

The Effects of Reciprocal and Non-Reciprocal Listening Tasks on the Complexity of Iranian EFL Learners' Oral Production

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Abstract

Researches in the field of task-based language teaching and learning claim that combining task characteristics and processing conditions can direct a learner's attention to the competing goals of accuracy, complexity, and fluency. The objective of this study is to find out whether reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks have different effects on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability in terms of complexity. For this purpose, forty students of intermediate level were chosen and then were randomly assigned into two experimental and control groups. Data analysis showed that performing reciprocal listening tasks had different effects on students' speaking complexity, compared to those that didn't receive these types of activities. Based on the results of this study, it is imperative that teachers consider the types of listening activities that can have influence over language learners' speaking ability.

Keywords: input, reciprocal listening task (interactive), non-reciprocal listening task (non-interactive), complexity

INTRODUCTION

Listening is an important skill in second language learning. For most people, knowing the second language means having high and enough ability in listening and speaking in that language. Reading and writing are therefore secondary skills. So listening and speaking must be reconsidered in language teaching context, especially in designing the tasks for second language learners. In recent years a number of researchers, syllabus designers and educational innovators have called for a move in language teaching toward task-based approaches to instruction (Prabhu, 1987). Prabhu (1987) deserves a credit for originating the task-based teaching and learning based on the concept that effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in language tasks, rather than just learning about language.

There are two main sources of evidence that defend the use of task in class. As Lynch and Maclean (2000, p.80) mention, "the first source of justifications for task-based learning is what we might term the ecological one: the belief that the best way to promote effective learning is by setting up classroom tasks that reflect as far as possible the real world tasks which the learners perform." Task-based language teaching is also discussed from a psycholinguistic perspective. Ellis (2000) noted that "From a psycholinguistic perspective a task is a device that guides learners to engage in certain types of information-processing that are believed to be important for effective language use and/or for language acquisition from some theoretical standpoint" (p.197). Ellis (2006) asserts that "tasks reduce the cognitive or linguistic demands placed on the learner" (p.23).

By focusing on the role of comprehensible input, second language acquisition research has given a major boost to listening. Without comprehending input at the right level, no learning occurs. Listening is thus fundamental to speaking.

Limited listening input fails to increase face-to-face communication. Adequate listening practice could give the learners essential contact with handy input that might activate their utterances. Reciprocal or interactive and non-reciprocal listening tasks have been neglected in language classrooms and failed to take adequate account of the fact that students need to interact with fellow students. Task-based syllabus was seen as enhancing the communication, which was largely unsuccessful because traditional textbooks did not complement the communicative approaches, a large number of teachers were untrained to teach the subject, and coursework focused on passing examinations that did not support communicative approaches (Ellis, 2005). Iranian English teachers, trying to teach spoken English, don't heed to the effects of reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening on speaking ability regardless of the reasons. That is to say, most Iranian English teachers ignore the kind of listening input students are provided with in order to understand and speak. As a result, the type of speaking which a language learner yields doesn't show his/her true ability in listening.

Types of listening

There are many different types of listening. According to Nunan (1999), we can classify listeners in relation to whether they take part in the interaction (known as reciprocal listening) or they have no time or chance to provide answers and they are cast in the role of non-reciprocal 'eavesdropper' on a conversation.

Classification of Production Variables

Ellis (2003, p.117) discusses the results obtained by the different studies in relation to production variables. The following table classifies some of the specific measures used in the various studies in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

Dimension	Measures
1 Fluency	Number of words per minute Number of syllables per minute Number of pauses of one/two seconds or longer Mean length of pauses Number of repetitions Number of false starts Number of reformulations Number of words per turn Length of run, i.e. number of per pausally defined units
2 Accuracy	Number of self-corrections Percentage of error free clauses Target like use of verb tenses Target like use of articles Target like use of vocabulary Target like use of plurals Target like use of negations Ratio of indefinite to definite articles
3 Complexity	Number of turns per minute Anaphoric reference Lexical richness, e.g. number of words families used, percentage of lexical to structural words, type token ratio Proportion of lexical verbs to copula Percentage of words functioning as lexical verbs Percentage of occurrence of multi propositional utterances Amount of subordination, e.g. Total number clauses divided by total number of c- units Frequency use of conjectures Frequency use of prepositions Frequency use of hypothesizing statements

Adapted from Ellis (2003, p. 117)

The main purpose of this study is to optimize the learners' production by focusing on reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks used in Iranian EFL learners' educational system and the influence these types of listening tasks have on improvement of the speaking ability.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

The present study attempted to answer the question raised about the impact of 'reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks on Iranian EFL learners' oral performance. The objective of the study can be expressed in the following question:

- Do reciprocal listening tasks improve the "complexity" of Iranian EFL learners' speech as compared to non-reciprocal listening tasks?

According to the above question, the following research hypothesis was developed. The negative counterpart was the null one.

- Reciprocal listening tasks don't improve the "complexity" of Iranian EFL learners' speech as compared to non-reciprocal task.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were 40 male intermediate students studying English at a private language institute whose main focus is on communicative approach toward language learning and teaching. The sample was selected out of a population of 70 intermediate students using the Preliminary English Test (PET). Those whose scores ranged from 50-60 out of 65 were selected to participate in the study.

Instrumentations

The Preliminary English Test (PET) was used to see if the two groups are homogeneous in terms of their L2 proficiency.

The participants' PET scores were entered into an 'Independent Samples t-test', the results of which confirmed the two groups' initial homogeneity. After ensuring the initial homogeneity of the groups in general language proficiency, the pretest including four speaking tasks was administered, and on the basis of the scores obtained from the pretest, the students were classified into two groups: Experimental and Control groups.

Computers, cassettes and tape recorder, microphones and post-test were other key instruments for recording the oral production of all the participants of the study.

Procedure

At the beginning of the program the PET exam including three sections of listening, reading and writing were administered to assure the initial homogeneity of the groups in terms of their L2 proficiency, then the pretest including five speaking tasks was administered. The tasks were written on sheets of paper and handed on to the students to read and answer them orally. All oral answers were taped-recorded and then transcribed. In order to score the oral pretest data the rater listened to each audio-tape recording and then transcribed it. In order to measure 'complexity' the ratio of lexical to grammatical words was calculated.

The instructional treatment was provided during five sessions, each of which lasted approximately 30 minutes. In control group, the students were asked to answer the listening tasks in the form of multiple-choice questions without any interaction between the teacher and students. Experimental group received the same listening tasks but the difference was that before answering the multiple-choice questions, the researcher asked questions about the listening tasks such as wh-questions and descriptive questions. At the end of the program, the participants in both groups were post- tested. The post- testing procedure was exactly the same as pretesting. Five speaking tasks were administered in one session. The procedure for scoring the posttest was the same as the pretest. The speeches of the participants in second performance were transcribed

by the researcher in order to measure. The transcriptions were coded, and evaluated in terms of complexity.

Measures

In order to score the data the measures used by Foster and Skehan (1997) were adapted for scoring the 'complexity of the participants' performance. In order to measure 'complexity' the ratio of lexical to grammatical words was calculated.

Design

This study employed an experimental design, in which participants in the control group completed the listening tasks, and participants in the experimental group completed the same listening tasks along with an independent variable as 'structured interaction' in which the organization and procedure of the interaction, as well as the questions and the order in which they were presented was constructed by the researcher in order to make more interaction between the teacher and students or between the students themselves. Participants in the study were 40 adult learners of English at the intermediate level.

Statistical Procedures

In this study, the following statistical analysis and procedures were utilized in order to analyze the collected data. First, Independent Samples Test was utilized to compare the means of each group's PET examination scores to see the homogeneity of two groups. Second, Independent Samples Test was utilized to compare the means of each group's task response characteristics in pretest and posttests in terms of complexity.

RESULTS

In order to test our hypothesis and to investigate the way 'Structured Interaction' affected task response characteristics of participants the researcher employed the measures to obtain every participant's score for complexity. In the following sections, discussion of descriptive statistics employed for comparing the means for research question of the study, and the Levene's Test for equality of variances in both participants' PET examination and task response characteristics in terms of complexity will be explained.

Table 1 depicts the results of descriptive statistics and an independent t-test. The necessary condition for comparison of the means is the equality of variance in both control and experimental groups, which is shown by Levene's test for equality of variances.

Table1. Independent Samples Test for the homogeneity of control and experimental groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
					F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PET scores	Control	20	54.800	3.054	1.293	.263	.507	38	.615
	Experimental	20	54.350	2.540					

As the results of Table 1 show, regarding the significance level of Leven's test (0.263), which is more than 0.05, equality of variances is verified.

The mean score of the PET test in control group is (54.8), and in experimental group (54.3). Significance of the t-test was calculated, 0.615. As the significance of t-test is higher than 0.05, therefore equality of PET scores' means in two groups of control and experimental is not rejected. As a result, the means of PET scores in control and experimental group do not have meaningful difference, so these two groups are homogeneous.

Results of the Pretest

A t-test analysis was run to determine if there was any statistically significant difference in scores of the pretest, measuring complexity of participants' oral performance.

The results of descriptive analysis for the complexity of discourse produced by the control group and experimental group are shown in Table 2 .The pretest mean scores were 1.9 for control group and 1.9 for experimental group and the standard deviations were .067 for the control group and .080 for experimental group.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest results

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest Complexity	control	20	1.9210	.06735	.01506
	experimental	20	1.9205	.08010	.01791

Independent t- sample test was utilized to compare the complexity of two groups. The necessary condition for comparing the means is the equality of variances of the control and experimental groups. Therefore, Levene's Test for equality of variances was utilized to compare the variances of two groups. As the results of Table 3 show, Significance of Leven's test is calculated.284, which is more than 0.05; therefore, equality of variances is verified. Mean scores of complexity in Control group is calculated (M=1.921, SD=.067) and in experimental group is (M=1.920, SD=.080). Significance of the t-test is calculated .983. As the significance of t-test is higher than 0.05, therefore equality of complexity scores' means in two groups of control and experimental in pretest is not rejected. As a result, there doesn't seem meaningful difference between the complexity score of control group and experimental group. This difference is not statistically significant ($P>0.05$, $df=38$, $t= .021$). These means differences are clearly illustrated in Figure 1

which displays the means for complexity variable in both control and experimental groups in pretest.

Table 3. Independent Samples t- test for the comparison of 'complexity' means in pretest

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.180	.284	.021	38	.983	.00050	.02340	-.0468	.04787
Equal variances not assumed			.021	36.912	.983	.00050	.02340	-.0469	.04792

Results of the post-test

The results of descriptive analysis for the complexity of discourse produced by the control (non-reciprocal) group, and experimental (reciprocal) group in performing a listening task are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the post test results

group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
control	20	1.9270	.06359	.01422
experimental	20	2.0435	.11882	.2657

Table 5. Independent Samples t- test for the comparison of 'complexity' means in post test

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.141	.084	3.866	38	.000	-.11650	.03013	-.17750	-.05550
Equal variances not assumed			3.866	29.057	.001	-.11650	.03013	-.17813	-.05487

Independent samples t-test was utilized to compare the complexity of two groups. Again the necessary condition for comparing the mean differences is the equality of variances of the control and experimental groups. Therefore, Levene's Test for equality of variances was utilized to compare the variances of two groups. As the results of Table 5

show, regarding the significance level of Leven's test ($P > 0.05$, $df = 38$, $t = -3.866$), (sig .084) which is more than 0.05, equality of variances is verified.

Mean scores of complexity in control group is ($M = 1.92$, $SD = .063$), and in experimental group is ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .118$). Significance of the t-test is 0.000. Because the significance of t-test is smaller than 0.05, therefore Null Hypothesis (equality of complexity mean scores in two groups of Control and Experimental) is rejected. Consequently, mean score of complexity in Experimental group is meaningfully higher than the Control group in post -test.

These means differences are clearly illustrated in Figure 2 which displays the means for complexity variable in both control and experimental groups. Comparison of the means presented in Figure 2 show that the participants who were provided with 'structured interaction' produced more complex discourse.

DISCUSSION

The immediate study focused on the effects of "structured interaction" in listening tasks on intermediate EFL learners' oral performance. The underlying reason in this study is that Iranian English teachers, trying to teach spoken English, don't pay enough attention to effects of reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks on speaking ability. Dependent variable measured was 'complexity' (operationalized as ratio of lexical to grammatical words). Chang and Read (2006) state that listening is a kind of ability that requires variety of features such as, linguistic, paralinguistic and even pragma linguistic which must support the students while they are listening. So the present study intended to provide the EFL learners with some supports by making them aware of the task response characteristics in terms of 'complexity through raising attention by means of 'structured interaction'. The findings of the study are also supported by Swain's (1985) output hypothesis, that in order to speak we have to actually speak. Through interactional listening task, learners may be pushed to notice their problems and try to overcome tensions between a concern to be fluent, a concern to be accurate, and a concern to take risks and use more complex language which is needed to be balanced and try to repair them in the second attempt, because "under certain circumstances, output promotes noticing" (Swain, 1998, p. 67).

It was found that 'structured interaction' in listening task resulted in the high ratio of lexical to grammatical words in the participants' discourse. The low ratio of lexical to grammatical words was observed in the performance of the participants who experienced the 'without structured interaction' discourse condition. This can be attributed to the influence of "structured interaction" in helping the learner remember and use lexical and rather than grammatical words. The findings of this part of study is in line with the results of the research by Bygate and Samuda (2005) who found a positive effect of comprehension and interactional strategies in promoting lexical complexity in narrative tasks.

CONCLUSION

According to Ellis (2003), the aim of a task-based class is stimulating language use, activating whatever language the students have, and providing learning opportunities for students. With regard to the discrepancy among the researchers, it seems that it will be better for both the teachers and researchers to explore various ways of improving L2 production, particularly on complexity. Thus the main concern of this study was to investigate the probability of enhancing the complexity of Iranian EFL learners' task-based oral performance through listening tasks.

In this research the researcher presented 'structured interaction' technique as a way of maintaining an acceptable means of improving complexity. The findings of the present study indicated that the experimental group performance in terms of complexity was more accurate than the control group's complexity

The most important contribution of this study is that it provides learners and L2 educators with a clear explanation of how 'structured interaction' through listening task affected the L2 learners' performance in terms of complexity. Regarding the results of the study, it is predicated that the purpose of a task is an important factor which contributes to the decision as to provide 'structured interaction'. The present study has implications for both pedagogy and research. In terms of pedagogical practice, the findings of this study suggest that 'structured interaction' through listening task can promote an optimal balance of attention between the planning of meaning and planning of form in language production. There are certain likely implications taken from this study for language teachers and material preparation experts. Teachers can include 'structured interaction' in their daily teaching of listening tasks. Providing students with the opportunity to interact between teacher and students while performing listening tasks is well worthwhile. Listening and interaction with teacher or with other students enable learners to work with a language problem in a reasonably stable site.

Based on the results of the present study, 'structured interaction' through listening task is suggested as complementary methodological options for taking care of language form where meaning negotiation has centrality. It can help learners to integrate what they already know into what they do. In order to enable better accumulation of knowledge in this research, sufficient numbers of primary studies are needed. Hopefully, the issues raised and discussed in this work have offered insights for improving research practices. Replication studies are obviously advisable in order to permit greater confidence in the results. The following areas for further research are suggested. First, replication of the study for male vs. female learners. Second, replication of the study with different age group.

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