

The Impact of Different Types of Tasks (Structured and Unstructured) on the Production of Relative Clauses and Lexical Diversity of Iranian EFL University Students

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Abstract—The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the impact of different types of tasks (structured and unstructured) on the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity of Iranian EFL university students. The participants of this study were thirty upper intermediate students of English language in Iranian context. To be certain about the homogeneity of the participants, the Nelson proficiency test was administered. After this stage, they were divided into two groups. Then a cartoon about fifty minutes was played for both groups. The experimental group (unstructured) received the film from the middle, while the control group (structured) saw the film from the beginning. Then, the participants were asked to produce whatever they heard. After analyzing the participants' sentences, the results showed that the control (structured) group outperformed the experimental (unstructured) one in producing the relative clauses while there was no significant difference between the two groups in the case of lexical diversity. Based on the obtained results some recommendations are given.

Index Terms—task, structured task, unstructured task, task-based language teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

There have been different methods and approaches in the history of language teaching and learning. These methods and approaches have been revised and modified based on different theoretical, linguistic and psychological frameworks. Different aspects of languages have been the focus of these theories and methods. For example, in some cases the goal of language teaching was to train the learners to achieve a native-like pronunciation by attending listening activities and memorization of different parts of the language. But the emergence of CLT revolutionized the field of language teaching and learning and caused radical changes in this process. To put it in a nutshell, the purpose of CLT was to understand others and to be understood by others (Zandmoghadam, 2007).

In fact, CLT and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) necessitated a serious rethinking of language presentation and emphasized on meaning based and positive involving of vocabulary to prosper an interaction-based of language learning in different contexts for different purposes (Chaudhary, 2010).

According to Swan and Walter (1984), the importance of vocabulary and lexical items cannot be ignored in the course of language teaching. It is one of the most demanding and necessary aspects of language teaching and learning that every language learner face.

The main objective of the present study is to investigate the impact of task on the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity of Iranian EFL learners. Looking for effective and appropriate language learning strategies is one of the main concerns of language learners, teachers as well as experts of this field to enable the learners to learn the language for the sake of communication. The purpose of TBLT is to equip the learners with tactics and strategies to recognize different situations and meet their interactional needs based on the setting in which they are in. Satisfying the learners' different needs is the core of Task-based strategy.

The purpose this study is to teach English through different types of tasks (structured and unstructured) on the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity of Iranian EFL University Students. The intention of this work is to demonstrate teaching relative clauses and lexical diversity with tasks in a dynamic form of practical exercises to remember them actively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the former language teaching and methods, TBLT tries to equip the learners to learn the intended target language in a meaningful situation. In the traditional language methods, the presentation of language was bit by bit while the teacher was in a full control of the classroom and most of decisions referred to him/her. The learning of languages did not result in communication and only rote learning of isolated materials of the most important goal of language learning. Learners were recognized as passive agents with clean slate. Different affective, cognitive and

psychological factors of the learners were ignored by the teachers and even curriculum designers. On the contrary, in TBLT the roles of learners has changed radically and they should participate in teaching and learning activities as actively as possible to internalize different function of language in real life situations. TBLT teaching supports the ideas that use language to learn it by participation in real based activities and tasks. The emphasis is on natural based situation to familiarize the learners with different functions of language in different contexts.

Structured and Unstructured Tasks

According to (Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005) the term structured can be defined as the clarity of larger structures and series of activates and events to be explained in time. According to this definition, one can claim that tasks with logical story line structures and frameworks are easier to understand and need less cognitive processing to unfold than those tasks with loose and irregular structure.

According to (Skehan 2009), by carrying out different task activities and narrative one it is impossible for learners to pay attention to different aspects of the target language such as complexity, accuracy and fluency simultaneously and that 'committing attention to one area, other things being equal, might cause lower performance unless the learner is assisted through manipulating performance conditions (e.g. the planning time available) or design features of the tasks (e.g. task structure).

In recent years, one of the task design features which have attracted researchers' attention is the inherent storyline structure of a narrative task. According to Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), narrative tasks are defined as 'stories based on a sequenced set of picture prompts, which are given to participants in order to elicit language performance' (pp. 248–9). The storyline structure of an oral narrative task pertains to the degree to which a task has 'a clear time line, a script, a story with a conventional beginning, middle and end, and an appeal to what is familiar and organized in the speaker's mind' (ibid, p. 246). It is assumed that a task which is tightly structured – i.e. has all, or at least most, of the abovementioned features – imposes fewer processing and attentional demands on task performers in simply enacting the task and getting the job done and as a result more attentional recourses would be left over to be devoted to complexity, accuracy and fluency of speech. Skehan and Foster's (1999) subsequent study lent further empirical support to this post-hoc interpretation (cited in Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011). They found that, compared to tasks that were loosely structured, narrative tasks with a tightly structured storyline induced learners to produce more fluent language. They also found that tight narrative structure combined with pre-task planning led task performers to speak more accurately in anL2. In another investigative attempt, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) studied whether and how the degree of structure in a narrative task might influence L2 oral performance. The results of their study revealed that overall task structure has positive and significant effects on complexity, accuracy and fluency of output. For example, in the case of fluency, they found significant differences between structure and unstructured tasks in terms of the number of pauses and speaking time, length of run, the total amount of silence, and false starts. (As cited in Ahmadian, Abdolreza pour, and Ketabi, 2012)

The notion of task structure first emerged from the post-hoc interpretations of the findings of a series of studies (Foster and Skehan 1996; Skehan and Foster 1999) that originally aimed to examine the degree to which familiar and unfamiliar task content would affect L2 oral production. Overall, the results of these studies revealed that talking in an L2 about a topic with which the task performers were familiar was associated with more fluent and accurate oral production and that where task participants were required to talk about unfamiliar information, less fluent and accurate output but more complex language was produced. However, Skehan and Foster in their post-hoc analyses of these findings noticed that the most fluent task performance was elicited by two tasks that had a tightly structured storyline. In a more recent study, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) attempted to replicate the effects for task structure found in this research program. In order to enhance the comparability of the results, they used the same structured and unstructured task employed by Tavakoli and Skehan (2005). The results of their study corroborated the results found by Skehan and Foster (1999) and Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) that task structure are linked with accuracy in L2 oral production. Tavakoli and Foster (2008) concluded that '*L2 performance is affected in predictable ways by design features of narrative tasks*' (p.459). Structured, narrative tasks with a tightly structured storyline induced learners to produce more fluent language. They also found that tight narrative structure combined with pre-task planning opportunity led task performers to speak more accurately in an L2. In another investigative attempt, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) studied whether and how the degree of structure in a narrative task might influence L2 oral performance. The results of their study revealed that overall task structure has positive and significant effects on complexity, accuracy and fluency of language. For example, in the case of fluency, they found significant differences between structured and unstructured tasks in terms of the number of pauses and speaking time, length of run, the total amount of silence, and false starts. In a more recent study, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) attempted to, among other things, replicate the effects for task structure found in this research program. In order to enhance the comparability of the results, they used the same structured and unstructured task employed by Tavakoli and Skehan (2005).

According to Skehan and Foster (1997; 1999) and Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) structured tasks can increase accuracy in the case of oral production on the part of the learners.

III. METHODS

A. Participants

The participants of the present study were thirty upper-intermediate level female EFL learners from Resalat Teacher Training Center, Zahedan, Iran. The language of all participants was Persian. They were learning English as a foreign language due to less exposure available for them in the context of Iran. None of them had been to an English speaking country before this study. They had been learning English as an academic major about two years and they were somehow proficient in general English. Their age ranged between 18 to 25. The main criteria for participants selection was the ease of access and availability.

B. Instrumentation

The process of data collection was done through the following instruments:

1. Nelson Proficiency Test

In order to make sure that all the participants were at the same level in terms of their language proficiency, a 50-item Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (section 300D) was used (see Appendix A). This multiple-choice test comprised cloze passages, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation. The English language proficiency test used in the present study was adopted from Fowler and Coe (1978). The overall internal consistency of this proficiency test was determined by Hashemian, Roohani and Fadaei (2012) using Cronbach Alpha (CA) and it turned out to be 0.82, which is an acceptable and high index of reliability.

2. Cartoon Film

A 15 minute part of a silent cartoon film (Tom and Jerry) was provided for participant in two groups and they were asked to repeat the story of the film in certain circumstances specified for each group. The main reason of providing a silent film for participants was to prevent them from taking advantage of the authentic material. As far as an oral narrative task is concerned, due to its very monologue nature, it induces learners to produce stretches of language which are not influenced by interactional and external variables (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Moreover, since many of the previous studies have used narrative tasks, this would enhance the comparability of the results of this study.

C. Data Collection Procedure

In order to collect the data, the Tom and Jerry film is played for the participants in the two groups and each participant was called from the class individually to narrate the above- mentioned film and write whatever they have understood from it. The film will be played from the very beginning for group 1 while, in the case of the Group 2; they received the film from the middle. It is worth noting that the oral production narration of the participant from the above mentioned story were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

D. Data Analysis Procedures

Both groups will perform tasks and their oral L2 production will be recorded and analyzed in terms of the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity.

The following formula will be used to measure the production of relative clauses:

$$\frac{n \text{ correct suppliance in contexts}}{n \text{ obligatory contexts} + n \text{ suppliance in nonobligatory contexts}} \times 100$$

= per cent accuracy

1. Obligatory context: refers to where that particular grammatical feature must have been used!

2. Lexical diversity: will be calculated by calculating the total number of different verbs used in one's speech.

Therefore, the whole study will be conducted in two three sessions.

Session 1: a language proficiency test to make sure that participants are equal in terms of level of proficiency.

Session 2: a structured task will be performed by group 1

Session 3: an unstructured task will be performed by group 2.

All task performances will be audio recorded and analyzed.

IV. RESULTS

The main purposes of the present study were to investigate the effect and difference of structured and unstructured task on the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity in upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. To this end, two null hypotheses were posed:

A. Research Hypothesis 1

H₀1: *There is no significant difference between Structured and unstructured tasks in the production of relative clauses in upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.*

In the following section, we refer to the measures that were employed in the current study.

TABLE 4.1.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR LANGUAGE PRODUCTION OF STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED GROUPS

Measure	Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lexical diversity	Structured	15	35	48	42.27	3.882
	Unstructured	15	32	44	38.60	3.832
Relative clauses	Structured	15	45	35	40	3.273
	Unstructured	15	30	40	34.73	3.305
	Unstructured	15	20	30	24.60	2.720

As shown in Table 4.3, there are differences in the mean scores of the structured and unstructured groups. As indicated in the table, the mean scores of accuracy and fluency for structured group are greater than that of unstructured group. On the other hand, the mean score of complexity for unstructured group is greater than structured one. To confirm or reject these differences, three Independent-samples t-tests were performed which are presented in Table 4.4.

TABLE 4.2.
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TESTS FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED GROUPS

Measure	Group	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Lexical diversity	Structured Vs. Unstructured	.022	.882	2.603	28	.015
				2.603	27.99	.015
Relative clauses	Structured Vs. Unstructured	.076	.784	4.385	28	.000
				4.385	27.99	.000
				-846	20.81	.407

As it can be seen in Table 4.4, the differences are statistically significant in terms of accuracy and fluency. That is, the structured group produced more fluent and accurate language than unstructured group and that structured task had positive effect on accuracy and fluency of language. In the case of complexity, it was revealed that there was no significant difference between participants in structured and unstructured groups ($t = -846$, $p = .407 > .05$). Thus, complexity of language production was not affected by task structure.

B. Research Hypothesis 2

H₀₂: *There is no significant difference between Structured and unstructured task in the production of lexical diversity in upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.*

Like the previous section, the same measures are used for measuring the production of lexical diversity. Descriptive statistics for the production of lexical diversity are presented in Table 4.5.

TABLE 4.3.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR LANGUAGE PRODUCTION OF LEXICAL DIVERSITY BY STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED GROUPS

Measure	Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lexical diversity	Structured	15	.35	.50	.41	.046
	Unstructured	15	.31	.46	.39	.042
Relative clauses	Structured	15	5	13	8.40	2.923
	Unstructured	15	3	9	6.93	1.981
	Unstructured	15	.21	.31	.25	.026

As shown in Table 4.5, there are differences in the mean scores of the structured and unstructured groups in the production of lexical diversity. In order to make sure that whether these differences are statistically significant or no, three Independent-samples t-tests were performed to approve or reject the difference. They are presented in Table 4.6 below.

TABLE 4.4.
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TESTS FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED GROUPS IN PRODUCING LEXICAL DIVERSITY

Measure	Group	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Lexical diversity	Structured Vs. Unstructured	.158	.694	1.321	28	.197
				1.321	27.76	.197
Relative clauses	Structured Vs. Unstructured	2.613	.117	1.609	28	.119
				1.609	24.62	.120
				3.047	22.67	.006

As illustrated in Table 4.6, the differences are not statistically significant between participants in structured and unstructured groups in terms of accuracy and fluency with the p-values of .119 and .197 respectively. In other words, the production of lexical diversity was not affected by both structured and unstructured tasks. In the case of complexity, it was found that there was significant difference between participants in structured and unstructured groups ($p = .005 < .05$).

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATION

The present research was an attempt to provide new evidence for the impact of different types of tasks (structured and unstructured) on the production of relative clauses and lexical diversity of Iranian EFL university students.

Q1. *Is there any significant difference between Structured and unstructured tasks in the production of relative clauses in upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners?*

Unlike Skehan and Foster (1999), the present study found a positive impact of structured task on the accuracy of performance. Besides many researchers (Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008, Tavakoli, 2009) have claimed that structured tasks can facilitate the process of accuracy aspect of language learning if sufficient and appropriate inputs are provided on the part of teacher in a natural-like situation. According to Skehan and Foster (1999), by providing good pre-task activities and engaging the learners through careful structured tasks prior the main tasks and activities, we can increase the learners' performance in different aspects of language such as accuracy and fluency.

Q2. *Is there any significant difference between Structured and unstructured tasks in the production of lexical diversity in upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners?*

Bases on the statistics and findings there no significance was observed between the two groups. In other words, the production of lexical diversity was not affected by both structured and unstructured tasks. In the case of complexity, it was found that there was significant difference between participants in structured and unstructured groups. To sum up, the results revealed that performing a structured task under careful online planning conditions would seem to be the best combination of task structure and online planning since it enables speakers to produce language with comparatively higher levels of complexity and accuracy and arguably fluency. This combination might enable language pedagogy to foster the 'balanced language development' in which the development of fluency is matched by the development of accuracy and complexity and, therefore, 'simply transacting tasks (and expressing meanings) is less likely to compromise longer-term interlanguage restructuring' (Skehan, 1998).

There are some reasons for these results. One of them has to do with unfamiliarity of Iranian EFL learners with the authentic material because as we know there is no use of such materials in Iranian context. The second reason refers to this fact that in Iranian context there is no emphasis on listening skill, so students cannot analyse the texts completely.

This study emphasized the effectiveness of the task-based approach on technical vocabulary learning and relative clauses. This suggests that the students' production improved substantially with the application of task based instruction. The current study made it clear that task-based language teaching is definitely more effective than traditional approach in teaching vocabulary in general and language production in particular. As we know English is taught as a foreign language in Iran and the learners has no exposure to real situation of language uses. The focus of language learning and teaching is mainly on educational objectives and communication and interaction receive no attention in this context. The methods of language presentation are mainly traditional and grammatical items are at the center of language teaching activities, so there is no opportunity for learners to practice whatever they learnt in real-life situations. TBLT can enhance more opportunities for Iranian learners to engage in different activities and natural uses of language in situation based settings based on different topics and purposes.

As discussed earlier, one of the most important aspects of TBLT is the time and energy allocated by the learners to different activities in order to acquire fluency, complexity as well as accuracy and earn these language aspects as effectively as possible. As a result, the aim of teachers' lesson plan and designing different activities must rotate around these aspects to conduct the learners in the best way of language learning. According to many experts one of the major drawbacks of TBLT refers to sequencing and gradation of different tasks in the process of language presentation on the part of the teacher (Long and Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 2003, 2006).

According to Robinson (2003, 2006), more empirical research must be done to find those factors affecting different elements in task difficulty and gradation of different activities according to learners' needs, wants and situation in the course of language learning. Thus, the results of the present study can be used as an empirical basis to select, grade and sequence tasks within task-based syllabi and testing.

In the case of unstructured tasks, the performance of the participants was not as regular as in the case of structured tasks. We can contribute this fact to ambiguity and lack of clarity in the case of unstructured tasks. The participants were not able to make a rational and clear connection between different. Therefore, the task performers had to ascertain the correct sequence of events unfolding in the video and the conceptual content that corresponds to it, put it in order, and then translates the message into actual words.

As Batstone (2005) argued the structured tasks can result in an establishment of form focus context and conduct learners to gain knowledge of language discourse, in which phonological, grammatical as well as lexical parameters of language manifest in learners; output. This explanation is in accord with Level's (1989) argument that monitoring is context-sensitive. It is also consistent with Kormos' (1999) suggestion that error detection depends, among other things, on the accuracy demand of the situation.

The final point is that designing different tasks and activities based on the learners' needs is among the most demanding job of every language teacher. Although TBLT has attracted many researchers and experts' attention all over the world, to put its theories into practice, we need a lot of evidence and research to travel this long path in the future. However, both of these professional strata (teachers and researchers) should devote time and effort to investigate the role of factors that play relatively significant roles in learners' task performance, a necessity that has been already given impetus within research and practical circles, as shown by the present review study. It is hoped that future studies would

shed more light on mechanisms that are involved in learners' ability to perform pedagogical tasks. (Fahim, Nourzadeh, and Fat'hi, 2011)

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