

The Efficacy of Topic Familiarity on Oral Presentation: Extensive Speaking Assessment Task of Iranian EFL Learners in TBLT

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Abstract

In order to communicate effectively, EFL learners require considering a variety of linguistic, contextual, cultural, and interactional aspects of complex communicative process of English learning along with receiving appropriate tasks. The tasks of speaking assessment are of paramount importance in EFL settings. The current study focused on one main factor that has been proposed in TBLT, i.e. topic familiarity to investigate the effect of topic familiarity on EFL oral presentations. The participants were 30 female intermediate participants ranged from 14 to 18 year old studying at one English language institute in Shiraz, Iran. A sample model of Oxford Placement Test was used to determine the participants' level of English proficiency. Then, the participants were asked to give impromptu presentations about unfamiliar topics. Their oral presentations were evaluated as pre-tests. In order to administer post-tests participants were asked to work on a new topic for the subsequent session. All oral presentations were evaluated through Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) checklist. Using SPSS software, paired- sample *t*-test was used to analyze the collected data. The results indicated that there was significant difference between mean scores of pre-tests and post-tests. The findings of this study indicate that topic familiarity has an influence on learners' oral presentations.

Keywords: task-based language teaching (TBLT), topic familiarity, extensive speaking task, oral presentation

1. Introduction

1.1 TBLT

Language teaching and learning has been one of the most controversial though interesting fields of research for many years. Tasks and task-based language teaching have played a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy lately (Ellis 2003, 2005; Rahimpour, 2008; Skehan and Foster 1999; Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005; Salimi and Dadashpour 2010).

The following definition of a task is provided by Ellis (2003, p. 16):

A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.

In accordance with TBLT, topic familiarity is also one of the factors that should be taken into consideration. Learners' topic familiarity, as cited in Ellis (2003), effects on the learners' tendency to negotiate meaning. Language learners exploit their knowledge of the world to help them comprehend or produce the texts.

1.2 Topic familiarity

From cognitive point of view, cognitive psychologists believe that knowledge can be organized in the form of schemata background knowledge or knowledge of the world which is essential for the way we learn language Long (1990). As cited by Sarandi (2010), the term background information covers a range of knowledge types containing the world knowledge, topic familiarity and prior experience in a field (content schemata), the expectation of the rhetoric of a text (formal schemata) Carrel and Eisterhold, (1983), and the information gotten from earlier input, usually termed as co-textual information Brown and Yule (1983). Through stimulating previous knowledge, readers or listeners' familiarity with text content appears to help general

comprehension, in fact, in this process; the focus of the learners is on meaning not form of the written or spoken text.

1.3 Speaking assessment tasks

Although speaking is a productive skill and can be empirically and directly observed and evaluated, there is a challenge of designing elicitation techniques Fulcher (2003). There are four categories of speaking assessment tasks: **Imitative** types refer to the ability to imitate a word or phrase. Tasks are word and sentence repetition. **Intensive** types refer to the production of short and limited stretches of oral language through directed response tasks to elicit a particular grammatical form and read-aloud tasks include reading beyond the sentence level up to paragraphs. **Responsive** types refer to brief interactions with interlocutors through question and answer, giving instruction and directions, and paraphrasing. Interactive types refer to transactional language and interpersonal exchanges through interview, role play, discussion and conversations, games. **Extensive** (monologue) types refer to speeches, oral production, and storytelling. Related tasks are oral presentations, picture-cued storytelling, and retelling a story (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010).

1.4 Oral presentations

An oral presentation is one task of extensive speaking tasks. It is a short talk on a particular topic given to a seminar or a tutorial group. In an oral presentation one (or more) students give a talk to a tutorial group and express their views on a topic in accordance with their readings or research. The other students then join in a discussion of the topic. For this task a checklist is a typical means of scoring (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010).

2. Review of literature

Text familiarity has been studied as a variable affecting language learning. In Pulido (2004) the learners were asked to read narratives which showed either culturally familiar or culturally unfamiliar topics. The study indicated that cultural background knowledge facilitates incidental learning of nonsense words.

Similarly, Chang (2006) pointed out that while reading comprehension was motivated by both linguistic difficulty and topic familiarity, inferring was facilitated by topic familiarity. Correspondingly, Pulido (2007) mentioned that familiarity of the learners with the topics of the reading tasks causes better comprehension of the texts. Comparably, Combs (2008) indicated that the topic familiarity training had no significant impact on the acquisition of form. In 1994 Schmidt-Rinehart revealed that the participants scored significantly higher on the familiar topic than on the new topic.

In a similar study, Sadighi and Zare (2002) concluded that previous knowledge has positive effect on listening comprehension. Othman and Vanathas (2004) also indicated that topic familiarity leads to better listening comprehension. Additionally, Chang & Read (2007) uncovered that background knowledge and topic familiarizing are the most effective support for listening comprehension of the EFL learners. In the same way, Rahimpour and Hazar (2007) mentioned that although the topic familiarity contained a positive effect on accuracy and fluency of participants' oral production it had a negative effect on complexity of their oral production. By the same token, Hayati (2009) made a conclusion that language learners' familiarity with culturally-oriented language material improves the Iranian EFL learners' listening proficiency. In accordance with topic familiarity, Mahdavy (2011) concluded that content familiarity plays a more important role in the meaning-making process required for incidental vocabulary learning. Shabani (2013) provided some evidence in support of the positive effect of background knowledge on speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Based on the above mentioned studies the effects of topic familiarity or prior knowledge on L2 learners' reading and listening comprehension are obvious. However, as stated by Rahimpour and Hazar (2007), because of the importance of topic familiarity, it is important to give thought to it as a task feature in syllabus design.

Through investigating the existing literature, it is perceived that there is a highly disappointing shortage of studies concerning the reasonable effects of topic familiarity on speaking assessment tasks for EFL learners. Hence, in this study the efficacy of background knowledge or topic familiarity on the speaking assessment task of oral presentations of Iranian EFL Learners is under investigation.

We hope that the results of this study would shed further light on this issue to pave the way for prospective studies on the topic.

2.1 Research question

Does topic familiarity have a positive effect on improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral presentations?

Hypothesis

H0: Topic familiarity has no effect on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral presentations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 30 female English language learners. The learners' performance on a sample model Oxford placement test indicated that they were intermediate EFL learners.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments which were utilized for the measurement of different variables in the study included:

3.2.1 Oxford Placement test

For the purpose of this study, an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to homogenize the participants based on their language proficiency level. The reliability index of this test was estimated through Cronbach's Alpha as 0.82.

3.2.2 Pre-test oral presentation

In order to ensure about the homogeneity of the oral production of the participants, the pre-tests were used in the form of oral presentations.

3.2.3 Introducing new topics to the participants

In order to evaluate the efficacy of topic familiarity on oral presentations, some new topics from such as (Ufology) were introduced.

3.2.4 Post-test oral presentation

All the participants were asked to have oral presentations based on the introduced topics. For all oral presentations, a checklist or grid was used based on (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 219).

3.3 Procedures

This study used a quasi-experimental design with no control group. A battery of pre-tests, treatment, and post-tests were used to assess the participants' oral presentations. A pilot study, as a small scale preliminary study was conducted on 10 participants to measure the validity and strengths of pre-tests. The validity of the pre-tests was confirmed by academic staff of English language department. The reliability of pre-test was .70 through Cronbach's alpha SPSS. For pre-test, the participants were required to give oral presentations on the spur of time, about subject matters that they were not familiar with. Then the treatment was introduced as introducing some new topics to the learners to work on for the subsequent session. The participants were asked to get sufficient information about the topic through the Internet, books, etc. Therefore, they got familiar with the new topics. In the following session when the students attended the class they were asked to give oral presentations about the topic as much as they could. During the discussion, the teacher (researcher) evaluated the participants' oral presentations. Her evaluation of the participants' oral presentations was deemed as a posttest.

4. Data analysis and results

In order to indicate whether topic familiarity has been influential in improving the participants' oral presentations, two kinds of statistical analyses were employed. First, the raw scores obtained in the pre-test and post-test oral presentations were analyzed descriptively, then inferential statistics were employed to present whether differences, if any, were statistically significant. Descriptive statistics for the application of the results of the pretests and posttests are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Pre-test	30	4.00	12.00	<u>8.5000</u>	<u>.39465</u>	2.16158
Post-test	30	16.00	20.00	<u>17.8333</u>	.17993	.98553
Valid N (listwise)	30					

As is shown in Table 1, the mean score of the pretests is 8.50, while that of the post-test is 17.833. This shows that the mean score of the post-test is higher than that of the pretest. It can be concluded that this increase in the amount of the students' oral presentations may highly be attributed to the effect of the treatment (topic familiarity). To continue, the standard deviation of the pretest is .39, and that of the post-test is .17. The standard deviation indicates that there is much more variation among the subjects' oral presentation cores in the pretest compared with that of the post-test.

In order to indicate whether the difference among the participant' means of the pre- and post-tests is statistically significant, a Paired (Matched) samples *t*-test was employed. Table 2 below presents the paired samples *t*-test and the difference between the means of the pretests and posttests.

Table 2. Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 Pre-post-	-9.33333	2.12267	.38755	-24.083	29	.000
	p ≤ 0.05	t-critical 2.045				

As is shown in Table 2, the t observed (-24.083) is much greater than the t -critical (2.045) with the degree of freedom (df) 29. This indicates that the difference between the means of the participants in pretests and posttests is statistically significant. That is, the subjects performed better in post-test than pre-test and this better performance in their oral presentations seems to be, to a great deal, the result of topic familiarity given.

In short, the findings of this study show the fact that when EFL learners can familiarize with different topics they have better oral presentations in their classes. Therefore, the findings of the current study reject the null hypothesis of the research study, i.e. the topic familiarity has no effect on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral presentations. Despite the results of this study, there are some defects and shortcomings. Firstly, the research is conducted on 30 female participants who are not a good representative of all Iranian EFL learners. Secondly, it seems that more research is needed to shed light on the impact of topic familiarity on different speaking assessment tasks for Iranian EFL learners.

5. Conclusions

Research in the area of speaking has shown that topic familiarity makes statistically significant contributions to effective oral productions. Concerning the effect of topic familiarity on speaking, the results are in line with Shabani (2013). In the present study it has been shown that content schemata related to the speaking ability. In other words, the more learners are familiar with the subject matters, the more they are able to speak.

The findings make important theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical contribution is that oral presentation which is related to familiarity with the topic plays a facilitative role in speaking. Moreover, the results have also important implications for EFL teachers and material developers. In TBLT, it can be claimed that if learners are made familiar with the content and organization of passages or well-organized texts with familiar topics are provided, one of the benefits would be the fact that speaking is maximized.

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