

A Study of Task-based Approach: The Effects of Task-based Techniques, Gender, and Different Levels of Language Proficiency on Speaking Development

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Abstract

The present research was an attempt to provide new evidence for the efficacy of task-based techniques to speaking proficiency development. The primary focus of the study was to investigate the effects of task-based techniques on speaking proficiency development. In the second place, it tried to scrutinize the effect of gender on speaking proficiency development under task-based principles of language teaching. In better words, the study is an attempt to find out which gender group would become more proficient in speaking after the task-based course came to an end. The study also tried to put possible different effects of task-based approach on foreign language learners of different levels of language proficiency under focus. Accordingly, the participants were categorized into two categories of 81, as the control and the experimental groups of the study. In continuation, each category was divided into two groups of males and females and finally, each male and female group of each category was classified into two classes of intermediate and advanced. In this way, each of the control and the experimental group contained some intermediate and some advanced male and female language learners. In order to determine whether task-based techniques to teaching speaking were effective and also to figure out which gender and proficiency level had a higher degree of improvement in speaking under task-based approach, a set of independent sample t-tests were conducted. Furthermore, in order to comment on the possible interaction between gender and different levels of language proficiency, a two-way ANOVA (MANOVA) was also conducted. It was found that the students of the experimental group, who experienced task-based principles of teaching speaking, performed remarkably better than those of the control group on the final speaking post-test. It was also concluded that gender was not a determining factor in speaking development under task-based approach but difference in language proficiency levels was shown to be an influential factor in speaking development since advanced language learners of the experimental group had performed ostensibly better than those of intermediate learners of the same group on the final speaking post-test. Ultimately, it was deduced that there was not a meaningful interaction between gender and different levels of language proficiency for a better development of speaking ability. In other words, it was not possible to determine a specific pattern of interaction between them by their simultaneous presence in the study.

Key Words: Task, Task-based approach, Information-gap task, Opinion-gap task, Independent sample t-test.

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1- Introduction

Speaking is so much a part of our daily life that we tend to take it for granted. However, learning speaking whether as a first or second language, involves developing a subtle and detailed knowledge about why, how and when to communicate and to produce complex skills for managing interaction, such as asking a question or taking a turn. One of the most important aspects of everyday talk is that it always takes place in cultural and social contexts. We speak in order to carry out various social tasks and, although we may not always be consciously aware of doing so, we attune our language and the meanings we wish to exchange to our specific purposes for speaking within the context. Having these pre-requisites at the back of his mind, the researcher considered task-based language teaching and learning for two main reasons. One was his personal commitment to a form of teaching that treats language primarily as a tool of communication rather than an object for study or manipulation. Clearly, if learners are to develop the competence they need to use a foreign language easily and effectively in situations they encounter outside the classroom, they need to experience how language is used as a tool for communication inside the class. "Task" serves as the most obvious means for urbanizing teaching along these lines. The second reason was his wish to see how second language acquisition develops not just as an autonomous discipline (it seems that it clearly has moved in this direction during the last decade) but also as an applied area of study.

1-1 Definitions of key terms

The following lines contain the definitions of tasks which have been proposed for teaching speaking by Rod Ellis (2003) and practiced by experimental students during the course of the present study. Nearly all of his proposed tasks can be categorized into three main categories; information-gap tasks, opinion-gap tasks and reasoning-gap tasks.

1-1-1 Information-gap task

An information-gap task is a task in which one participant holds the information that the other participants do not have and that must be exchanged in order to complete the task. There are two types of these tasks; jigsaw tasks and two-way tasks. These tasks are considered as the examples of information-gap tasks in the literature, in which the input material is divided between two or more participants in such a way that they are required to exchange information to complete the task. (*ibid.*)

1-1-2 Opinion-gap task

These tasks require the participants to exchange opinions on some controversial issues while the participants are likely to hold different views. There are three types of tasks in the literature which are introduced as the examples of opinion-gap tasks: convergent tasks, open tasks and divergent tasks.

Convergent tasks require students to agree on a solution to a specified problem. In divergent tasks students are assigned different viewpoints on an issue and they have to defend their positions and refute their peers'. Open tasks are those in which participants know that there is not a predetermined solution to the focused problem but they try to find a reasonable one. (*ibid.*)

1-1-3 Reasoning-gap task

A reasoning-gap task is a task which requires the participants to engage in reasoning, such as synthesizing the provided information and deducing new facts in order to perform it successfully. Prabhu (1987) distinguishes reasoning-gap from information-gap and opinion-gap tasks. In his opinion, reasoning-gap tasks need a more sophisticated linguistic knowledge than those of information-gap and opinion-gap. (*ibid.*)

1-2 Research questions

The study was an attempt to answer the following questions:

1- Does the application of task-based approach to teaching speaking have any effect on the speaking proficiency of male and female learners of English?

2- Is there any difference in terms of speaking proficiency development between male and female learners of English who have experienced task-based techniques to teaching speaking during a semester?

3- Is there any difference in terms of the degree of progression between intermediate and advanced English learners of the same gender under task-based approach of teaching speaking?

1-2 Research hypotheses

According to the mentioned research questions, the following null hypotheses were formed:

H01: The application of task-based approach to teaching speaking has no effect on the speaking proficiency of either male or female.

H02: There is no difference in terms of the degree of speaking proficiency development between male and female learners of English who have experienced task-based approach to teaching speaking during a semester.

H03: There is no difference in terms of the degree of progression between intermediate and advance learners of the same gender under task-based approach of teaching speaking.

2- Literature review

2-1 Task definition

One commonly encountered use of the word "task" refers to meaning-focused activities, such as projects, problem-solving, and stimulations. For a general framework to analyze any set of language learning materials, however, this definition would be too narrow, since it will be inapplicable to materials which are not meaning-focused. An alternative broader definition is proposed by Breen (1987) as follows "...task refers to any proposal contained within the materials for action to

be undertaken by the learners, which has the direct aim of bringing about the learning of the foreign language (p.128)."

Such a definition has the virtue of recognizing that there are many different routes to classroom language learning, from stimulations to choral repetition, while at the same time excluding work that is not directly related to language learning_ for example, copying a chart as a preparation for a listening comprehension exercise. In practical terms, however, it is not always easy to determine the aim of a proposed classroom action and it is for this reason that we should use our ability for inference.

2-2 Tasks in language pedagogy

There has been a growing interest in the idea of a task as a unit for developing language curricula. This interest has been stimulated by work in second language acquisition which supports Corder's (1967) early claim that learners have their own "built-in-syllabus" which is in the same way more efficient than the instructor-generated sequence.

Thus, a syllabus that specifies the linguistic content and the order in which it is to be taught may not accord with the learner's built-in syllabus. One way around this problem is to specify the content of syllabus in terms of tasks which indicate in broad terms what learners will communicate about and the procedures they will follow to do so, but which do not attempt to specify explicitly the actual language that is to be used or learnt.

Task-based language teaching, therefore, is predicated on the principle that having learners perform tasks which help them to develop knowledge and skill in the second language in accordance with the way their own language learning mechanisms work. Tasks function as devices for creating the conditions required for language acquisition. According to one body of theory, learners need opportunities to engage in meaning negotiation in order to obtain the kind of input that works for acquisition and to experience occasions when they are pushed to use the second language more precisely and appropriately.

2-3 The rationale for task-based courses

The theoretical bases of task-based teaching and learning have been discussed in some detail in the following lines. Here, therefore, the researcher focused on the specific reasons that researchers/educationalists have given for advocating task-based instruction and the critical response they have received.

Traditionally, the content of a language course has been specified in terms of the linguistic items to be taught. The type of syllabus that was extracted from this approach to course design has been variously labeled, for example, “synthetic” by Wilkins (1976) and “linguistic” by Ellis (2003). A linguistic syllabus from Ellis’ point of view focuses on what is to be learned; it is interventionist and external to the learner. Traditionally, it consisted of a graded list of grammatical structures. Structural approach is also used to refer a type of approach associated with methods like *Audiolingualism*. White (1988) mentioned that Structural syllabuses in this sense often use the 'sentence pattern' as the unit of analysis, and may be said to adhere, albeit somewhat loosely, to the principles of structuralism, particularly the notion of minimally contrasting units. An alternative approach, based on theories of communicative competence and functional grammar involved identifying the linguistic exponents for performing notions and functions. Developed partly as a reaction to overemphasis on structural teaching, notional/ functional approach was associated with the *Council of Europe* team, particularly David Wilkins. In the Council's model, syllabus content would be generally arrived at by a process of *Needs Analysis*, which identified notions and functions to be taught. However, the notional/functional approach is still essentially a linguistic syllabus as it involves specifying the linguistic content to be taught which is interventionist and external to the learner. Thus, the shift from structural to notional/functional syllabus does not involve any radical rethinking about the basic type of syllabus, although it did make it easier to design courses based on learners’ needs, as it could be specified much more clearly in terms of notions and functions.

2-4 A framework for task-based course design

Figure 2-1 identifies the key elements in the construction of a task-based course. The figure shows that the construction of a task-based syllabus requires the specification of tasks to be included in the syllabus. To achieve this it is helpful to classify tasks in terms of their type, to determine their thematic content and then to sequence them using appropriate criteria for grading their levels of difficulty for the learner. This will suffice in the preparation of a task-based syllabus consisting entirely of linguistically unfocused tasks. However, an optional element in the framework is the specification of the features of language that are the forms and the functions of the language to be incorporated into the design of the syllabus.

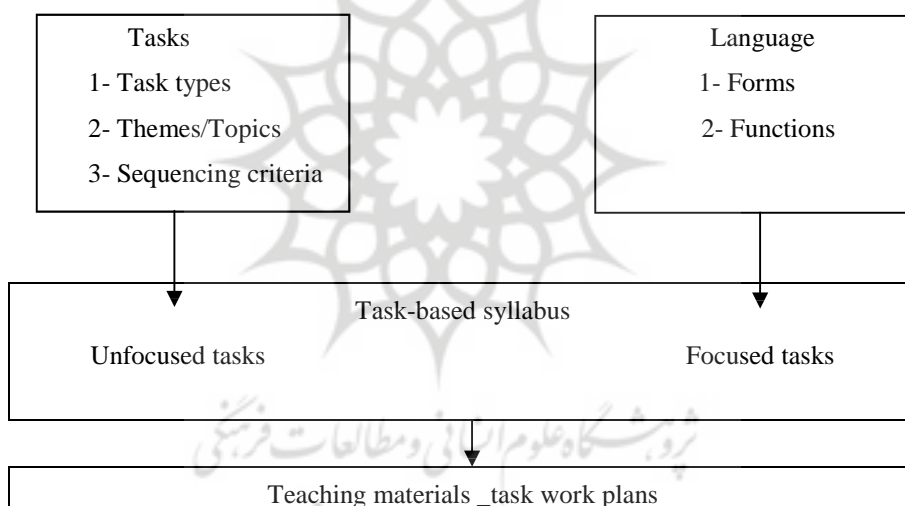


Figure2.1: Designing a task-based course. *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*, Ellis, 2003, (p. 96)

If this option is chosen, the result will be a syllabus consisting entirely of linguistically focused tasks or, possibly, of mixture of focused and unfocused tasks. Such a syllabus introduces a focus on form into a meaning centered curriculum; that is the syllabus consists of tasks as described previously but also allows for the systematic treatment of linguistic form. In such a case, consideration needs to be given to both the sequencing of the task and the linguistic content. Finally, figure 2.1

shows that the syllabus serves as a basis for the preparation of materials in the form of task work plans.

2-7 Evaluation of task-based pedagogy

This section is a general framework for classifying different types of language tests related to task-based pedagogy. This framework enables us to pinpoint the essential characteristics of task-based evaluation approach and to distinguish two methods to accomplishing it.

Following Baker (1989), a general distinction can be made between system-referenced tests and performance-referenced tests. System-referenced tests assess knowledge of language as a system. As Baker put it, "...their aim is to provide information about language proficiency in a general sense without reference to any particular use or situation."

Thus, tests belonging to psychometric and integrative paradigms are system-referenced. Performance-referenced tests, in contrast, seek to provide information about the ability to use the language in specific contexts; they are directed at assessing a particular performance, for example, the ability of a trainee pilot to understand and respond to messages from the control tower when landing an aircraft. Thus, whereas system-referenced tests are more construct-oriented, drawing on some explicit theory of language proficiency, performance-referenced tests are more content-oriented.

System-referenced and performance-referenced tests can be both more or less direct/indirect. The second distinction concerns the relationship between a test performance and the criterion performance. Direct tests are holistic in nature and aim at obtaining a contextualized sample of the testee's use of language. The measure of proficiency obtained from such tests is not an integral part of the testee's performance but has to be derived from it, for example, by obtaining an external rating. Indirect tests are less contextualized and, arguably, more artificial. Such tests are based on an analysis of the criterion performance in order to obtain measures of the specific features that comprise it.

3- Method

3-1 Subjects

The researcher worked in two English institutes called Parsa and Allame-Ghotb- Ravandi and taught speaking to 162 English learners of both genders who were at different levels of proficiency; intermediate and advanced. Intermediate language learners had experienced at least 3 years of English learning and had passed the first three books of Interchange series (Intro, 1, 2 volumes), while advanced language learners who had experienced learning English more than three years, were the students of an intensive speaking course and had passed all the course books of interchange series (Intro, 1, 2, and 3 volumes). The researcher, well-aware of the design of his study, painstakingly, picked four female and four male classes while the classes of each gender consisted of two advanced and two intermediate speaking classes. In this way, inspired by intact group design (Hatch and Farhady 1981), the need for a pre-test which is used to figure out pre-existing differences among language learners was satiated.

Firstly, the students were categorized into two categories of 81, as the control and experimental groups of the study. Secondly, each category was divided into two groups of males and females and thirdly, each male and female group of each category was classified into two classes of intermediate and advanced. In this way, each of the control and the experimental groups contained some intermediate and some advanced male and female language learners.

3-2 Materials

As expressed previously, three types of suggested tasks were fulfilled through the term in order to improve the speaking proficiency of the experimental group students. *Convergent tasks* (such as deciding what items to take on a deserted island or deciding on the needed items for a fishing trip), *divergent tasks* (such as discussing political issues or debating on the advantages and disadvantages of having a satellite receiver), *jigsaw tasks* which are very similar to two-way tasks,

(such as doing a puzzle or filling out an application form), and *open tasks* (such as proposing some solutions for the improvement of the educational system or deciding on solutions for some family problems), and *reasoning-gap tasks* (such as reasoning about English learning or discussing the reasons of decrease of marriage in our society) were some examples of the tasks which students practiced during the term.

In better words, considering the nature of the existing conversations in students' course-books, appropriate information-gap tasks (jigsaw), opinion-gap tasks (convergent and divergent tasks), and reasoning-gap tasks were planned by the researcher and practiced by the students in the classroom during the course of the study.

In this way, male and female English learners of the experimental group experienced a set of productive tasks in which, language is not regarded as an object of study or manipulation but as a means of communication. In contrast, students of the control group mostly experienced memorization, repetition of conversations and blank-filling exercises of the course books.

3-3 Procedure

As expressed before, subjects who studied at different levels of the two previously introduced institutes were divided into two groups of control and experimental, each group was then categorized into two groups of males and females and then, male and female groups were classified into intermediate and advanced classes. In this way, the researcher had access to 8 groups of language learners. At the very first session of the term two speaking examinations, one for intermediate and one for advanced language learners, were conducted on some oral tasks similar to those which were practiced during the term, not as the pre-test but as the speaking proficiency certification of the students or as a proxy which determines extremers (those whose performances result in large variances). The students were marked according to a chart proposed in "testing language skills" by Farhady, Birjandi, and Jafarpour (1994) which considers structure, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension for evaluation of speaking. Those students of the experimental group

who received one-fourths or below of the total mark, were determined as extremists but were not separated from the others. In order to avoid the effect of large variances their post-test results were not considered.

At the end of the term, when a set of oral tasks was administered to the students of the experimental group, two other speaking examinations similar to those of the pre-test (not exactly the same) were conducted as the post-test.

4- Data analysis

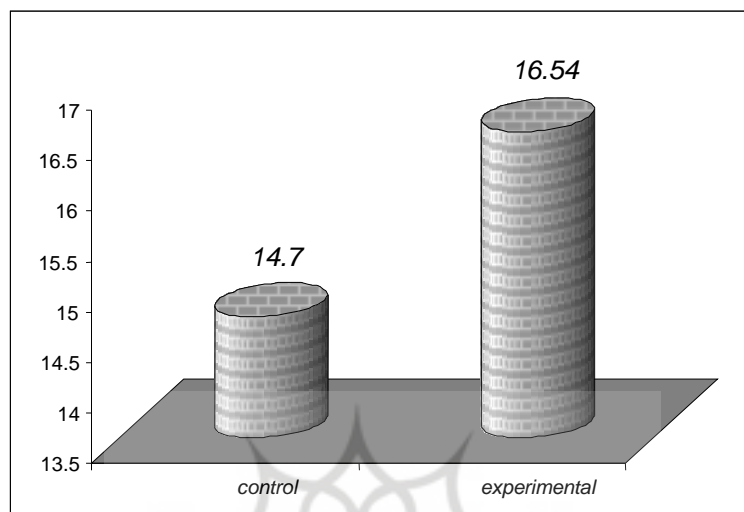
The most reasonable way to concentrate on the efficacy of task-based approach was obtaining the means of both control and experimental language learners on the post-test and then comparing them.

Regardless of gender and different levels of language proficiency the mean of 80 learners of the control group who did not experience task-based approach was compared with the mean of 80 learners of the experimental group who experienced task-based approach for speaking development.

Table 1. T-test table of the efficacy of task-based approach

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Scores	Equal variances assumed	12.416	.001	-7.860	158	.000	-1.83750	.23379
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.860	138069	.000	-1.83750	.23379

As it is clear in table 1, task-based approach functioned effectively in speaking development of language learners ($t(158) = -7.860$ and the critical "sig." value is less than 0.05 ($P = 0.00 < 0.05$ even less than 0.01). So, there was a meaningful difference between performances of language learners of the two groups. Language learners of the experimental group performed remarkably better than those of the control group in the final test on speaking.



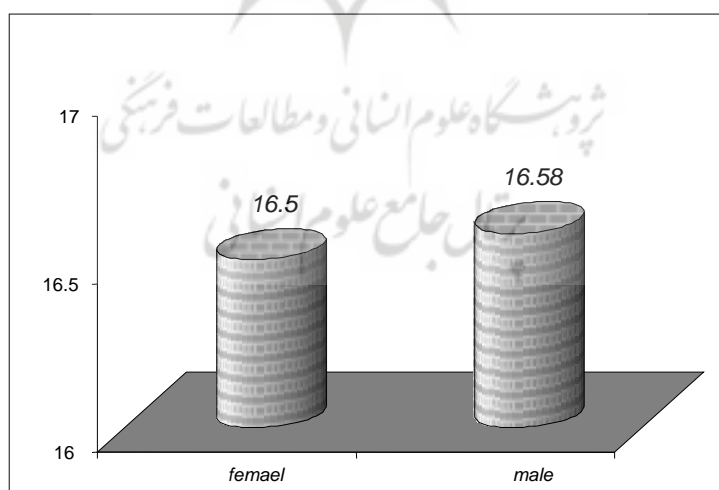
So, the first hypothesis which claimed that the application of task-based approach toward teaching has no effect on the speaking proficiency development of English learners was rejected, because task-based approach was shown to be an influential instrument in teachers' hands for developing speaking proficiency of learners.

One of the fundamental purposes of the present study was to investigate the role of gender under task-based approach. This time, regardless of levels of language proficiency, the mean of 40 female learners of the experimental group on the speaking post-test was compared with the mean of 40 male learners of the experimental group. The mean-comparison of these two groups that experienced task-based principles for speaking development provided the researcher with a reasonable instrument for the study of the role of gender.

Table 2. T-test table of the role of gender under task-based approach

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Scores	Equal variances assumed	1.195	.278	-.334	78	.739	-.08750	.26183
	Equal variances not assumed			-.334	75.600	.739	-.08750	.26183

Considering table 2, ($t(78) = -.334$ and the critical "sig." value which is more than 0.05 ($P = 0.739 > 0.05$), it was found that there was not a meaningful difference between the performances of male and female learners of the experimental group under task-based approach. So, based on the results of this study, gender did not have a determining effect on the success of language learners. Male and female learners had approximately close marks on the speaking post-test and the difference between their performances was not salient if there was any.



So, the second hypothesis which claimed that there is no difference in terms of speaking development between males and females who experienced task-based approach of teaching speaking was confirmed. Gender was shown to be an insignificant variable for the success under task-based approach based on the obtained results of the study.

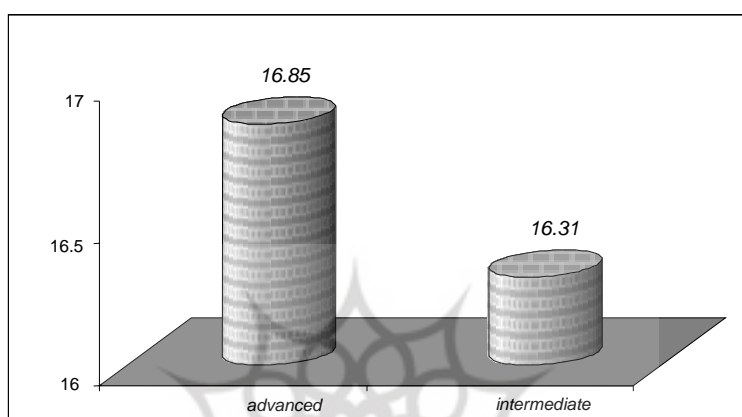
Another aim of the research was to study the effect of different levels of language proficiency on the degree of progression under task-based approach. For obtaining an answer to this case, firstly, regardless of the gender of the language learners, the mean of 40 experimental intermediate learners was compared with the mean of 40 experimental advanced learners on the pre-test. The results showed that there was not a meaningful difference ($P=0.23$) between the performances these two groups of language learners before they undergo task-based principles of teaching speaking. Secondly, the means of these two groups on the final post-test were compared. The mean-comparison of these two groups, on the post-test, provided the researcher with an agreeable instrument for the investigation of the influence of different levels of language proficiency on the degree of progression under task-based approach.

Table 3. T-test table of the role of different proficiency levels under task-based approach

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	
scores	Equal variances assumed	.235	.629	-2.097	78	.039	-.53750	.25626
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.097	78.000	.039	-.53750	.25626

The results showed that there was a meaningful and significant difference between the performances of intermediate and advanced learners of the experimental

group. So, based on results, different levels of language proficiency had a determining effect on the degree of progression of language learners under task-based approach.



Advanced students of the experimental group performed noticeably better than those of intermediate level. In other words, different levels of language proficiency seemed to be influential on the degree of improvement under task-based approach while speaking development is under investigation.

It is possible to integrate the second and third question of the research and investigate the interactional influence of gender and different levels of language proficiency of language learners under task-based approach. In order to do so, a two-way ANOVA was applied to see whether the two above-mentioned variables interact with each other for a better development of speaking ability under task-based approach.

Table 4. Two-way ANOVA table of interactional influence of gender and different language proficiency levels under task-based approach

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	6.684(a)	3	2.228	1.668	.181
Intercept	21995.028	1	21995.028	16463.101	.000
G2	.528	1	.528	.395	.531
G3	5.778	1	5.778	4.325	.041
G2 * G3	.378	1	.378	.283	.596
Error	101.538	76	1.336		
Total	22103.250	80			
Corrected Total	108.222	79			

Considering table 4, (F-G2 (1, 76) = 0.395; P = 0.531. F-G3 (1, 76) = 4.325; P = 0.41. F-G2,G3 (1, 76) = 0.283; P = 0.596) in addition to certification of previous results, it can be claimed that there was not a meaningful interaction between gender and different levels of language proficiency for a better development of speaking ability. In other words, these two variables behave separately or independently under task-based approach. In fact, considering the results of the present study, it would not be possible to determine a specific pattern of interaction between these two elements by their simultaneous presence in the study.

5- Conclusion

Better performance of the students of the experimental group which was determined by the mean-comparison with those of the control group, was somehow anticipated by the researcher observing the strongly motivated learners of the experimental group who also showed a higher degree of openness to experience during the course of the study than the students of the control group. Experimental students showed a higher inclination to negotiate meaning or to establish a sound communication with the aim of innovative expressions and gestures compared to

students of the control group who preferred to use memorized bits of language or formulaic expressions. One of the most salient privileges of task-based approach seems to be that language development of students of the experimental group is socially driven which corresponds to Vygotskian accounts of language learning

Gender is one of the most influential variables in nearly all of social phenomena. Language as a basic social phenomenon is not an exception. Under many language teaching and learning approaches, the superiority of females has been delineated. Most of neurolinguistic experimentations relate this female superiority in second or foreign language learning to the more engaging left hemisphere which is believed to have the responsibility of language development Lange and Crooks (1998). Considering the critical role of experience, task-based approach exploits the right hemisphere in addition to the left, dissimilar to most classical approaches used for second or foreign language development.

To the researcher's best knowledge, this fact can correspond to different cognitive and psycholinguistic differences between two groups of students. Advanced learners who can be placed in higher levels of cognitive and psychological readiness, seem to establish more meaningful relationships with task-based techniques which are strongly social, cognitive and psychological. Compared to intermediates, they seem to have powerful capacities for deriving linguistic patterns from real-life speaking practices. Intermediate language learners having a less developed cognition and world knowledge might be suspicious of the efficiency of task-based techniques for acquiring language, in which performing an unrelated social activity is needed for developing their second or foreign language.

To recapitulate, task-based techniques which are socially and humanistically driven seemed to be quite influential on the development of speaking proficiency especially for those of advanced who were in higher cognitive and psychological levels, while gender seemed to have an insignificant effect on speaking ability development under task-based approach.

5-1 Implications

Based on the statistical results of the study, these implications are noticing:

- Experimental students showed a higher inclination to negotiate meaning or to establish a sound communication with the aim of innovative expressions and gestures compared to students of the control group who preferred to use memorized bits of language or formulaic expressions.
- Considering the critical role of experience, task-based approach exploits the left hemisphere in addition to the right, dissimilar to most classical approaches used for second or foreign language development.
- An intermediate language learner having a less developed cognition and world knowledge might be suspicious of the efficiency of task-based techniques for acquiring language, in which performing an unrelated social activity is needed for developing their second or foreign language. Task-based techniques of language development which were socially and humanistically driven seemed to be quite influential on the development of speaking proficiency, especially for advanced language learners who were in higher levels of cognitive and psychological readiness.

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