The Impact of Task Types on Listening Comprehension of Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated the difference of five task types applied in Task-Based Instruction (TBI) on intermediate-level EFL learners' listening comprehension ability. To this end, 31 intermediate EFL learners were given five task types of matching, selecting, role-playing, note-taking and completing. Their proficiency and listening homogeneity was ensured using an institutional TOEFL test and the listening paper of FCE. Then, they enjoyed TBI through implementing the task types for about ten 20-minute sessions. The results of the different tasks were analyzed to find out what task was the most effective. The results indicated that the learners outperformed in the two tasks of note-taking and completing than in the first three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing, but there was no significant difference among the three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing ($p > 0.05$), neither was there any significant difference between the two tasks of note-taking and completing ($p > 0.05$).

Keywords: Task, Task type, Task-Based Language Teaching, Authentic Materials, Listening Comprehension

1. Introduction

There are strong barriers that interfere in students' listening comprehension. The foremost problem appears to be how to prepare efficient listeners to be able to handle the real-world listening properly. At first, both learners and teachers tended to neglect the value of listening comprehension skill because they mainly focused on other language skills, especially speaking, and listening comprehension was an internal activity with no obvious immediate output.

The ultimate aim of language teaching is to enable learners to use the language they have learned to communicate to the world outside the classroom. In communicating, two parties, namely creator and recreator of the message, are involved. As in creating a message, the speaker exploits the world knowledge and linguistic knowledge, in recreating that message, the listener applies the same type of knowledge to transform the message into thought. Therefore, in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, some scholars like Rivers (1981) proposed the need for developing listening systematically not only as a basis for speaking but as an independent skill. Considering the crucial role of listening in successful oral communication, this study was designed to examine the different effect of five task types applied in TBIon improving intermediate-level EFL learners' listening comprehension ability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Listening in a Second or Foreign Language

In EFL teaching, listening comprehension conveys that the listener repeats the text by demonstrating his understanding through matching questions and answers related to the text, or understanding the meaning of particular vocabulary items used in that context. However, it is completely different from what is meant for a native speaker to understand an intended message. In normal interaction, understanding the verbal message as well as the context in which it occurs is necessary. Brown and Yule (1999) declare that the listener usually achieves a partial understanding of what the speaker intended and could convey partially. Therefore, this habit of tolerable mutual comprehension should be developed in learners not to attempt to get 100 percent comprehension.

2.2 Evolution of Listening Comprehension

In an unending effort to prepare skillful listeners to handle the real world listening, scholars have tried to invent practical methods for teaching language skills, and always looked for the best methods for teaching these skills; however, as Chastain (1988) argues, the most pervasive changes to language teaching happened by the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that brought a revolution in the goal of language teaching and learning. It focused on achieving communicative competence through treating all skills fairly as well as on the negotiation of meaning and providing opportunity to develop all four skills in a meaningful way.

Later on, as Ellis (2005) asserts, TBI originated from the opinion that specifying what a learner would learn in linguistic terms is impossible. Therefore, as Prabhu (1987) argues, preselection of linguistic items should be stopped and instead the content of teaching should be specified in terms of holistic units of communication, i.e. tasks. In this way, based on his claim, teaching through communication rather than for communication could be possible. Consequently, Prabhu in 1979 developed a procedural syllabus based on these assumptions in which a set of tasks were arranged according to difficulty. This syllabus was designed to be run in secondary school classes on his Communicational Teaching Project in Bangalore, Southern India. In the early 1980s, American Government Language Institutions utilized TBI for teaching foreign languages for adults (Edwards & Willis, 2005).

2.3 Principles and Theoretical Supports for Task-Based Approach

Feez (1998, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 224) summarizes the principles of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as follows:

- "The focus is on process rather than product.
- Basic elements are purposeful activities and tasks that emphasize communication and meaning.
- Learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while engaged in meaningful activities and tasks.
- Activities and tasks can be either:
  o Those that learners might need to achieve in real life;
  o Those that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom.
- The difficulty of a task depends on a range of factors including the previous experience of the learner, the complexity of the tasks and the degree of support available."

Edwards and Willis (2005) state that various perspectives support task-based learning including Interaction Hypothesis, Output Hypothesis, cognitive, and socio-cultural perspectives.

2.3.1 The Interaction Hypothesis Perspective

According to the Interaction Hypothesis, negotiation of meaning provides learners with both comprehensible input and the production of modified output that are necessary for language development (Edwards & Willis, 2005). Supporting this view, Long (1983b, 1996, as cited in Edwards & Willis, 2005) reminds that through exchange of information, learners receive feedback on the level of their comprehension in the L2. It eventuates in negotiated modification of conversation, more understandable interaction, and consequently comprehensible input (Based on these findings, task that is a basic element in TBLT stimulates negotiation of meaning, and thus, provides the necessary conditions for language development.

2.3.2. The Output Hypothesis Perspective

The Output Hypothesis postulates that learner output, the language a learner produces, not only is a sign of acquired knowledge (Krashen, 1985, as cited in Edwards & Willis, 2005), but also is a sign of learning at work (Swain, 1998, 2000, as cited in Edwards & Willis, 2005).

Research on how the different task types and dimensions can have an effect on the negotiation of meaning, negotiation of form, and opportunities for learners to produce modified/comprehensible output demonstrated that task type provides learners with various opportunities to modified output (Iwashita, 1999; Pica, Holliday, Lewis & Morgenthaler, 1989; Shehadeh, 1999; Swain, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 1998, as cited in Edwards & Willis, 2005).

2.3.3 Skehan's Cognitive Perspective

Skehan (1998) discriminates three aspects of learner performance as fluency, accuracy and complexity and refers to fluency as the ability of the learner to communicate in real time, accuracy as the learner's capacity to use the Target Language (TL) following its norms, and complexity as the capacity of the learner to use more complex TL structures. He argues that through engaging learners in different types of production and communication, these aspects can be influenced.

2.3.4 The Socio-Cultural Perspective

According to socio-cultural theory, learners collaboratively fabricate knowledge through a joint activity. Based on the learners' socio-cultural history and the locally determined goals of the activities, learners involve in these co-constructed activities. It has been indicated that such co-construction of knowledge involves learners in cognitive processes that are implicated in L2 learning (Lantolf, 1996).

Roots of this perspective lie in works of Vygotsky (1987) on how learners accomplish tasks jointly, and how the process of accomplishing a task can promote L2 learning. Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Edwards & Willis, 2005) argues that "dialogic interaction" is a crucial trigger for language learning because external, social activities in which the learner engages in are the primary source of mental/cognitive activities. Interacting with other people awaken cognitive processes in the learners. The cognitive processes that occur on the "inter-psychological (or social) plane" include cognitive development as well as language development. Vygotsky proceeds because what emanates from the social (inter-psychological) scope would finally be presented internally or "intrapsychologically" (i.e. within the individual), this language development moves from the social plane to the internal mental plane of individual. In other words, participating in dialogue and performing tasks helps learners to internalize language and employing the joint completion of tasks is a way to achieve this in the language classroom.

2.4 Role of Tasks in Task-Based Language Teaching

In commencing to talk about TBI, it seems crucial to specify what is meant by task. Various definitions are presented for what a task is; for example, Bialystok (1983, p. 103) suggests that a communication task must "a) stimulate real communicative exchange, b) provide incentive for the L2 speaker/learner to convey information, c) provide control for the information items required for investigation, and d) fulfill the needs to be used for the goals of the experiment."

Nunan (1989) divides task types into two broad categories of real-world/target tasks (e.g., using telephone) that refer to uses of language in the real world and pedagogic tasks (e.g., information gap activities) that happen in the classroom (Nunan, 2004).

Edwards and Willis (2005, p. 15) declare in TBLT, tasks compose the main component in the language classroom because "they provide better contexts for activating learner acquisition process and promoting L2 learning". Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 228) mention because "tasks are believed to foster processes of negotiation, modification, rephrasing, and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning" it can be concluded that TBLT is based on a theory of language learning rather than a theory of language structure.

2.5 Significance of Tasks in Language Learning

In language teaching, in order that tasks be useful in providing a rich context for promoting learners' knowledge and skills, and integrate improving fluency and accuracy, they should be employed systematically (Bygate, 1999). Utilizing TBI and authentic materials accelerate students' progress and enable them to apply effectively their new FL in real world (Skehan, 1996; Prabhu, 1987).

Ellis (2003) mentions key characteristics of an effective two-way collaborative task as: 1) a main focus on meaning (rather than on language form), 2) selection by the learner to select the needed linguistic resources for completing task (rather than on all resources all provided to the learner), and 3) a palpable outcome (that is assessable for its correctness or appropriateness). These features promote collaborative learning, active listening, negotiation of meaning, and attention to feedback. Consequently, these features are crucial for developing learner uptake during the task, rather than sole completion of the task (Gass, 1997; Carroll & Swain, 1993). Bygate (1999) proclaims that a pedagogical task promotes learning through establishing demands, and on communication tasks, the demands are communication problems that need to be solved through employing language. Language and processing exist alongside and using tasks promote learning, i.e. developing both language content and processing abilities.

According to Ellis (2003), a task can involve any of the four language skills including listening comprehension ability. Listening tasks can be applied for various purposes: 1) measuring whether learners have acquired a special feature targeted to be learned or facilitating learning a special feature through modifying the input for effective processing the feature, 2) providing a non-threatening way to engage learners in a meaning-centered activity, and 3) providing learners with the enriched input. In listening-to-comprehend tasks, learners use their schematic knowledge to carry out the task (Ellis, 2003).

2.6 Primacy of Task -Based Language Teaching Approach

Proponents of TBLT argue that the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom. This is done by designing tasks that require learners to use the language for themselves (Willis &Willis, 2007).

In methods that mastery of grammar is emphasized, Edwards and Willis (2005) argue that learners do not obtain efficient level of competency in the TL because language is not a system of grammar and lexicon. However, considering language as a meaning system is more efficient in language learning. Halliday (1975) declares that in the process of language acquisition and learners' effort to mean, they develop a lexico-grammar that enables them to achieve their intended meaning. This incentive besides struggling to communicate promotes developing a practical language system.

At a major private Japanese university with approximately 340 first year students participating in a second-semester, speaking course to examine Bugler and Hunt (2002) conducted a study to examine how tasks can be used as a basis for teaching. The final product was highly qualified and the findings showed that the experience was rewarding, intrinsically interesting, and educationally beneficial for the students who participated in the task-based project.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

This research was quasi-experimental in nature; two intermediate classes at an intermediate level in Language English Institute participated in this study. The total number of students in these two classes amounted to thirty-one students between the ages of 17-21 who had had the same amount of exposure to listening materials before the experiment, and all had studied English for 14 terms (each term consisting of 20 sessions of 90 minutes each).

3.2 Materials and Procedure

Despite the previous and various studies on TBLT, its theories and applications, there has been virtually less research study performed on the comparison of differenet task types used to develop listening comprehension of intermediate EFL/ ESL learners. Therefore, this study is new in employing five varied task types of matching, selecting, role-playing, note-taking and completing to conduct a research for investigating the possible difference of the various task types utilized in TBI on listening comprehension of intermediate-level Iranian EFL leraners.

Before the study, all the participants were given an institutional PBT TOEFL test to ensure they were all intermediate language learners. The TOEFL test was composed of three parts: listening comprehension, structure and written expressions, and reading comprehension. Listening comprehension, structure and written expressions, and reading comprehension sections were made of 50, 40 and 50 multiple-choice items, respectively. The test was adopted from *Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test (the Paper Based Test)* (Deborah Philips, 2003, pp. 431-454). All participants scored between 400 and 580, which put them in the intermediate level (See www.toefl.org).

To establish the listening homogeneity of the subjects, the participants took a listening test, namely, FCE (First Certificate in English) listening test. Then, they received task-based listening instruction through implementing five task types of matching, selecting, role-playing, note-taking and completing for three sessions each week for five weeks (that is for 15 sessions). Five listening passages accompanying their comprehension questions were selected from *Delta's Key to the Next Generation TOEFL Test* (Gallagher, 2006). Each quiz included 10 multiple-choice items through which the participants' listening comprehension progress was examined after implementing each of five task types.

4. Findings

4.1 Performance of Subjects on the TOEFL Pre-test

The estimated language proficiency mean of all the participants, who were administered a TOEFL proficiency test to ensure they were intermediate EFL learners, amounted to 426.46 that put them as intermediate learners.

Table 1. Results for the TOEFL proficiency pre-test

No. of students	Mean score
62	426.46

4.2 Performance of Subjects on the FCE Pre-test

The listening paper of FCE was administered as the main pre-test to all participants to ensure comparability of them as intermediate EFL listeners. Table 2 showed the relevant descriptive statistics.

Table 2. Results for the FCE pre-test

No. of students	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err
31	13.06	2.58	0.52

4.3 Performance of Subjects on the Different Task Types

In order to investigating the difference among the effectiveness of the task types examined in this study, including matching, selecting, role-playing, note-taking (e.g., providing answer for the questions, identifying main idea) and completing in developing the listening comprehension of the intermediate Iranian EFL learners the following analyses were employed. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean scores on the different task types. It revealed a significant difference in the mean scores of task; Wilks' Lambda = 0.571, $F_{(9, 39)} = 10.72$, $p < 0.05$, multivariate Partial Eta Squared = 0.429. These findings indicated that there was a significant difference among the investigated task types of this study in promoting the listening comprehension of the intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

Table 3. Within-participant factors

Task type	1	2	3	4	5
Independent Variable	Matching	Selecting	Role-playing	Note-taking	Completing

Table 4. Multivariate tests[b]

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig	Partial Eta Squared
	Pillai's Trace	.429	10.726[a]	4.000	57.000	.00	.429
Task	Wilks' Lambda	.571	10.726[a]	4.000	57.000	.00	.429
type	Hotelling's Trace	.753	10.726[a]	4.000	57.000	.00	.429
	Roy's Largest Root	.753	10.726[a]	4.000	57.000	.00	.429

Note. df = degree of freedom; a= exact statistic; b=design: intercept; F= fisher's static

Table 5. Mauchly's test of Sphericity[b]

| Within subjects effects | Mauchly's W | Approx. Chi-square | df | Sig. | Epsilon [a] | | |
					Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Task types	.508	39.594	9	.00	.761	.807	.250

Note. a= maybe used to adjust the degrees of freedom for the averaged tests of significance. Corrected tests are displayed in Within Subjects Effect Table; b=design: intercept

In order to find out which groups or sets of the mean scores differed from one another Pairwise Comparisons (Table 6) was used. The information provided in Table 6 compared each pair of task types and indicated whether the difference between them was significant or not. Results showed there was no significant difference among the three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing ($p > 0.05$). In addition, there was no significant difference between the two tasks of note-taking and completing ($p > 0.05$). In other words, the performance of the learners in the first three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing was different from the performance of the participants in the remaining two tasks of note-taking and completing.

Table 6. Pairwise comparison

| (I) Task types | (J) Task types | Mean Diff. (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. [a] | 95% Confidence Interval for Difference[a] | |
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-.361	.291	1.000	-1.209	.488
	3	-.180	.174	1.000	-.688	.327
	4	-.984[*]	.279	.008	-1.797	-.170
	5	-1.557[*]	.256	.000	-2.302	-.813
2	1	.361	.291	1.000	-.488	1.209
	3	.180	.234	1.000	-.503	.863
	4	-.623[*]	.190	.018	-1.177	-.069
	5	-1.197[*]	.282	.001	-2.019	-.374
3	1	.180	.174	1.000	-.327	.688
	2	-.180	.234	1.000	-.863	.503
	4	-.803[*]	.237	.012	-1.494	-.112
	5	-1.377[*]	.237	.000	-2.069	-.685
4	1	.984[*]	.279	.008	.170	1.797
	2	.623[*]	.190	.018	.069	1.177
	3	.803[*]	.237	.012	.112	1.494
	5	-.574[*]	.245	.223	-1.287	.139
5	1	1.557[*]	.256	.000	.813	2.302
	2	1.197[*]	.282	.001	.374	2.019
	3	1.377[*]	.237	.000	.685	2.069
	4	.574	.245	.223	-.139	1.287

Note. Based on estimated marginal means, a= adjustment for multiple comparisons:

Bonferroni. *The mean difference is significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Descriptive statistics provided in Table 7 compared mean scores of the five task types clearly and revealed that the learners' performance was better on completing (M = 6.5902) and note-taking (M = 6.0164) task types in comparison to the other three task types of selecting (M= 5.3934), role-playing (M=5.2131) and matching (M= 5.0328).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics of mean scores of the five task types

Task types	Mean	Std. Dev.	No. of students
Matching	5.0328	2.35915	31
Selecting	5.3934	2.39638	30
Role-playing	5.2131	2.22197	30
Note-taking	6.0164	2.16404	30
Completing	6.5902	2.10061	30

5. Discussion

The performance of learners in the first three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing were different from the performance of the participants in the remaining two tasks of note-taking and completing. In other words, there was no significant difference among the three tasks of matching, selecting and role-playing. Additionally, there was no significant difference between the two tasks of note-taking and completing. These findings showed that there was no significant difference among the investigated task types of this study including matching, selecting, role-playing, note-taking and completing in improving the listening comprehension of the intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

By considering the cognitive effect of tasks as one of the rationales for choosing task-based syllabuses, Prabhu (1987) believes the tasks that established a reasonable challenge and were cognitively motivating provide learners with a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, Skehan (1998, p. 107) asserted that "although task accomplishment always lead to a sense of satisfaction, the completed outcome of project-oriented tasks caused much more motivation and satisfaction." Findings of the present study revealed the after performing the tasks learners felt sense of satisfactory and became more motivated to continue and perform several more tasks.

In other studies Foster and Skehan (1996) and Mehnert (1998) examined the impact of task planning and the results showed that task planning produces positive influence on accuracy and complexity of learner's performance. The effects of (1) meaning/form-focused strategic planning, (2) undetailed strategic planning, and (3) minimal strategic planning on EFL learners' speech in three experimental tasks of personal information exchange, oral narrative, and decision making was studied by Foster and Skehan (1996). They found that meaning/form-focused strategic planning promoted complexity and fluency of speech (for all three tasks), and more accuracy (for two of the three tasks) than minimal strategic planning condition; besides, the meaning/form-focused strategic planning condition resulted in speech complex and fluent speech than the undetailed strategic planning condition. Findings of the present study are in congruent with the findings of the previous studies.

Attending that context-dependency of tasks is another factor that influences the effectiveness of a task. According to Robinson (1995), visual information makes performing the task easier and Nunan (1989) states that when tasks are supported by photographs, drawings, tables, and graphs are easier to understand. Accordingly, the findings of the present study indicated that the completing task that is generally context-based caused greater development on listening comprehension comparing the other examined tasks of this study.

In a study by Bahrami (2010) the impact of task types on the learners of different levels was investigated and the results showed that the matching, labeling, and form-filling tasks showed some degrees of effect on improving the listening comprehension of the learners at the intermediate level but the selecting task was not as effective as other tasks. However, the findings of the present study revealed that selecting task was statistically effective for intermediate EFL learners; moreover, there was no significant difference in the performance of learners in the three tasks of matching, selecting, and role-playing.

The cognitive load of a task on oral and written linguistic performance has a noticeable effect on improving fluency, accuracy and complexity. In congruence with the findings of Bahrami (2010), this study showed the tasks that provide learners with more comprehensible input would be more effective and the learners showed better performance in the completing and note-taking tasks of this study that provided the learners with more comprehensible input.

Findings of this research somehow paved the way for acceptance of the belief that instructing listening through various tasks might have a relative positive impact on listening comprehension ability of the EFL learners although the tasks did not show significant difference in their primacy.

6. Conclusion

Based on the discussed theoretical and empirical foundation, this study offered a relative degree of empirical support to the theoretical considerations relating to the positive role of tasks in the students' listening comprehension ability. Hence, adding a further piece of evidence on the nature of TBI and its effect on listening comprehension ability to the very few studies already conducted in this area. The findings of this study made some remarkable contributions to the current literature. According to Rost (1990), in performing listening tasks, listeners are not just involved in decoding the spoken text; rather they are involved in hypothesis testing and inferencing. Therefore, tasks promote listening comprehension as Edwards and Willis (2005) argues "tasks provide better contexts for activating learner acquisition process and promoting L2 learning" (p. 15).

Moreover, it examined some task types to gauge most effective ones to implement in EFL/ESL classes. The survey highlighted the importance of various tasks and their difference in listening comprehension ability of an EFL population. The results provide evidence that tasks would be effective on promoting the listening ability of intermediate EFL learners even though some of the tasks are not significantly more effective than the others.

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