

The Impact of Oral Presentation on Fluency and Accuracy of Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking

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Abstract

This study was an investigation into the efficacy of students' oral presentations in improving their speaking ability in terms of accuracy and fluency. In this respect, control and experimental groups data were gathered through an oral interview. Oral pre- and post-tests were administered to both groups, comprising the total of 35 participants, while students' performance was recorded for further analysis. The recorded data was transcribed later and two measures, i.e., error-free T-units and number of correct words per minute, were used to identify students' speaking accuracy and fluency. An analytic scale was also prepared and used by an observer and a teacher as an observation checklist in pre- and post-test sessions to assess students' performance. T-tests were run to compare groups on pre- and post-tests. The obtained results from observation checklists were compared with the data of two measures. The outcome of both analyses showed that oral presentation can improve accuracy and fluency in speaking ability of students and the effect size in both measures was large. In addition, the comparison between findings of accuracy and fluency measurement and outcome of observation checklists yielded the same result; both of which verified students' speaking improvement.

Key words: oral presentation, accuracy and fluency, error-free t-units, speaking assessment analytic scale

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is a productive necessary skill to communicate effectively in any language, especially when speakers are not using their native language. Language learners often think the ability to speak a language is the *product* of language learning; however, this skill is also an important part of the language learning *process*. It is worthwhile for students to know when they learn how to speak; they can use speaking to learn.

There are some components of speaking skills which should be considered in effective English speaking performance, such as accuracy and fluency. According to Foster and

Skehan (1999), pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations are singled out as important factors to be emphasized in building fluency for EFL speakers. Drawing on Tam (1997), providing a variety of situations and frequent speaking tasks for learners plays a significant role in the improvement of learners' fluency and accuracy in speaking.

According to Roger (2008), a successful L2 speaker is one who is able to operate in all speaking situations appropriately. Richards (2006) applies Jones (1996) and Burns' (1998) proposal to categorize speech activities into three main division: *talk as interaction*, *talk as transaction*, and *talk as performance*. *Talk as interaction*, in his definition, is what normally means a 'conversation', which describes interactions with a social function; *Talk as transaction* is defined as a situation in which the focus is on what is said or done; and *Talk as performance* is defined as a public talk, i.e., talk that gives information to audience, which is made of a recognizable format and is similar to written language rather than conversational language.

Drawing on this categorization, Ferris (1998) examined the tertiary ESL students at three different American institutes considering their difficulties in English listening and speaking skills and found that students were highly concerned with oral presentations and whole class discussions, but they had little difficulty conducting small-group discussions. His findings show that a great number of learners' difficulties are with *talk as performance*.

Unlike Ferris' study which followed a quantitative approach, Morita (2004) conducted a qualitative study which examined how students were expected to speak in two graduate courses in a TESL program at a Canadian university and how they acquired the oral academic competence required to perform successful oral academic presentations. Morita's findings suggested that both non-native and native speakers gradually outperformed in oral academic discourses through ongoing negotiations with instructors and peers.

Considering the great importance of speaking to the learners, teachers have tried to use different methods and teaching techniques to help learners master this skill, one of which is task-based language teaching (TBLT). Some researchers emphasize the importance of task-based approaches over communicative instruction in which teachers and learners feel freer to find their own procedures to maximize communicative effectiveness (Gass & Crookes, 1993; cited in Skehan, 1996). Task-based L2 performance is an interesting subject in itself and needs more empirical investigation, but as tasks are widely used in language teaching methods and also language examination, knowing more about their efficacy can have practical value (Tavakoli & Foster, 2008).

In the area of task-based research, a growing interest has been created in the role of tasks in second language teaching and learning in recent years. Most task-based studies have focused on oral language production (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Skehan, 2003; Khaghaninejad, 2008; Rahimpour, 2008; Mehrang & Rahimpour, 2010, Tavakoli & Foster, 2011). Most

of the researches indicate that task type is an important variable both in how learners approach language production and in how it affects the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of language products.

One of the studies done to find out the effect of task structure on language performance (fluency and accuracy with regard to oral performance) was carried out by Tavakoli and Foster (2008). In this study, they tried to operationalize the narrative structure by choosing two structured and two unstructured tasks. They defined tasks with loose structure, the ones in which the events could be reordered without compromising the story while this is not possible for the tasks with tight structures. Results showed that tightly structured tasks led to more accurate performance. However, with regard to fluency, the performance on structured tasks was just slightly more fluent.

Duff (1986), as cited in Skehan (1996), investigated task type among non-native speakers. The focus of her study was on quantity and quality of interaction while doing two tasks. In the first task, the participants were required to solve a problem together; the second one assigned them different viewpoints on an issue which they had to discuss. The quantity of their language production was measured in c-units, defined as any word, phrase, or sentence which contains pragmatic or semantic meaning in a conversation. The quality, on the other hand, was evaluated by the number of turns, types of questions and syntactic complexity. Results showed that problem-solving task generated more turns (per individual and for the whole task), and more c-units per task. The debate task resulted in more words per turn, more words per c-unit, and more syntactic complexity.

Birjandi and Ahangarani (2008) examined the effects of task repetition and task type on fluency, accuracy, and complexity of Iranian EFL learners' speaking. The researchers focused on particular types of task such as, narrative task, personal task and decision-making task. Participants did those tasks in immediate and delayed post-test sessions after the treatment. Findings indicated that task repetition and task type can cause significant differences in learners' oral discourse in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

In a similar vein, Khaghaninejad (2008) conducted a study to find more evidence of the efficacy of task-based approach in speaking proficiency development of Iranian EFL learners. It was found that those who experienced task-based principles of teaching speaking outperformed remarkably comparing learners who didn't experience task-based approach in their speaking classes.

It should not be forgotten that learners are responsible for their own development in the process of language learning. Thus, in the case of speaking ability, learners should reinforce themselves by participating in speaking class activities to reach accuracy and fluency of speech in the target language. For the mentioned reasons, and also by drawing on the effectiveness of task-based approach, this study aims at performing a research in the area of task-based language learning to investigate how certain type of tasks, which engage learners actively in the classroom activities, affect learner's

performance in the speaking skill. The considered task is oral presentation by learners and the focused features in speaking ability are fluency and accuracy.

To do so, the present study tries to seek answers for the following questions:

1. Does students' oral presentation influence their speaking fluency?
2. Does students' oral presentation influence their speaking accuracy?

METHOD

Participants

Thirty five female Iranian EFL learners in intermediate level, ranging in age from 14 to 28, participated in this study. They were divided to two groups, one of which focused on oral presentation as the main speaking activity during the term while the other group functioned as control group of the study and followed their common course procedures like other terms. The experimental group consisted of 18 learners and the control group included 17 participants who were assigned to separate classes.

Instrument

A set of interview questions designed by the researcher was used as the basis of oral pre- and post-test interview. In designing the questionnaire, eight everyday topics were considered and about ten questions were constructed around each topic; some of these topics were chosen from students' course book. The performance of students during the test sessions was recorded for further analysis. In addition, a modified checklist based on Foreign Service Institute (FSI) analytic scale of speaking assessment was prepared by the researcher. The considered criteria in this checklist are fluency and coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation.

The checklist was composed of four rows. Each row included one of the mentioned criterion related to speaking ability, and five sentences described the performance of a speaker related to that criterion. Sentences were ordered according to the least native-like to the most-native like. Each sentence was given a value, started from 1 for the least native-like, to 5 for the most native like. One sentence which described the performance of a participant was chosen by the observer. Finally, values of the chosen sentences were summed up and a total score, out of twenty, was given to each participant. This checklist was used by an observer and the teacher in pre- and post-test sessions in order to judge students' performance.

Procedures

In the first session of class, an oral pre-test was administered with the presence of an observer. The designed questionnaire was used by the teacher; she asked each participant some questions, choosing randomly. Questions were about personal information like family, leisure time and hobbies, lifestyle and travelling and general ones like human and society, environmental, educational and professional issues. Furthermore, the entire session was recorded. The observer and the teacher judged the

performance of students according to the modified speaking assessment scale of FSI checklist.

During the term, eight general topics were introduced to learners as the topics of oral presentation. Learners were supposed to search those topics and gather enough information to have enough background to maneuver in class speaking activities. The number of sessions of each class was 22, and half an hour of each session in experimental group was devoted to oral presentation. Learners should be present in all sessions and they had to participate actively in the speaking activities. Each participant was required to give a lecture at least two times in a term. The maximum allowed time for presenting was 15 minutes and the minimum time was 10 minutes. During the presentation time, the teacher made no correction and gave no feedback to the presenter. Other class students were allowed to ask presenter any questions they had.

The last session of the term, the post-test was conducted. Similar to the pre-test session, the questions were asked orally by the teacher and learners' answers were recorded. The teacher tried not to ask the questions in the same order as the pre-test ones. The observer and the teacher judged learners' performance according to the prepared checklist.

The recordings of the sessions underwent detailed analysis. First, the recordings were transcribed for further analysis on accuracy and fluency. To measure accuracy, the number of error free T-units was divided by the total number of t-units (Arent, 2003). To measure fluency, the number of correct words produced by students in one minute was counted (Skehan & Foster, 1999). The results of these two measures in pre- and post-test were compared. The main purpose of this comparison was to see if students' performance showed any improvement or not.

The observation checklists in two test sessions were also analyzed. After calculating the final score for each participant, the average of given numbers by the teacher and the observer was calculated. This was done in order to make sure of inter-raters reliability. In the next step, t-test was used to reveal the differences between and within the groups before and after the treatment sessions. The outcome was compared in pre- and post-test to judge learners' improvement in speaking skill from teacher and observer's point of view.

Data analysis

This study was an attempt to examine the role that variation in task type may play in the speaking fluency and accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. After gathering data, the recordings of pre- and post-test sessions were transcribed and reviewed carefully. To measure accuracy, all the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them were counted as T-units. Only those T-units that contained no syntactic, grammatical, lexical, or spelling errors were counted as error-free T-units. In other words, the number of error free T-units are divided by the total number of t-units in order to calculate accuracy (Arent, 2003). To measure fluency, the number of correct

words which each participant produced in one minute was counted. In other words, fluency was calculated by counting the number of words per minute (Skehan & Foster, 1999).

After measuring fluency and accuracy of students in two test sessions, the results of pre-test was compared with the results of post-test by paired-sample t-test in SPSS. In addition, the outcome of checklists' analysis in pre- and post-tests were compared to see if the judgments showed improvement or no change in speaking performance of the students; t-test was used for this purpose. The outcome of these two comparisons was compared with each other again; these comparisons were done in order to see whether the findings are in the same line and approve students' improvement in speaking ability after treatment sessions.

RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, there were three sets of data in this study namely, outcomes of observation checklists, students' speech fluency and students' speech accuracy. First of all, three sets of scores (scores of observation checklist, accuracy and fluency measures), obtained in pre- and post-test, were fed into the computer software SPSS for data analysis. Next, the paired-samples t-test was used to answer first research question of the study and found out that oral presentation can positively affect the students' oral performance in terms of accuracy and fluency and also from observers' point of view. Table 1 shows the results of paired-samples t-test done on outcome of observation checklists, table 2 shows the results of accuracy measure (error-free T-units per T-unit) and table 3 shows obtained results of fluency measure (words per minute).

Table 1. Paired-samples t-test done for observation checklist outcome

Groups	Pretest		Posttest			95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	N				
Experimental	15.00	2.82	17.16	2.40	18	2.68, 1.64	8.812	17	.000
Control	14.7	2.203	15.18	1.77	17	-2.05, -.165	-2.4	16	.024

As it is shown by Table 1, oral presentation, in observers' point of view and according to their analytic speech assessment, affected performance of students in experimental group positively from pre-test (M=15, SD=2.82) to post-test (M=17.16, SD=2.40), $p < .05$. The eta squared statistic (.82) indicated a large effect size. Whereas in control group of the study, although mean score of students shows an increase in students' performance (M1= 14.7, M2=15.18), and probability value (sig. 2-tailed=.024 <.05) showed that there is a significant difference in students' performance in pre- and post-test session, eta squared (0.26) indicated that this effect size is a small one.

Table 2. Paired-samples t-test done for accuracy measure

Groups	Pretest		Posttest			95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD	N				
Experimental	.803	.062	.858	.048	18	-.074, -.053	-5.82	17	.000
Control	.767	.083	.777	.078	17	-.022, .003	-1.53	16	.146

As it was mentioned earlier, students' performance was recorded in pre- and post-test session. The recorded sounds were transcribed later and two measures were used to calculate accuracy and fluency amount of students. When accuracy measure was imposed, obtained outcomes from pre- and post-test sessions were compared by paired-sample t-test to answer the first question of the study. As it is indicated by the table 2, students who focused on oral presentation as a speaking task outperformed the students of control group in their oral production in terms of accuracy ($p = .000 < .05$). On the other hand, students' speaking accuracy in control group underwent no significant difference ($p = .146 > .05$). It is helpful to know the eta squared was 0.66 which shows a large effect size.

Table 3. Paired-samples t-test done for fluency measure

Groups	Pretest		Posttest		N	95% CI for Mean Difference	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD					
Experimental	43.44	7.898	46.61	7.80	18	-4.351, -1.982	-5.63	17	.000
Control	40.06	6.731	40.41	7.56	17	-1.412, .706	-.706	16	.490

Another measure which was under the focus of this study was speech fluency of students. The same procedure was followed to compare the performance of students before and after the treatment sessions and to find the answer to the second research question. The results showed that there was a significant difference in students' speech fluency in experimental group ($p = .000 < .05$), while students in control group did not show any significant improvement ($p = .49 > .05$). The magnitude of the difference (eta squared=.65) was large.

As the above mentioned results showed, all three methods of measuring oral performance of the students in experimental group are in the same line; observers' judgment, accuracy measure and fluency measure showed that when students focus on oral presentation as a speaking task, they can improve their speaking ability in terms of accuracy and fluency of speech more. In addition, although an increase in mean scores and also probability value of scores (just scores of observation checklist) in control group showed the students' progress after passing a term, comparison between the obtained results indicated that the students' improvement was not as significant as the improvement of students in the experimental group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first research question addressed the effect of oral presentation, as a speaking task, on learners' oral production in terms of accuracy. In response to this question, Table 4.2 revealed that this task can improve accuracy of students' speech. Like the present study, some researchers believe that task structures can affect accuracy positively (e.g. Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005; Tavakoli & Foster, 2008, Tavakoli, 2009, Jamshidnejad, 2011), although some others found no influence of task structure on speech accuracy (Skehan & Foster, 1999; Rahimpour & Mehrang, 2010). Skehan and Foster (1999), reported that accuracy can be influenced by task structure only when students engaged in some kind

of pre-task activity before their under focused performance; this claim can justify students' improvement in post-test-session in the present study. Treatment sessions and the opportunity of each learner to present orally in class can play the role of pre-task activity before performing in post-test session.

The second question focused on the efficacy of oral presentation on speaking fluency of students. Findings of Table 4.3 revealed that task structure can improve fluency which is in line with the research findings by Foster and Skehan (1996), Skehan and Foster (1999) and Tavakoli and Skehan (2005). On the contrary, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) and Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010) reported that task structure cannot improve fluency. Tavakoli and Foster (2008) explained that a task which is monologue makes greater demands on attentional resources compared with an interactive task; hence, this demand can decrease fluency.

The effectiveness of oral presentation on learners' speaking accuracy and fluency improvement can be due to the opportunity of learners in repeating the task. In the current study, the participants were supposed to give a presentation two times during the treatment sessions. This claim is supported by Bygate (1996) who stated that in first performance of a task, learners can familiarize with the content which they should produce and in other performance of the same task, they have sufficient attentional resources to devote to selecting and editing appropriate output which may result in better language production.

Another point to be mentioned, as a result of accuracy and fluency improvement of participants in the current study, is providing the learners with planning time. As it was mentioned, topics of the issues which were introduced to learners for their presentation were the same topics upon which the questions of pre- and post-test were constructed. Thus, it can be claimed that, participants of the study had enough planning time before post-test session. Ellis (2009) and Ahmadian and Tavakoli(2011) claimed that rehearsal and planning can be hypothesized to help fluency development because they assist language learners to enhance their access to their exemplar-based knowledge and even assist learners to make stronger connections between their exemplars.

In addition, another point that can be claimed that improves accuracy and fluency of participants of this study is background knowledge. As it was mentioned earlier in this study, the topics considered for the learners in their speaking class presentation were everyday topics, even covered in their course book, and the participants had the opportunity to search around those topics. In line with this claim, Shabani (2013) stated that topic familiarity and background knowledge about a particular topic provide learners with the necessary information to facilitate speaking task and results in more fluency of speaking.

Furthermore, it should be stated that both groups in this research studied the same course book and passed a twenty two-session class during the term. Even the control group, in which the learners did not focus on oral presentation as an only speaking task in their class, showed a progress in comparison with their status at the outset. Students

in control group were active in the class during the period of 22 sessions; they could talk to each other, do role-plays, learn many things regarding the speaking ability from both the teacher and their classmates; however, the experimental group outperformed in the post-test session. One reason for the significant improvement of students in experimental group can be more dynamic and focused participation in speaking activities. Students in experimental group were required to give a presentation at least three times during the term, thus, they have more opportunity to use language. Three different ways of speaking improvement assessment yielded a similar result in this study, each of which confirmed students' speaking improvement by focusing on oral presentation as a speaking task.

It should be kept in mind that product-oriented and teacher-centered classes are better to be changed into process-oriented and learner-centered in which personal and group work among students are encouraged. The advantage of this kind of classes is that it allows the use of English in a low-risk environment and makes students become less dependent on the teacher and more dependent on the group for their learning, and thus build their self-confidence in using English for meaningful communication. This type of learner-centered learning activity clearly meets the students' desire for an active speech role (Gan, 2012).

Having conducted this study in the area of task and components of speaking ability, the researcher came up with other potential issues for investigation. First, accuracy, complexity and fluency are three components of speech which are not independent of each other; thus, it is more beneficial if further research consider all three components at the same time. Second, there are some factors that can affect components of speech such as pre-task activities, planning time, task repetition, the role of confidence and background knowledge. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of these factors on speaking ability.

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