

Output Task Types and Learning of English Grammar: The Case of Iranian Intermediate EFL Students

Peyman Rajabi^{1*}, Nazli Azarpour²

¹ELT Department, Malayer Islamic Azad University, Malayer, Iran

²Faculty of Humanities, Payame Noor University, Malayer Center

*Corresponding author: Paymanrajabi2002@yahoo.com

Received December 22, 2018; Revised January 27, 2019; Accepted February 19, 2019

Abstract This study aimed at exploring the role of output task-based activities in improving Iranian EFL learners' grammar knowledge. To this end, 90 Iranian EFL learners at Malayer Islamic Azad University participated in the study. After homogenizing the participants' English proficiency level by administering an Oxford Placement Test, 60 students were selected and randomly assigned into two experimental and control groups. To measure the participants' level of grammar knowledge a pretest of grammar was administered as well. Then the experimental group received different output task types during 12 sessions of instructions whereas the control group received the mainstream practices (a question-and-answer approach). The results of an Independent T-Test revealed that output task types better promote both noticing and learning of grammar. The positive effect of output demonstrated in the present study is consistent with the function of output in the second language acquisition domain.

Keywords: *task type, grammar, output tasks*

Cite This Article: Peyman Rajabi, and Nazli Azarpour, "Output Task Types and Learning of English Grammar: The Case of Iranian Intermediate EFL Students." *Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2019): 35-38. doi: 10.12691/jll-3-1-6.

1. Introduction

The role of tasks has received more support from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers who are interested in developing pedagogical applications of second language acquisition theory [1]. Interest in tasks as the basic unit of second language teaching began when researchers showed great inclination towards tasks as SLA research tools in the mid-1980s.

Richard and Rodgers [2] argue that language learning depends not merely on providing students with 'comprehensive input' but in tasks that require them negotiate meaning and involve in naturalistic and meaningful communication [2]. For teachers, grammar enhancement tasks provide opportunities for task-based courses designed for low-proficiency learners. Simple grammar tasks can be designed that can be done with zero competence in L2 [3] and thus cater for 'silent period', which shows the early stages of acquisition for some learners [4,5].

One of the most important things about Task-Based Teaching (TBT) is that it increases learners' confidence by providing them with a lot of opportunities to use language in classroom without being afraid of making mistakes [6]. They assume that once students have enough words they begin to communicate. In other words, TBT is designed to help learners use language in real world even if the language is grammatically incorrect. Willis & Willis [7] also argue that task is not a substitute for a good topic but

it increases learners' motivation and involvement [7]. It provides a framework for the classroom activities.

2. Literature Review

Task has been defined in a variety of ways. Nunan [8] explains 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. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (cited in Ellis, [9]).

Long [10] defines a task as a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward ... in other words, by a task it is meant the hundred and one thing people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. Tasks are things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists. Prabhu [3] limits the notion of a task as an activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process. Skehan [11] continues this with a definition of a task as an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.

The task variables based on Ellis [9] that we will consider here are: (1) required vs. optional information

exchange, (2) types of required information exchange, (3) expected task outcome, (4) topics, (5) discourse domain, and (6) cognitive complexity ([9], p.86).

Required vs optional information exchange: from the psycholinguistic perspective, the main difference between these two is that, in required information exchange, the exchange of information is necessary. In contrast, in *optional information exchange*, the exchange of information is optional [12].

Information gap: one-way vs. two-way: One-way tasks and two-way tasks are required information exchange tasks that are distinguished in terms of whether the information to be shared is split one-way, i.e. held by a single person as listen and do tasks or it is held by two or more participants, i.e. two-way, as in same-or-different tasks ([9], p. 88).

Tasks outcome: open vs. closed tasks: Ellis [9] argues that, open tasks refer to those tasks where the participants know there is no clear outcome, like surveys, debates, and, so on, whereas closed tasks refer to those tasks where the participants know there is a predetermined, single, correct outcome, like same-and-different task.

Topic: Ellis [9] assumes that it is logical to imagine that the topic of a task will also affect learners' tendency to negotiate meaning. Obvious factors to consider are topic familiarity and topic importance [13].

The SLA has focused on investigating the types of tasks which improve learners' attention to a specific linguistic target. Recent research has also investigated the role of attention in mediating input and learning. Findings of such studies indicate that attention is necessary for learning to take place has simply stated that "people learn about the things that they attend to and do not learn much about the things they do not attend to".

Many studies on input enhancement [14] and focus on form [15] as well as the noticing function of output are all based on the premise that directing learner's attention to acquire form and meaning in an integrated way.

Among these studies, a research issue which seems to have received relatively less attention from researchers and has produced mixed results is whether output tasks better promote noticing and learning of a target linguistic form than non – output tasks. More specifically, research on the effects of output in comparison with comprehension task [16] and the relative efficacy of different output tasks and input comprehension task has produced completely different results. Therefore, more research needs to be done to investigate what the suitable means of getting learners to focus of form are.

The present study seeks to explore the following issues, which remain to be learning of one grammatical feature which Iranian intermediate EFL learners often find problematic: the English past tenses. Bases on the research findings, this study also aims to propose pedagogic techniques and approaches which might be effective for teaching this grammatical structure.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants for this study were chosen among the intermediate EFL learners of Malayer Islamic Azad

University. Ninety students were chosen as the population of the study. Participants were reduced to sixty students and then they were divided into two groups randomly. The experimental group was assigned to task-based teaching and the control group was taught traditionally, i.e., question and answer activity; the second model ([17], p. 71).

All participants were female, and differed in terms of age. They range from 19 to 28 years old. None of them had ever lived in a foreign country or traveled to an English speaking country. The classes were conducted in the afternoon twice a week and 60 minutes a session.

3.2. Instruments

The following instruments were utilized in order to gather data: (1) The Oxford Placement Test measures a test taker's ability to communicate in English. It provides information about a person's language level. This test is comprised of 60-item test: 5 items are reading comprehension, 30 multiple-choice items are vocabularies and grammar, and 25 items are in a form of close test. The test is reliable (consistently grading test takers at the right level) and valid (having a strong theoretical basis and having been through a rigorous test design, pretesting and piloting stage). The reliability of the test was estimated by the researcher, and the reliability was 0.77 (2) Interchange and Passages Objective Placement Test as pre-test: The test of grammar as pre-test for the study was extracted from "Interchange and Passages Objective Placement Test". The test includes 20 items. According to Coefficient Alpha formulae, the reliability was nearly 0.76 which indicated that the test was reliable enough. (3) Task based assessment (Direct performance-referenced test) as post- test: Assessment tasks are viewed as devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning focused and directed towards some specific goal ([9], p. 279). Brindly [18] identifies a number of specific advantages of what he calls 'task-centered assessment': it results in both language teachers and learners regarding language as a tool. It has a positive wash-back effect; it enables assessment to be more easily integrated into the learning process; it provides learners with useful diagnostic feedback on progress and achievement; it enables the results of an assessment to be reported in a way that is intelligible to non-specialist.

4. Results and Discussion

This study was an attempt to investigate the effect of output task types on Iranian EFL learners' grammar improvement. To fulfill the purpose of the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used.

As mentioned above, 90 learners participated in this study. The participants were female studying at Malayer Islamic Azad University. Some statistical analyses were run to prove the homogeneity of the participants:

Table 1. Students' Performance on Language Proficiency Test

N	M	SD	R	Min	Max
90	35.24	8.83	36	19	55

All the data including mean, maximum score, minimum score, range, and so on were shown in Table 1. The mean of this test was 35.24; the standard deviation was 8.837, so the variance was calculated at 78.092. The minimum and maximum scores obtained by the participants were 19 and 55, respectively. The range is 36. That is, the difference between the largest and lowest score is 36. The subjects whose scores fell between one SD above and below the mean were selected as the main participants of the present study and the rest were excluded from the study. The main participants were randomly assigned into two experimental and control groups.

To see whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups in terms of grammar knowledge, a grammar test as the pretest was administered to both experimental and control groups. An Independent Pair t-test was used to determine the . Since there were two groups in the present study, the researcher used Independent Pair t-test to compare the means of different groups.

Table 2. Descriptive Data of the Control and Experimental Groups in Pre-test

	N	M	SD	V	Min	Max	R
Ctrl.	30	11.33	1.89	3.6	7	15	8
Exp.	30	11.13	1.61	2.6	8	14	6

Table 2 provides useful descriptive statistics for the two groups. The data include the mean, the standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. As you can see the mean for experimental group is 11.13. Standard deviation is 1.64. The minimum score is 8 and the maximum score is 14, so the range would be 6. In the second group, the mean for control group is 11.33. The standard deviation is 2.76. The minimum score is 7 and the maximum score is 15, so the range would be 8.

Table 3. Independent Pair t-test Analysis for the two Groups in pre-test

Equality of Variances		95% Confidence					
Assumed	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	9.38	.005	-.241	58	.812	-.2	.831

Table 3 indicates the output of the Independent Pair t-test analysis and whether there is any significant difference between the means of two independent groups. As it can be seen in this table, the significance level is .812 ($p=.81$) which is above 0.05, therefore, there is no statistically significant difference between the groups in pre-test. In other words, it could be claimed that the two groups were somehow homogeneous.

Table 4. Descriptive Data of the Control and Experimental Groups in Post-test

	N	M	SD	V	Min	Max	R
Ctrl.	30	12	2.42	5.85	9	15	6
Exp.	30	15	1.43	2.04	12	17	5

Table 4 shows useful descriptive statistics for the two groups in posttest. The data include the mean, the standard

deviation, minimum and maximum scores. As you can see the mean and standard deviation for experimental group are 15 and 1.43 respectively. The minimum score is 12 and the maximum score is 17, so the range would be 5. The table also provides information about the mean, the standard deviation, and the range scores of the control group which are 12, 2.42, and 6 respectively.

Table 5. Independent Pair t-test Analysis for the two Groups in posttest

Equality of Variances		95% Confidence					
Assumed	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
	7.05	.013	2.691	58	.012	-.3	.619

The outcomes of the inferential statistics are shown in Table 5. The Independent Pair t-test was used to see whether there is any significant difference between the means of two groups in their posttest or not. As it can be seen, the t observed is greater than the t critical at .05 and the significance level is .012 ($p=.012$) which is below 0.05; therefore, there is statistically significant difference between mean score of the two groups in the posttest. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. In other words, it can be claimed that the instruction was effective.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of task-based instruction on grammar improvement of Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 60 EFL learners studying English at Malayer Islamic Azad University. The research question addressed in the present study was whether task-based teaching can lead Iranian EFL learners to greater increase in L2 grammar improvement or not. To analyze the data, the researcher used pre-test and posttest design manipulated independent T-test (based on SPSS version 22) for this study. Results displayed an increase in students' performance in grammar due to the effect of task-based instruction.

One of the most important things about this task is that it promotes learners' confidence by providing them with plenty of opportunities to use language in the classroom without being constantly afraid of making any mistakes ([7], p.3). Once they have stock of words they can begin to communicate. And once they begin to communicate, the teacher can help them shape their language so that it becomes more complex and more grammatical. So the more we try to control the language that learners produce, the more learners are likely to be concerned with form rather than meaning, and the less task-like the activity becomes.

Regarding to the research question: "if output task types has any effect on grammar improvement of Iranian EFL learners", the researcher found, that the task types were effective for a few reasons: First of all it is worth noting that this task accompanied by some written texts, texts that some elements from which were omitted or the order of sentences or paragraphs were changed and learners were asked to restore the original texts based on the grammaticality of the text. However, it was very

convenient for learners to perform the task, because the outcome was closed i.e., all students decided on the same answers. Furthermore, it reduces pressure from learners in case when they run into a misunderstanding from the text, they recourse to the written text.

In order to help students promote their grammar improvement, the researcher gave the students the blank or jumbled written text, and asked them to restore the original text based on the text they had just encountered with. One of the shortcomings of this task was that it was much more a language-focused than the other tasks, for example prediction task, or matching tasks. Whereas the prediction task led into an activity which mirrored the way we perform in real life, the grammar here is much more artificial. It is simply a preparation for the gap-filling activity. Another shortcoming of this task was that learners were not as creative as the prediction task.

Generally speaking, according to the obtained results, grammar in EFL students tended to improve through exposure to task-based input. The conclusion that may be made from the above statistics analysis is that the participants who were taught based on task generally tended to score higher in grammar.

References

- [1] Long, M. and G. Crookes (1993). Three approaches to task-based syllabus design'. *TESOL Quarterly* 26(1): 27-56.
- [2] Richards, C. R., and T. S. Rodgers, (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: A description and analysis*. New York: Cambridge University press.
- [3] Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [4] Krashen, S. (1981). *Second Language acquisition and Second language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- [5] Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in Second Language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- [6] Willis, D., & Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.
- [7] Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8] Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [9] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [10] Long, M. (1985). 'A role for instruction in second language acquisition: task-based language teaching' in K. Hyltenstam and M. Pienemann (ed.): *Modelling and Assessing Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [11] Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics* 17: 38-62.
- [12] Pica, R., R. Kanagy, and J. Falodun. (1993). 'Choosing and using communication tasks for second language research and instruction' in S. Gass and G. Crookes (ed.): *Task-based Learning in a Second Language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters
- [13] Gass, S., and M. Varonis. (1984). The effect of familiarity on the comprehension of non-native speech. *Language Learning* 34: 65-89.
- [14] Rutherford, W., Sharwood Smith, M. (1985). Consciousness-raising and Universal grammar. *Applied Linguistics* 6, 274-282.
- [15] Doughty, C.J. (2001). *Cognitive underpinnings of focus on form*. In: Robinson, P. (Ed.), *Cognition and L2 Instruction*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, pp. 206-257.
- [16] Izumi, S. (2002). Output, input enhancement, and the noticing hypothesis? An experimental study on ESL relativization, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 24, 541-577.
- [17] Marianne Celce-Murcia (2001). *Teaching English as a second or foreign Language*. Third Edition.
- [18] Brindly, G. (1994). "Task-centered assessment in language learning: The promise and the challenge" in N. Bird, P. Falvey, A. Tsui, D. Allison, and A. McNeill (eds.): *Language and learning*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Language in Education, Hong Kong Education Department.

