The Effect of Task Outcome on Speaking Improvement of Pre-Intermediate High School Students in Malayer

Soheila Pashaie 1, Hamidreza Khalaji 2*

1. M.A Student, English Teaching Department, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran
2. PhD, English Teaching Department, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran

* Corresponding Author: hrkhalaji20@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aimed at exploring the role of task outcome on speaking improvement of high school students. To this end, 60 female high school students, Malayer, Iran, participated in the study. To homogenize the participants’ level of proficiency, the NELT Placement Test was employed and the participants with the pre-intermediate level of proficiency were selected. Accordingly, the number of the participants was reduced to 40. To measure the participants’ level of speaking at the pre- and post-tests, closed questions (20 items) were applied. Then, the participants were randomly divided into two groups: experimental (N=20) and control (N=20). The experimental group received task-based speaking activities during the 19 sessions (30 minutes) of instructions, and the control group received the traditional practices (a question-and-answer approach). The results of independent t-test revealed that the participants’ levels of speaking fluency in the experimental group was significantly higher than those in the control group (P=0.05).

Keywords: task, speaking task, fluency, task-based language teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

Human beings need to communicate and this communication can be performed more through speech and writing. For most people the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language since speech is the most basic need of human communication (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Few members of the adult society know English, and the schools do not have the English native or
near native-speaking teachers. All these conditions make English more difficult for the students. English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught as a lesson in guidance schools and high schools in Iran. Speaking is one of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). It is the means through which learners can communicate with others to achieve certain goals or to express their opinions, intentions, hopes and viewpoints. Actually, it was assumed that the interactional nature of spoken language requires the speaker’s ability to use motor-perceptive skills, which are concerned with correctly using the sounds and structures of the language, and interactional skills, which involve using the previous skills for the purposes of communication. This means that EFL students should acquire the knowledge of how native speakers use language in the context of structured interpersonal exchanges in which many factors interact (Bygate, 1987; Brown, 2001). In addition, speaking requires that learners understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language ("sociolinguistic competence") (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Cohen, 1996; Harmer, 2001). A good speaker hence synthesizes this array of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech act.

The researcher focused on speaking skills through social interaction. This is because speaking skills are very important. The purpose of the current study is to find out whether inserting closed task speaking activities into conventional speaking courses can improve learners’ fluency in speaking sub-skills.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Task and its Kinds

There are different types of task in language teaching. The first kind of task, as Nunan (1991) states, is related to real world and is labeled target task, and the second one is pedagogical. Pedagogical tasks are fulfilled within the classroom while target tasks are employed for authentic users out of the classroom.

Based on Richards’ definition and Ellis’ (2003) point of view, the narrow definitions of pedagogic tasks indicate that most tasks include and involve language and the focus is on ‘eliciting language use’, and meaning is the most important part of tasks. Analogous efforts have been made by the proponents of TBLT to define and authenticate the nature and function of tasks in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Prabhu (1987) was one of the first advocates of TBLT. He put task-based approach into practice in Bangalore in India. He believed that in task-based syllabus,
learning is facilitated since students pay more attention to meaning and task, not the language itself. In other words, the promoters of TBLT believe that the engagement of learners in classroom in ‘real language use’ is an essential and crucial factor in teaching a language (Willis & Willis, 2007; Prabhu, 1987).

B. Task and Interaction in the Classroom
As Nunan (2004) asserts, emphasizing interaction and communication in the target languages the main characteristic of a task-based approach. He believes that the focus of TBLT is on meaning and it engages learners in “comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language” (as cited in Oura, 2001, p. 71). The use of language is the principal way of promoting language and it is the main reason for applying more communicative tasks(Long, 1989; Prabhu, 1987, as cited in Brandl, 2007). In fact, it seems that the primary goal of L2 learners is to be able to interact easily with the target language speakers. Actually, the significant part of interaction is that it presents and makes receiving feedbacks available “from the listener to the interlocutor in order to classify meaning, social understanding, or advanced conversation” (Vandergift, 1997, p. 494). Contrary to the traditional and conventional activities which are designed based on a pedagogical point of view and mostly overlook authenticity and real life situations(Izadpanah, 2010), a task-based approach, by providing classroom experiences that are similar to the demands of authentic language use, copes with the real and on-line communication more directly (Newton, 2001). Indeed, task-based activities via facilitating using language in meaningful contexts can have profound influence on promoting learning process.

Of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important. People who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language, as if speaking included all other types of skills, and many, if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak (Ur, 2006).

Reviewing previous research related to defining speaking, it was noticed that two main approaches are adopted to define speaking, the bottom-up and the top down approach. Skehan (1998) distinguished three aspects of production: (1) fluency; (2) accuracy and (3) complexity. This may also involve a greater willingness to take risks, and use fewer controlled language subsystems. This area has also taken a greater likelihood of restructuring that is development in the inter-language system.
Speaking in L2 has occupied a peculiar position throughout much of the history of language teaching, and only in the last two decades has it begun to emerge as a branch of teaching, learning and testing in its own right, rarely focusing on the production of spoken discourse (Bygate, 2002).

Graham- Marr (2004) mentioned many reasons for focusing on listening and speaking when teaching English as a foreign language, not least of which is the fact that we as humans have been learning languages through our ears and mouth for thousands of years, far longer we as humans have been able to read. Although not a set curriculum in most schools, speaking skills have been found to be a fundamental skill necessary for a child success in life.

Brown and Yule (1983) began their discussion on the nature of spoken language by distinguishing between spoken and written language. They pointed out that for most of its history; language teaching has been concerned with the teaching of written language. This language is characterized by well-formed sentences which are integrated into highly structured paragraphs. Spoken language, on the other hand, consists of short, often fragmentary utterances, in a range of pronunciations. There is often a great deal of repetition and overlap between one speaker and another, and speakers frequently use non-specific references.

Brown and Yule (1983) also pointed out that the loosely organized syntax, the use of non-specific words and phrases, and the use of fillers such as 'well' and 'ahoy' make spoken language feel less conceptually dense than other types of language such as expository prose. Brown and Yule (1983) also drew a useful distinction between two basic language functions. These are the transactional function, which is primarily concerned with the transfer of information, and the interactional function, in which the primarily purpose of speech is the maintenance of social relationships.

Brown and Yule (1983) suggested that most language teaching is concerned with developing skills in short, interactional exchanges in which the learner is only required to make one or two utterances at a time. The interactional nature of language was examined by Bygate (1996). Bygate distinguished between motor-perceptive skills, which are concerned with correctly using the sounds and structures of the language, and interactional skills, which involve using motor-perceptive skills for the purposes of communication. Motor-perceptive skills are developed in the language classroom through activities such as model dialogues, pattern practice, and oral drills and so on.
Traditional classroom speaking practice often takes the form of drills in which one person asks a question and another gives an answer. The question and the answer are structured and predictable, and often there is only one correct, predetermined answer. The purpose of asking and answering the question is to demonstrate the ability to ask and answer the question.

In contrast, the purpose of real communication is to accomplish a task, such as conveying a telephone message, obtaining information, or expressing an opinion. In real communication, participants must manage uncertainty about what the other person will say. Authentic communication involves an information gap; each participant has information that the other does not have. In addition, to achieve their purpose, participants may have to clarify their meaning or ask for confirmation of their own understanding.

To create classroom speaking activities that will develop communicative competence, instructors need to incorporate a purpose and an information gap and allow for multiple forms of expression. However, quantity alone will not necessarily produce competent speakers. Instructors need to combine structured output activities, which allow for error correction and increased accuracy, with communicative output activities that give students opportunities to practice language use more freely.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to determine the effect of closed task outcome on the learners’ speaking fluency. To achieve the goal of this quasi-experimental study, the following research question was posed:

Q. Does employing closed outcome speaking activities affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners ‘speaking fluency? 

To come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research question, the following null hypothesis was proposed:

H0. Employing closed outcome speaking activities does not significantly affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners ‘speaking fluency.
C. Speaking Tasks

Bygate (1987), drawing on Brown and Yule (1983), makes a distinction between factually-oriented talk and evaluative talk. Factually-oriented talk is further divided into four task types: description, narration, instruction, and comparison. Evaluative talk is also further divided into four task types: explanation, justification, prediction, and decision. There are some other taxonomies of tasks based on particular task features such as one-way vs. two-way tasks. While this ‘feature classification approach’ has shed light on current understandings of their impact upon language learning and the nature of classroom interaction, it is the recent work of Skehan (1998, 2001, 2009) and Robinson (2001, 2007, 2010) in which explicit links have been made between particular ‘task type’ characteristics or conditions and their impact on task difficulty.

Speaking task is an activity that requires learners to participate in a non-threatening environment, emphasis is on meaning, to arrive at an outcome but the outcome is not that important, involvement in the process of learning in important. Task is not a substitute for a good topic but it increases motivation and involvement. It provides a framework for the classroom activities.

D. Closed versus Open Tasks

The design of a task will, to some extent at least, determine the nature of the ‘product outcome’. We will consider a number of factors related to this aspect of tasks- whether the outcome required of a task is open or closed the degree of inherent structure in the required outcome, and the discourse mode the task is designed to elicit. The outcomes of a language learning task can be closed or open. Closed outcomes are when there are only certain correct outcomes or solutions, as in many problem-solving tasks. Role-play and interviews have open outcomes. Closed tasks encourage meaning negotiation, open tasks, if they are convergent, and promote accuracy and complexity. Outcome refers to what learners arrive that when they have completed the task. For instance, whether learners can tell a story based on pictures or not.
III. METHOD

A. Participants

The participants of this study comprised 60 female EFL language learners at the Pre-intermediate level studying at Enghelab and Fatemiyeh high schools in Malayer, Iran. The results of test of homogeneity reduced the number of the participants to 40. The experimental group included 20 participants and the control group included 20. The participants’ age varied between 15 and 16 from high school.

B. Instrumentation

The following instruments were utilized in order to gather the data. (1) Proficiency test: Nelson English Language Test (NELT) was used to homogenize the learners regarding their language proficiency level, (2) the speaking tests skills: These tests constructed by the researcher, includes 20 items according to language functions in English Book one, assessing speaking fluency of the participants. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was 0.72. The purpose of employing such a question was to compare the participants’ levels of speaking fluency before and after the treatment.

C. Procedure

To determine the homogeneity of the participants at the outset of the study, NELT was administered. Based on the results of the test, the researchers reduced the number of participants to 40 females. The course lasted for 19 sessions, three days per week. All participants received closed questions before the study began. During 19 sessions (in a time limitation of 20-25 minutes), the experimental group was treated through task-based speaking activities, including different kinds of speaking tasks such as filling the gaps, multiple choice, interactive activities, etc. They were allowed to check their answers by listening again to the tape; in contrast, the participants in the control group were taught through the traditional approach to speaking. That is, the learners listened to the tape for one or two times and then were asked to answer the teacher’s questions. In the end, students could ask all their questions and problems regarding vocabulary, grammar, etc. After the treatment was over, the speaking closed questions were again administered to the both groups.
IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of task outcome on speaking improvement of Pre-intermediate high school students in Malayer. To fulfill the purpose of the study, descriptive statistics (concentration, dispersion and distribution indexes) and inferential statistics (independent t-test) were applied. To homogenize the participants, NELT was conducted and those whose level of proficiency was at the pre-intermediate level were selected for the study. To test the learners’ closed questions were applied before and after the treatment.

To determine the participants’ levels of fluency, the results of the questionnaires were analyzed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the fluency scores in the control and experimental groups at pretest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Experimental Group</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>56.13</td>
<td>57.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>7.491</td>
<td>7.703</td>
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As Table 1 illustrates, there is no significant difference between the participants’ mean scores for fluency in the control and experimental groups at the pretest (MCont= 56.13; MExp=57.85). The results indicate that the participants were rather homogeneous on the part of their speaking fluency at the outset of the study.

H0. Employing closed outcome speaking activities does not significantly affect Malayerian pre-Intermediate EFL learners ‘speaking fluency.

To compare the speaking fluency mean scores of the control and experimental groups at pretest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 2 displays, there is no significant difference between the control and experimental groups regarding their fluency in speaking [(t (48) = -.800, p=.428 > .05)] at pretest.
Table 2. Results of t-test analysis for comparing the speaking fluency mean scores (Pretest)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>Df</th>
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Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the control and experimental groups at the posttest. As this table indicates, there is a considerable difference between the participants’ speaking fluency mean scores in the control and experimental groups at the posttest (MCont= 59.79; MExp= 64.46).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the fluency scores for the control and experimental groups at posttest

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To compare the speaking fluency mean scores of the control and experimental groups at posttest, an independent t-test was run. As Table 3 indicates, a significant difference emerged between the control and experimental groups [(t (48) = -2.440, p=.018 < .05)] at the posttest.

It means that teaching listening via task-based method has significantly ameliorated the learners’ speaking fluency in the experimental group (see Table 4).

Table 4. Results of t-test analysis for comparing the speaking fluency mean scores (Posttest)

<table>
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<th>Groups</th>
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Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is supported, that is, employing of closed speaking activities in English classroom has a significant effect on the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners’ fluency in speaking.
V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effect of closed speaking activities on the improvement of speaking fluency among EFL intermediate learners. The results showed that the experimental group, in which closed speaking activities were applied, benefited significantly from the treatment.

The performance of learners in each group at the post-test was compared through the t-test formula. The comparison between the mean values of the two groups demonstrated significant change in the improvement of speaking fluency.

Therefore, it can be concluded that through using closed speaking activities, the development of learners’ speaking will be facilitated and this method is preferable to the traditional method of teaching listening which is based on merely asking and answering questions.

REFERENCES


