

Investigating EFL learners' perception of narrative task difficulty

Masoud Saeedi

(Payam-e-Noor University, Najaf Abad Branch, Iran)
saeedi.tefl@gmail.com

Shirin Rahimi Kazerooni

(MA, Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, Iran)
gmsh60@gmail.com

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate EFL learners' perception of task difficulty. Twenty adult Iranian learners participated in this study on a volunteer basis. Drawing upon current models of task difficulty, the researchers managed to operationally define four oral narrative tasks of varying degrees of complexity. Having performed the tasks, the participants attended a round of retrospective interviews. The qualitative analysis brought to light five major themes. To explore how current models of task difficulty would compare with Skehan's model and Robinson's componential framework. In this regard, the protocols were investigated from a cognitive, information-processing perspective on task-based language teaching and the most relevant implications were discussed.

Keywords: Task-based language teaching; task difficulty; narrative task; resource-directing variables; resource-dispersing variables.

Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, the study of task design and performance conditions has become a burgeoning area of research. In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), a number of researchers have tried to investigate task difficulty, task design, and performance conditions (see for example Ellis, 2003; Robinson, 2001; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Skehan, 1998, 2001). Put differently, identifying different task design

features and performance conditions and understanding the way they influence task performance have concerned researchers over the last two decades or so. However, although a substantial bulk of research has addressed different characteristics and features of task difficulty (TD), particularly in an EFL context, has not been fully investigated. Therefore, the current study attempts to find out whether (and how) adjusting different

aspects of oral narrative task demand alters the way learners perceive the difficulty of narrative tasks (Cf. Saeedi, Ketabi & Dastjerdi, 2011).

Theoretical background

There is a consensus among researchers that defining and determining TD is an overriding consideration in task-based language teaching. If TD is determined, educators will be more likely to have a better understanding of task performance and development. TD can also inform grading and sequencing decisions in a language teaching syllabus (Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1998). Previous research has mainly drawn on variables from a cognitive, information-processing perspective to operationally define TD. This has resulted in different, yet complementary, models for conceptualizing TD.

Defining task difficulty

The earliest conceptualization of TD dates back to the work of Candlin (1987). He argues that the cognitive load, code complexity, and interpretive density of the language to be used should be accounted for in determining the difficulty of tasks. Later, iii ca ee aasss rrr Seaa’’s (1998) operationalization of TD. Drawing Caiiii’’ rrawwwrr rrr add inspired by a cognitive, information-processing perspective on language learning, Skehan proposed a three-layered distinction for the analysis of TD to which learner factors can also be added: code complexity ‘‘ccc all ary aaeety add gggggggg cllll extty a vaeety)), cggttt cllll extty ‘‘faii iiaty ff iii c rrrrrr rr rr ta a aatttt t ff computation and organization and ffff eeecy ff nrrr ooooo cmmncccaiee eeee ‘‘ii rruuee cca’’, eeeee eof aaaaaaa aaaaang ff xxx aaaa ay,,

aaaæ a oooooooocllll ll add aaæee aac eeeeecccccc,, rrr ea ff mrag eer xeeeece’.. The author maintains that evidence should be collected regarding the effects of task manipulation on fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Skehan posits that these three aspects of performance can change if learners are engaged in different types of production and communication. For example, if promoting fluency in the learner is sought by the task designer, he should engage the learner in meaning-oriented tasks; on the other hand, if he wants to promote accuracy or complexity, he should get him involved in more form-focused tasks. Thus, Skehan argues, what must be done is to discover what task types, variables, and dimensions promote fluency, accrracy o cllll extty L2 aaæees performance. In fact, Skehan takes linguistic cllll extty be a ‘‘rrr aaaa’’’’ ff eæee’’ willingness to stretch their interlanguage by experimenting with more difficult forms and by trying out more elaborate language. He further contends that TD is a function of the amount of attention the task demands from aaaaaaa aaaaæea’’ rr eesssssss aee premised on a limited-capacity conception of attention, which suggests that when task demands are high, attention can only be channeled toward certain aspects of performance to the detriment of others. This tension is portrayed in his Trade-off Hypothesis, which predicts that there is a tension between form (complexity and accuracy), on the one hand, and fluency, on the other.

Another controversial model has been put forward by Robinson (2001), who argues that human beings operate with a multiple-resource attentional system. He is of the opinion that human brain has a multiple-resource attentional system, i.e. depletion of

attention in one pool has no effect on the amount remaining in another. In this context, Robinson proposed an operational taxonomy of task characteristics. This Triadic Componential Framework (TCF) distinguishes between three categories of a

Resource-directing dimensions (for example, open vs. closed tasks) and participant variables (for example, same vs. different gender). The second category has to do with individual differences in learner factors, such as working memory capacity, which can have an effect on the extent to which learners evaluate task demands. The last component, task complexity, refers to the cognitive load of tasks, such as their reasoning demands (Robinson, 2011).

The TCF divides task features along two dimensions. *Resource-directing* dimensions of complexity affect allocation of cognitive resources to specific aspects of L2 code. *Resource-dispersing* dimensions, initially implicit knowledge of the L1 concept-structuring function of language becomes gradually explicit and by increasing complexity along these dimensions, do not do this: increasing complexity along these dimensions reduces attentional and memory resources with negative consequences for production, a position which is in agreement with Skehan (1998). As stated by Robinson (2011), despite such negative consequences, progressively increasing complexity along resource-dispersing variables is also important if one wants to approximate the complexity conditions under which real-world tasks are performed.

Task difficulty from learners' perspective

The difficulty of a task can be investigated through learner performance; however, how learners perceive and define TD and what factors contribute to their perceptions of TD is what will broaden the current understandings of this construct and will assist task designers in designing and employing more effective language teaching materials. Although there has been a growing bulk of research investigating the way different task variables, task types, and performance conditions affect TD as well as TD has been somewhat under-researched (Tavakoli, 2009). In fact, few studies have examined TD as viewed by learners themselves.

One of the earliest attempts to investigate reading, listening, and speaking tasks to assess how cognitively demanding they were and why. They identified such factors as lack of familiarity with task types, confusion over task purposes, and cultural knowledge to be the major factors affecting TD.

Elsewhere, Robinson (2001) gave learners the simplified and complex versions of a speaking task; the aim was to investigate their perception of TD. He reported that the learners found the more complex version of the task more difficult and more stressful than the simplified version. Furthermore, the simplified task. As a result, it was concluded cognitive demands of tasks.

In yet another study, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) used retrospective questionnaires to

explore how the structure of oral narrative ed aaæees eerceiii ff ...

The findings of their study suggested that the presence of structure in narrative tasks influenced the perception of TD. Using the same tasks, Tavakoli (2009) had already tried to see why learners would find some tasks more difficult than others. Her study revealed that the understanding of TD is a function of such variables as cognitive and linguistic demands of tasks, amount of information, and task structure.

The present study

Given the small body of research on aaæe'' pecceiii ff T rrrre clealy a need for further research in this area, particularly in an EFL context. Since in previous studies conducted in ESL contexts English was used as the language of data collection, participants might have failed to convey what they had in mind because of their limited proficiency. Furthermore, the findings that address the effects of simultaneously manipulating different dimensions of TD on learner ratings of tasks can increase confidence in making pedagogic decisions. The present study, therefore, attempts to investigate the impact of manipulating cognitive demands of aarraiee Iran LLL leanr'' perception of TD. To this end, four levels of narrative task difficulty were operationalized. In fact, the researchers tried to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1 Do task eegge'' a aaæe'' perception of TD converge?
- 2 Which tasks do learners find more complex and what factors do they consider in their perception of TD?

Participants

The participants in this study were 20 adult Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (13 females and 7 males aged between 18 and 37). On the basis of a locally administered placement test and an oral interview, they were assigned to intermediated-level courses at a language institute in Isfahan, Iran. The participants attended their classes twice a week during a three-month term. None of the learners had ever been to an English-speaking country and they had virtually no opportunity to use English for communicative purposes outside the classroom context. These EFL learners were studying English for a number of reasons including, inter alia, improving their future employment prospects or furthering their careers. They took part in this research study on a volunteer basis.

Tasks

In line with previous research in this area, the researchers decided to use narrative tasks. Narrative tasks – retelling of stories based on sequenced sets of picture prompts – have been widely used in task-based research for a variety of reasons. Such tasks are non-interactive and fairly open to control (Skehan, 2001). Therefore, to answer the research questions posed earlier, four narrative tasks with different degrees of difficulty were used (see appendices).

The first task (*Football*) was simplified along what Robinson (2001) calls the resource-directing dimension of Here/Now and the resource-depleting dimension of planning. In general, previous studies have shown that tasks in the Here/Now are less cognitively demanding than tasks which require talking about displaced, past-time events (see Robinson, 1995). The participants could, therefore, look at the pictures when narrating this picture story in

the present tense. Besides, they were given a ten-minute pre-task planning time to prepare what to say and how to say it as this appears to have become the standard length of pre-task planning time (Ellis, 2009). In addition, this task had a clear macro structure, i.e. there was a clear sequential organization in the pictures such that without compromising the main theme of the story it was quite impossible to rearrange the pictures. According to Skehan and Foster (1999, p. 100), the existence of a clear timeline

The second task (*Picnic*) was kept simple along the resource-directing dimension of Here/Now but made complex by removing pre-task planning time. Like *Football*, this task also had a clear macro structure.

When performing the third task (*Walkman*), the participants were allowed to plan what to say and how to put it in the past tense without visual support. Unlike the first two tasks, however, *Walkman* did not have a clear sequential organization of events. The fourth task (*Unlucky Man*) was made complex along all dimensions. In other words, the learners were required to retell this unstructured picture story in the past tense without provision of visual support (-Here/Now) or pre-task planning time. These four tasks of different levels of difficulty are set out in the following table.

Table 1: Four Narrative Tasks Manipulated along Different Dimensions of Task Difficulty

	Football	Picnic	Walkman	Unlucky Man
Structure	+	+	-	-
Here/Now	+	+	-	-
Planning	+	-	+	-

Procedure

Before the participants were asked to perform the tasks, the purpose of the research was explained to them. Each student took four tasks, one at a time. After performing the four narrative tasks, each learner was interviewed. The researchers audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. To have a better understanding of the interviews, the researchers conducted them in their L1 (Persian). Participants were asked a number of different questions about the picture stories, the difficulty of tasks they performed, and which task they perceived to be more difficult or more interesting. They were also asked to say why they perceived one task to be more difficult than the others and what factors they thought contributed to this difficulty.

Analysis

In order to identify the general themes in the data, a systematic approach to the analysis was employed. To foster reliability, a colleague was asked to sift through the data again to find out whether or not the identified general themes would emerge. The initial emerging themes in the data were compiled, refined, and categorized by using an inductive approach. Extra care was exercised so as not to force the data into the categories proposed by Robinson (2001) and Skehan (1998).

Results

In this section, the findings of the current study are presented with reference to the research questions raised above. With regard to the first research question, the results of

the retrospective interviews indicated that 14 of the learners mentioned *Unlucky Man* as the most difficult task. Five of the participants considered *Walkman* difficult while only one referred to *Football* as more challenging. This demonstrates that the aaæe'' pecceiii add eggge'' interpretation of TD converged. In other words, the most demanding task in the task eeggge'' ppeaaiaaaiizaii ff eeee (*Unlucky Man*) was also considered by most of the learners as the most difficult. The following demonstrative extracts, translated into English, represent the general criteria identified by the researchers when answering the second research question. As shown in these comments, one of the most frequent criteria expressed by the learners was related to a need for necessary vocabulary and certain structures to verbalize what they had in mind:

It is easy to narrate the story [Picnic] in Persian, but because I couldn't remember some of the words [for example, the word "hide"], I couldn't express myself in English well.

The second dominant theme that emerged rr eæe'' reooo eeeed the problem they had experienced when trying to unravel the storyline in *Unlucky Man* and *Walkman*:

This story [Walkman] was vague. I didn't really understand what was going on in the pictures. I didn't get what the story was about. I think it was confusing.

The third frequently mentioned factor cttttttt tt aaiic rceiii of TD concerned the amount of time they needed to plan what to say and how to say it, particularly before retelling *Unlucky Man* and *Picnic*:

I didn't have enough time for telling this story [Unlucky Man]. The story was vague. I think it needs more time to understand. You should give me more time for thinking.

The fourth criterion found was about the processing load that the tasks had imposed on the learners. Most of the learners perceived *Unlucky Man* and *Walkman* to be difficult because they had been required to perform these tasks in the past tense without contextual support. This was specially the case with *Unlucky Man*, where learners were not given any planning time:

I found Unlucky Man the most challenging because I was not allowed to look at the pictures as I was telling the story. Picnic and Football were much easier to narrate because I could see the pictures and tell the story.

The last identified factor contributing to the aaæe'' eeerceiii ff aa hhhh rrrtty ff rrrrr r Vvægeess ff rrrrr r wa eeral times by the participants who had considered *Unlucky Man* and *Walkman* difficult:

I think the most difficult story was Walkman because the pictures were not so clear.

Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of manipulating TD on EFL leaner'' perception of the difficulty of narrative tasks. To be able to answer the research questions raised at the outset of the study, four levels of TD were operationalized by simultaneously manipulating cognitive demands of the tasks in question along the Here/Now, planning time, and task structure variables. The results of the interview data revealed that manipulating cognitive demands of narrative tasks influences EFL

understanding of TD was described in terms of five main categories. On the whole, the difficulty the participants experienced while performing the tasks stemmed from the following:

- a) not being able to access the necessary vocabulary items or structures;
- b) trying to unravel the storyline (*Walkman* and *Unlucky Man*);
- c) needing pre-task planning time to prepare what to say and how to say it;
- d) the processing load; and
- e) the vagueness of pictures.

In general, these are consistent with the ones reported by Tavakoli (2009), where ten ESL learners highlighted almost the same TD criteria identified in this study. Yet, the current study brought to light two additional criteria, namely the processing load imposed on the learners while performing certain tasks and the pre-task planning time they needed. In other words, unstructured tasks performed without visual support (*Walkman* and *Unlucky Man*) were considered more difficult than the other tasks (*Picnic* and *Football*). One may argue that referring to displaced events hinders the process of accessing current interlanguage to retrieve the elements needed for encoding messages. On the other hand, giving learners pre-task planning time facilitates access to interlanguage system which in turn eases the burden of attentional resources.

Such themes can be accounted for with reference to the two dominant TD frameworks proposed by Robinson (2001) and Skehan (1998). As was sketched above,

for Skehan (1998) TD can be analyzed in computation and organization and for Robinson (2001), on the other hand, divides task features along two dimensions: resource-directing dimensions and resource-dispersing dimensions. Robinson hypothesizes that, although increasing TD along the former allocates cognitive resources to specific aspects of L2 code, making tasks more cognitively demanding along the latter reduces attentional and memory resources with negative consequences for production. To clarify, consider the following table:

Table 2: Identified themes and current models of TD

Theme	Skehan’s (1998) scheme	Robinson’s (2001) framework
Need for certain vocabularies and structures	Code complexity	No corresponding category
Difficulty experienced when following unstructured storylines	Information organization	Cognitive factors: resource-directing (Robinson, 2001); resource-dispersing (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007)
Pre-task planning	No corresponding category	Cognitive factors: resource-dispersing
Clarity of pictures	Cognitive Processing (clarity and sufficiency of information given)	No corresponding category
Processing load experienced while performing unplanned tasks without visual support	No corresponding category	Resource-dispersing and resource-directing factors

As shown in the above table, the first identified theme, i.e., the need for certain vocabulary items and target structures needed for encoding messages, though a crucial aspect of TD, is not represented in Robinson (2001). In this respect, Robinson and Gilabert (2007) argue that this aspect of TD is a function of the conceptual/cognitive demands of a task and cannot by itself contribute to TD. By contrast, this factor corresponds to Code Complexity in Seeaa’’ 9999899cche Cccennng eee difficulty in following the unstructured storylines, this theme is represented by Rsssss sssss saeegrr y of Cggttt Facoo More specifically, it has been grouped as a resource-directing factor in Robinson (2001) and a resource-dispersing factor in Robinson and Gilabert (2007). As conceptualized by Skehan, this dimension of TD corresponds fffrrr aazzzaii iiii ii Cognitive Complexity and Cognitive Processing factors. As for the need for pre-task plagggggg ii Rsssss ssss framework, this dimension of task complexity is categorized as a resource-

rrrrr rrrr aac Seeaa’’ cceeme the other hand, there is no corresponding category. Regarding the clarity of pictures, gggggg Rsssss ssssssawwwork there is no corresponding factor available for this eeeee ee Seeaa’’ s 9999899 corresponds to Cognitive Processing. Finally, the processing load the learners experienced while performing the unplanned tasks without visual support can be accounte rrr ee ff Rsssss ssssss000sss resource-dispersing and resource-directing dimensions of TD, respectively.

Conclusion

The current study was an attempt to investigate the impact of manipulating cggttt de aaane’’ understanding of task complexity in an EFL context. Unlike previous studies conducted in an ESL context, in the present study participants were allowed to express themselves in their L1. The contribution that this study makes to the existing literature is the finding that simultaneously manipulating TD along planning time, task structure, and

Here/Now variables can influence EFL learners' perception of task difficulty. In other words, making tasks more demanding along the above-mentioned dimensions is also reflected in learners' perception of TD. This implies that the cognitive demand of tasks is considered by EFL learners as an important factor contributing to TD. This piece of evidence, supported by Taaakii (2000) provides support to the principles of a cognitive task design.

One implication of the findings reported here is that in designing and sequencing pedagogic tasks EFL teachers and task designers should take into account TD as an overriding consideration. In the same way, knowing how learners perceive TD is essential in arriving at a precise evaluation of task design (Samuda, 2001). Additionally, as language testing (LT) research now acknowledges that tasks are of different difficulty levels and appreciates the fact that a hierarchy of task difficulty has to be established, understanding the effects of tasks on the way test-takers interact with and respond to them is essential (Bachman, 2002, p. 471). This strongly suggests that identifying different aspects of task design that determine TD is of paramount importance to LT researchers since an index of task difficulty is essential in selecting appropriate tasks, in providing a more reliable assessment of oral ability, and in improving the validity of interpretations. It should be acknowledged that, given the small number of participants, these findings are only suggestive and, therefore, caution must be taken in making any generalizations on the basis of the results obtained here. Additionally, it is not yet clear whether manipulating the complexity of other task types along other task variables would

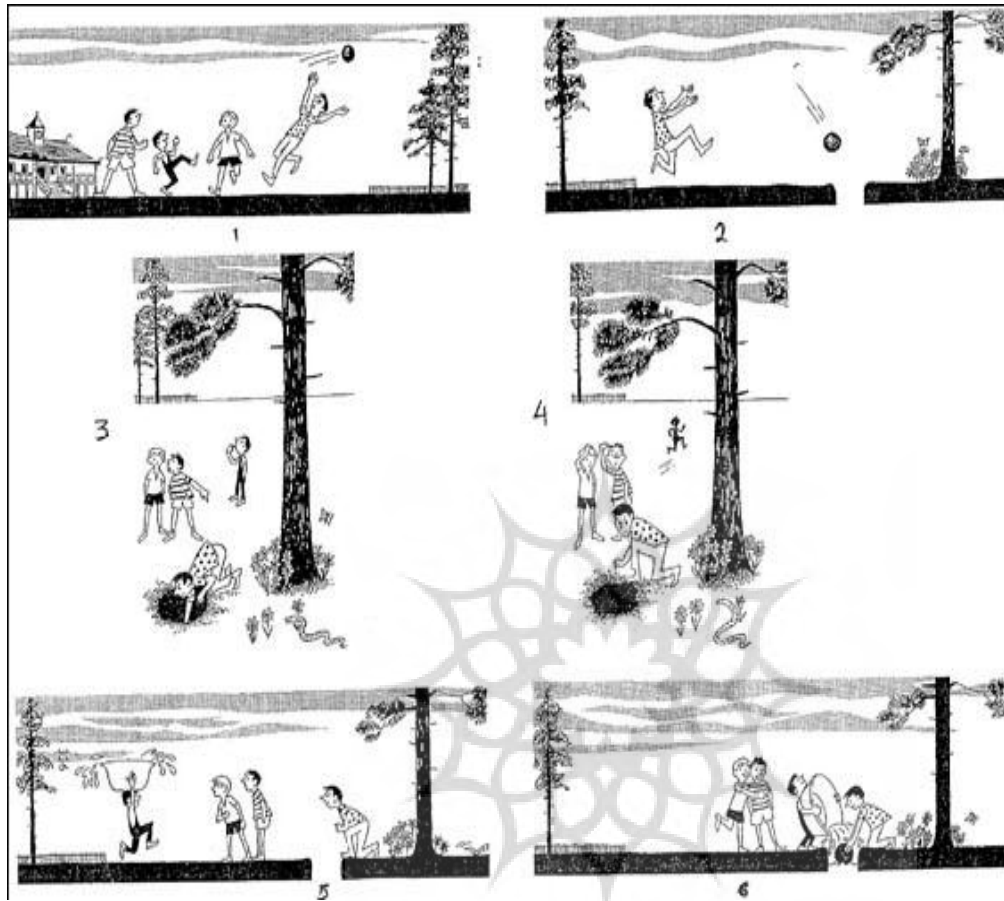
confirm the findings of this study. Hence, further research is needed to investigate the potential effects of other task types and complexity dimensions on learners' perception of TD.

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Football



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Walkman



1



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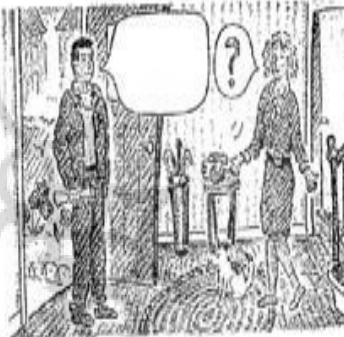
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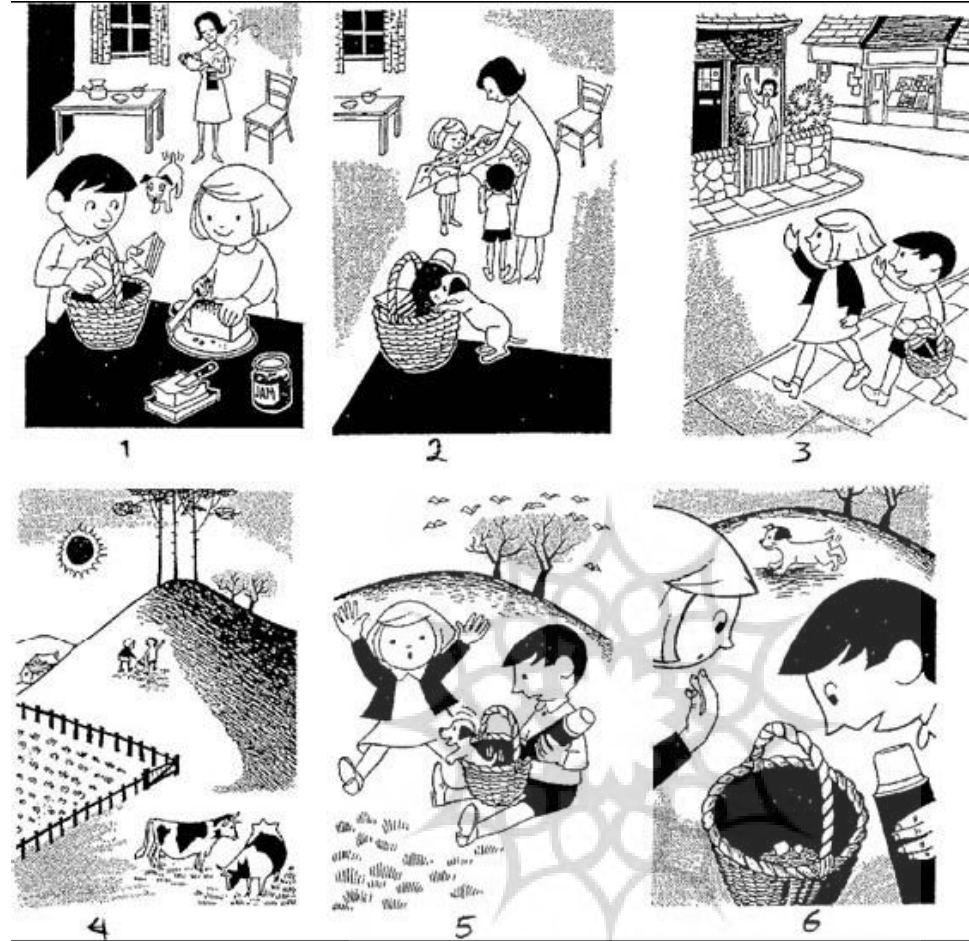
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Picnic

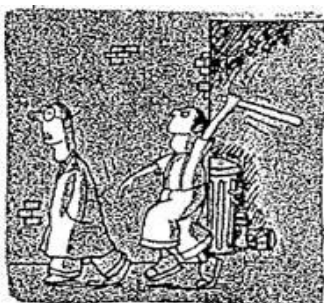


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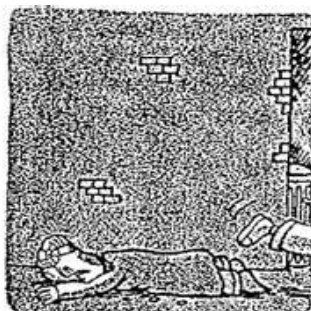
Unlucky man



1



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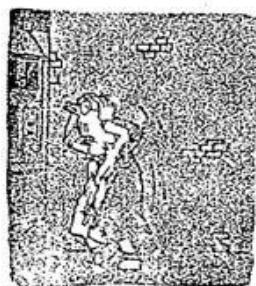
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