came to this conclusion that tasks are effective in developing various skills especially speaking. As it is obvious, speaking and other skills of a language are interactive where the interlocutors or those who are involved in the skill interact with each other to communicate successfully with each other. In speaking, the speaker and listener try to achieve the intended meaning through using utterances they know. The utterances may be grammatical or even ungrammatical. If the meaning is achieved, whether the utterance is grammatical or ungrammatical, it is believed that the speaking task has been successful. Tasks also create such a condition. They provide the language users with an opportunity to achieve the intended meaning. This intended meaning is the output of the task. In other words, a task must have an output. The output can be a motivation for creating other outputs too.

The present research made use of interview. Since the number of the participants who were selected as homogenous was not as the researchers expected, the researchers used the interview in order to be sure about the obtained results since the majority of previous studies have been quantitative. After analyzing the participants' interview, it was apparent that the closed tasks affect the accuracy of speaking and those who are exposed to closed type of tasks are more focused on the accuracy of the skill.

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