Enhancing Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency through using task-based activities

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of task-based activities on Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency. For this study, 50 Iranian participants were selected from students based on Oxford Quick Placement Test. The selected intermediate participants were then randomly divided into two equal groups: experimental and control. After a pre-test, a treatment was started; in the first session of the treatment, the task of 'buying' was given to the participants to be performed in a near authentic context. In the second, the third and the fourth sessions of the treatment, the task of 'ordering food', 'ordering a bus ticket' and 'visiting a doctor' were given to the participants, respectively. The control group did not receive task-based instruction. At the end of the experiment, a post-test for finding their speaking fluency was done. The findings revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group ($p < 0.05$).

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, speaking fluency, task-based speaking activities

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1. Introduction

Speaking is defined as an interactive process of building meaning that includes producing, receiving and processing information (Luoma, 2004). Speaking is an interactive process of obtaining and evaluation of information in order to produce meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a diversity of contexts (Chaney, 1998). Similarly, Tarone (2005) says that speaking is the most difficult and complicated language skill to master. The act of speaking incorporates listening and comprehending simultaneously and it depends on communicative competence and the situational context (Koran, 2015). Hence, speaking is thought to be the more complicated skill since it includes the ability of using grammar, sound, vocabulary and even cultural knowledge of the language. Speaking is the way how students express themselves not only orally but also coherently and appropriately in a sensible manner (Koran, 2015).

Speaking is considered as a basic part in foreign/second language teaching-learning. It has occupied a fundamental and delicate rank all the way through the history of language teaching. In spite of its significance, teaching speaking has been undervalued and it is just in the last two decades, it has won its right to be an autonomous branch of teaching, learning and testing' (Bygate, 2003). Various ideas have been given regarding the definition of speaking skill; according to the Oxford Dictionary of Current English (2009, p. 414), speaking is "the action of conveying information or expressing ones' thoughts and feelings in spoken languages." Nonetheless, Brown (1994) defines speaking as an interactive process of constructing, receiving and processing information, while Chaney (1998, p. 13) considers speaking as 'the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal or non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts'.

One approach to teaching speaking is task-based language teaching (TBLT) which provides many advantages for teachers who make the students enthusiastic because TBLT approach offers the language experience in the classroom. TBLT focuses on learners using language naturally in pairs or group work and allows them to share ideas (Nunan, 2004). It encourages them to be actively involved in the learning process.

TBLT is one of the most effective and meaningful language teaching approaches in recent years, which emphasises on learning by doing and performing with language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Communicative language teaching advocates task-based language instruction. Teachers can provide their students with task-based activities, which will make any syllabus more effective by making it student-centred, relevant and motivating. TBLT offers an effective means to motivate students to learn and gives them confidence to succeed (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). A task-based approach for teaching speaking tries to encounter learners with a natural authentic context. One of the best practices to provide interaction opportunities for learners is to involve them in group work to complete a task, as they must interact with each other, understand each other, express their own ideas, check their own comprehension, seek clarification and assimilate the language that they listen and may be beyond their present ability (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Having reviewed the literature, it is crystal clear that in Iranian EFL context, few studies have been carried out to examine the effects of task-based speaking activities on speaking skill in general and on speaking fluency in specific. Therefore, this study endeavoured to see whether Iranian EFL learners could benefit from using task-based speaking activities. The current study is among the few that examined the impacts of task-based activities on speaking fluency. This research can be significant since it can enrich the growing body of research in the domain of task-based activities and speaking skill.

1.1. Research question and hypothesis

This study tried to answer the following research question:

RQ. Does using task-based speaking activities have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency?

Based on the above-mentioned question, the following hypothesis was suggested:

H. Using task-based speaking activities has a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Theoretical background

Speaking is a key skill that language learners should master with the other language skills. It is defined as a complex process of conveying and receiving messages through the use of oral communications but it also involves non-verbal symbols such as gestures and facial expressions. Harmer (2001) defined speaking as a skill by which students are judged while first impressions are being formed. To speak the foreign language fluently and accurately, students must be able to know some parts, which are very crucial to enhance this skill. Harmer (2001) noted these parts, which refer to the language characteristics that pupils must have knowledge about, in addition to the processes of the language and information in the same time when an interlocutor interacts with them. The main parts or components of speaking are knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, fluency and attitude. These are the major core of speaking that need to be learned by the learner who wants to learn the foreign language (Harmer, 2001).

In recent teaching situation, much heed has been paid to design activities, which concentrate more on tasks that are balanced between the need to achieve fluency and accuracy. In TBLT, fluency and accuracy are of the chief features and they are seen as complementary in performing a given task. Though Richards and Rodgers (2001) mentioned that fluency and acceptable language is the main goal: Accuracy is judged not in the abstract, but in the context, and this is an obvious point because the emphasis of TBLT is on the communicative process between learners or teachers-learners rather than mastery of the language forms.

Many questions have been formed about the role of accuracy in TBLT theory. Lee (2000, p. 61) stated that 'The task-based approach somehow excuses teachers and learners from a consideration of how to develop high levels of accuracy in the use of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary'. Students should improve a communicative competence through classroom practice; however, simultaneously they should know how the language system works in a correct and appropriate way. If someone wants to learn a foreign language, he will obviously meet with all types of learning problems. Dalley (2009) defined that these difficulties have to do with the learning of the new sound system of the new vocabulary items and the learning of the unknown ways of arranging the foreign words into sentences.

Task work can also help develop learners' fluency, complexity, accuracy and appropriation of language use. Research (Robinson, 2011; Skehan, 2014) showed that learners' attention could be drawn differently to fluency, complexity or accuracy in their performance with language by varying the kinds of task. Certain kinds of relatively simple tasks may tend to prioritise accuracy and fluency in performance, while more complex tasks (e.g., containing unstructured content or multiple elements to deal with) may lead to more grammatically complex, less fluent and less accurate language, thereby helping to push interlanguage development (Robinson, 2011). Task conditions are also influential: pre-task planning time can lead to greater complexity and fluency but less accuracy, whereas lack of time pressure results in greater accuracy.

Repeating tasks can enable learners successively to increase their complexity, accuracy and fluency. Although research is not yet definitive regarding the details, these features of tasks offer teachers and materials developers clear opportunities to influence learners' attention to particular

aspects of language use through the selection and manipulation of task designs (Skehan, 2014). Finally, task-based learning has implications for other types of language learning. Experience of working with a particular task can provide a starting point for relevant 'off task' learning—checking vocabulary, clarifying grammatical features, exploring pragmatic expressions—or pronunciation practice: form-focused work is made valuable by prior experience of the task and of trying to complete it (Skehan, 2014).

2.2. Empirical background

Various empirical studies were conducted to examine the effects of TBLT on English learning, for example, Ahmed and Bidin (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study to validate the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting writing skills of EFL learners enrolled in undergraduate programmes at public sector Malaysian universities. To do this study, they selected one experimental group and one control group. The data were collected following a Mixed Method Research paradigm during pre-test and post-test. A paired samples *t*-test was applied to determine the statistical significance of the learners' scores in pre-test as compared to the post-test. The vast majority of the learners opined in their reflective journal that TBLT was the most interesting and a learner-centred approach—enabling learners to use their existing linguistic resources. The use of existing linguistic resources is a fundamental principle of TBLT as it leads the EFL learners to be fluent and confident users of the English language both inside and outside the classroom in real-life situations.

Gunawan (2016) investigated the effect of using TBLT approach in developing students' speaking skill and to explore students' attitude towards the use of TBLT approach in teaching English speaking. Involving two classes as the experimental class and the control class, which consisted of 60 students, was selected by using Cluster Random Sampling technique. The research applied quasi-experimental method. The population of the research was the eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri Watampone in academic year 2015/2016. The data were collected through speaking test and questionnaires then analysed by paired-samples *t*-test. The result of the research showed that (1) the use of TBLT approach in teaching speaking significantly improved the students' speaking skill. The mean score of students' post-test in the experimental group was 70.00 and the mean score of students' post-test in the control group was 58.66. It signifies that the improvement of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group. (2) The students' attitude towards the use of TBLT was strongly positive.

Namazian Dost (2017) investigated the effect of TBLT on motivation and grammatical achievement of EFL junior high school students in Ahvaz. To accomplish the objectives of the study, a Homogeneity test (Oxford Quick Placement Test) was administered among 100 students at the junior high school and finally, 80 participants were selected. Then, they were divided into two subgroups, namely, control and experimental groups. Before starting the treatment, a validated teacher-made grammar test in terms of the materials supposed to be covered in both groups was administered to them as the pre-test. Moreover, a motivation questionnaire was presented to both groups at the beginning and at the end of the study. Then, the experimental group received the treatment, which was teaching and learning grammar through using TBLT, and the control group received traditional teaching, which is teaching grammar through instruction on examples and drills proposed by the teacher. After 12 sessions of treatment, the two groups were administered the same teacher-made grammar test as post-test. Data were analysed by paired and independent samples *t*-test. The findings indicated that the experimental group significantly performed better than the control group. Generally, the experimental groups outperformed the control groups. Furthermore, the results of motivation questionnaire show that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups' motivation in the post-test of the questionnaire, which implies that the experimental group's motivation increased significantly. The outcomes recommended that TBLT could be used in English classes to develop the grammar ability of Iranian EFL learners.

This study can be significant since its results can open a new window of opportunity for novice researchers who are willing to carry out new empirical studies in the domain of task-based instruction. In addition, this study may bring about some implications for EFL teachers and learners; this study may help them to teach and learn English language more successfully through applying task-based instruction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

To do this research, 50 intermediate participants from Andisheh English Institute, Baghmalek, Khuzestan, Iran were selected among 67 Iranian EFL learners as the target population of the study. Their level of proficiency was determined through administrating the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The respondents of the research were selected through non-random sampling method since only intermediate level students were included. The selected participants were randomly divided into two groups: one experimental group and one control group. The participants were all male with the age range of 15–17 years old.

3.2. Instruments

The first instrument, which was used in the present study, was the OQPT. This test was used to homogenise the participants. It assisted the researchers to have a greater understanding of what level (i.e., elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate) their participants were. According to this test, the learners who scored between one standard deviation (SD) above and one SD below the mean were determined as intermediate and were considered as the target participants of the study.

The second instrument was a researcher-made speaking pre-test. The pre-test included some topics concerned with the learners' textbook (i.e., Family and Friends 2). The participants were required to talk about the topics of the units about 2–3 minutes and their speech was recorded for the second rater. The reliability of the pre-test was computed through inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis (r = 0.889). Moreover, the validity of the pre-test was verified by three English experienced professors.

The third instrument was a speaking post-test. The post-test was similar to the pre-test in form but different in topics. This test included topics extracted from Family and Friends 2 textbook. The level of topics was the same in terms of difficulty in both pre- and post-tests. The reliability of the post-test was calculated through inter-rater reliability by means of Pearson correlation analysis as (r = 0.823). It is worth noting that the post-test was validated by three English experienced professors. Before administering the final version of the pre- and post-tests to the target population, they were piloted on a similar group in other English institute.

The fourth instrument used in this study was the speaking checklist (Hughes, 2003). It was used to help the raters score the participants' speech. The raters scored the participants' speech based on this speaking checklist.

3.3. Data collection procedure

After making the participants homogenous, their proficiency level of speaking skill was measured by a speaking pre-test. Afterwards, the students in the experimental group received the same treatment. In each session, the experimental group was given a topic to be discussed in the group. In the first session of the treatment, the task of 'buying' was given to the students to do it in a near authentic context. The researchers provided the context in which the students could buy things such as pens, notebooks and pencil cases.

In the second session of the treatment, the task of 'ordering food' was given to the participants. The same as the previous task, the researchers provided the context in which the participants could order food in English. In the third and the fourth sessions of the treatment, tasks of 'ordering a bus ticket' and 'visiting a doctor' were given to the students, respectively. The control group, on the other hand, received conventional instruction; in fact, they did not receive task-based instruction. They did the activities individually without cooperation with their classmates. At the end of the treatment, a post-test of speaking was administered to both groups in order to measure the effects of task-based instruction on their speaking fluency.

The whole instruction lasted seven sessions. In the first two sessions, the OQPT and the pre-test were administered, respectively; in four sessions, the participants received the treatment; and in the seventh session, the post-test of speaking was given to the participants of both groups to determine the effects of the treatment on their speaking fluency.

3.4. Data analysis

First, descriptive statistics were computed. Second, paired and independent samples t-tests were run to assess the effects of the treatment on the participants' speaking fluency.

4. Results

In order to analyse the gathered data, the SPSS software, version 25 was used.

Table 1. Group statistics (pre-test of both groups)

	Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Pre-test	CG pre-test	25	14.64	1.97	0.39
	EG post-test	25	16.68	2.26	0.45

In Table 1, the descriptive statistics of both groups is presented. The control group's mean score and the related standard deviation are 14.64 and 1.97, respectively. The experimental group's mean score and the related standard deviation are 16.64 and 2.26, respectively. This means that both groups are somehow similar since they are homogeneous at the beginning of the treatment.

Table 2. Independent samples *t*-test (pre-test of both groups)

		Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	0.77	0.38	−3.39	48	0.00	−2.04	0.60	−3.24	−0.83
	Equal variances not assumed			−3.39	47.12	0.00	−2.04	0.60	−3.25	−0.82

In Table 2, an independent samples t-test was used to show the scores of both groups on the pre-test. Since Sig (0.38) is greater than 0.05, the difference between the groups is not significant at ($p < 0.05$). Indeed, they performed equally on the pre-test.

Table 3. Group statistics (post-test of both groups)

	Groups	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Post-test	CG pre-test	25	14.96	1.619	0.32
	EGpost-test	25	30.32	4.94	0.98

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of both groups on the post-test. The control group's mean score is 14.96 and the experimental group's mean score is 30.32. It seems that both groups are different and the experimental group outperformed the control group.

Table 4. Independent samples *t*-test (the post-test of both groups)

	Levene's test for equality of variances		*t*-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)	Mean difference	Standard error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference Lower	Upper
Post-test Equal variances assumed	18.63	0.00	−14.75	48	0.00	−15.36	1.04	−17.45	−13.26
Equal variances not assumed			−14.75	29.08	0.00	−15.36	1.04	−17.48	−13.23

Table 4 indicates that the difference between both groups is significant at $p < 0.05$. In fact, the experimental group outperformed the control group on the post-test.

Table 5. Paired samples statistics (pre and post-tests of both groups)

		Mean	N	Standard deviation	Standard error mean
Pair 1	CG pre-test	14.64	25	1.97	0.39
	CG post-test	14.96	25	1.61	0.32
Pair 2	EG pre-test	16.68	25	2.26	0.45
	EG post-test	30.32	25	4.94	0.98

Based on the descriptive statistics in Table 5, the mean scores and the related standard deviations of the control group on the pre- and post-tests are 14.64, 1.97 and 14.96, 1.61, respectively. The experimental groups' mean scores and the related standard deviations on the pre- and post-tests are 16.68, 2.26 and 30.32, 4.94, respectively.

Table 6. Paired samples *t*-test (pre- and post-tests of both groups)

	Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (two-tailed)
	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 CG pre-test—CG post-test	−0.32	1.14	0.22	−0.79	0.15	−1.39	24	0.17
Pair 2 EG pre-test—EG post-test	−13.64	4.94	0.98	−15.67	−11.60	−13.80	24	0.00

In Table 6, paired samples *t*-test is used to compare the pre- and post-tests of each group. Since Sig (0.17) is greater than 0.05, the difference between the pre-test and post-test of the control group is not significant. Since Sig (0.00) is less than 0.05, the difference between the pre-test and post-test of the experimental group is significant.

5. Discussion

In this part, the research question 'Does using task-based speaking activities have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency'? is answered based on the results obtained in the tables above. After gathering the data, the researcher used paired and independent samples *t*-tests to analyse them so as to find out the effectiveness of treatment on the students' speaking fluency. The results demonstrated that the participants (experimental group) who received task-based instruction outperformed those who were trained through traditional instruction (control group). Therefore, the positive hypothesis of the study 'Using task-based speaking activities have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking fluency' was accepted.

Doing tasks in near authentic situations can be the reason for improving the experimental group's speaking fluency on the post-test. Learning by doing helped Iranian EFL learners to enhance their speaking fluency. This study proved the positive effects of doing tasks on speaking fluency. It can be claimed that task-based speaking activities could be useful for the learners who are shy and less confident in speaking and it is supposed that one of the reasons that students fail to speak and discuss is the lack of positive affective classroom climate in the classroom and many students are not exposed to positive affective speaking situations; therefore, task-based speaking activities can get students motivated to have discussion about their feelings, preferences and their ideas about the subjects to be discussed because task-based speaking activities will be done in small groups and it can improve learners' motivation and decrease learners' stress and provide opportunities for speaking activities through the use of group activities (Yegani & Jodaei, 2017).

The results of the present study are in line with Gunawan (2016) who examined the effect of using TBLT approach on developing students' speaking skill. The result of the research showed that the use of TBLT approach in teaching speaking significantly improved the students' speaking skill.

In addition, this study is supported by Namazian Dost (2017) who examined the effect of TBLT on motivation and grammatical achievement of EFL junior high school students of Ahvaz. The findings showed that the experimental group significantly performed better than the control group. Generally, the experimental group outperformed the control group. The results suggested that TBLT can be used in English classes to develop grammar ability among Iranian EFL learners.

6. Conclusion

With reference to the results of the study, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners can benefit from task-based speaking activities in speaking skill. Based on the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that the use of task-based speaking activities in teaching and learning can produce positive results because they could improve students' speaking skill. The positive effects of using task-based speaking activities became obvious after the treatment. Those students who were taught through task-based speaking activities could speak more fluently after the treatment. Here, it can be claimed that receiving instruction through using task-based speaking activities can facilitate English learning. TBLT can improve students' learning since it encourages students in completing task activities which leads to language development. Through using TBLT, students get more eager to learn and often excited, in contrast to the following traditional activities. In sum, task-based speaking activities proved to be beneficial for the students. TBLT can enhance students' English learning. As a result, it is recommended that teachers and students use task-based speaking activities for better teaching and learning. English teachers should be open towards implementation of task-based activities in their classes. They should offer their students a variety of enjoyable tasks. Participating in tasks influences student progress and attitudes toward the lesson. Rather than being passive listeners, students prefer to be active receivers (Ruso, 2007).

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7. Implications of the study

This study can have some implications for EFL teachers, learners and material designers. The findings of the current study can persuade teachers to use task-based instruction in their classrooms and require the learners to do different tasks in order to learn English language more easily. Through doing tasks, teachers can encourage cooperative learning among the students. Besides, English language learners can be the beneficiaries of the results of the current research. Through performing different tasks in different situations, EFL learners can master English language in general and speaking skill in particular. The findings of the present study can make the syllabus designers aware of the importance of using task-based instruction in learning and teaching English language. Syllabus designers can incorporate task-oriented activities and exercises in EFL textbooks in order to compel EFL learners to learn language by doing the tasks; in fact, *learning by doing* can be encouraged by the results of this study.

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