

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF TOPIC FAMILIARITY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

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Abstract:

Activities with distinct design characteristics. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of comprehensive research into the roles played by different types of tasks. To address that gap, this study used CAF (complexity, accuracy, and fluency) to evaluate sixty ESL students' oral performance and examined how task repetition and subject familiarity impacted their results. Four monologic tasks were given to participants after they were interviewed using stimulated recollection. The results show that by doing the same tasks repeatedly, participants could improve their CAF and use known content to create speech with increased structural complexity. Task repetition, which emphasizes grammatical encoding and lexical options, and topic familiarity appear to facilitate conceptualization. An additional way to enhance CAF was to restate previously discussed content. Since content familiarity and task repetition are two components of topic familiarity, these results suggest that instructors may wish to consider utilising task repetition to acquaint students with new subjects.

Introduction:

Because of its centrality to academic success, professional opportunities, and further education, developing fluency in spoken and written English has long been an objective for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) (Long, 2015). After all these years of trying, many students still have difficulty speaking English properly. Some learners struggle to use appropriate expressions in real-life circumstances, even after mastering English grammar and vocabulary. In English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, when students have few opportunities to practice their language skills outside of class, this may be an even bigger problem. Consequently, educators must help their students acquire the form-meaning speaking abilities necessary for effective communication (Baker & Westrup, 2003).

It is suggested that language instructors adopt task-based methods, which employ instructional activities to cultivate proficiency in communication (Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1996). In this approach, students strive toward a communicative objective using meaning-focused and informationally-gapped tasks (Ellis, 2003). Tasks have been the subject of research that has looked at their functions and offered practical approaches to implement them in second language (L2) classes (Bygate, 2001; Bui, 2014). However, several design and implementation factors remain unexplored, and the interplay between them is hardly discussed in the research that has examined them. As a result, educators could encounter unknowns while preparing lessons. The relationship between task design, speaking processes, task performance and learners' focus and memory can be explored through a processing approach to researching pedagogic tasks, as proposed by Skehan (2014). This study expands upon Levelt's (1989) speaking model by investigating how content familiarity as a task design variable and task repetition as an implementation variable influence the speaking performance of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. The term "content familiarity" is used to describe the extent to which students already know the subject matter (Carrell, 1987), whereas "task repetition"

means teaching the same material to the same students multiple times. Mackey et al. (2007) found that learners get familiar with the speech material through both prior knowledge and task repetition. Therefore, both elements are interrelated dimensions of topic familiarity. Furthermore, the study will investigate the interplay between these factors and their effects on oral output.

Levelt's Model for Second Language Speech

One of the things that has made Levelt's speaking model (1989, 1999) stand out is how well it aligns with task-based approaches (Skehan, 2018). Taking a more optimistic view on public speaking, Levelt's model has gained much attention (de Bot, 1992; Kormos, 2006) in contrast to models that highlight mistakes. According to Levelt, conceptualization occurs before a language learner chooses to speak by retrieving and structuring pertinent concepts from memory. Preverbal communication, or output, conveys meaning without yet using language (de Bot, 1992). A learner's ability to articulate speech is contingent upon their ability first to activate lemmas, which are syntactic representations linked to lexical concepts, in the mental lexicon during the grammatical encoding stage. The student keeps tabs on their speech and adjusts as they go along.

Bilingual or second-language speakers were eventually included in Levelt's model, which was originally developed for monolingual speakers (de Bot, 1992). The oral production stages of bilingual speakers are often sequential, meaning that they finish one stage before moving on to the next, in contrast to the simultaneous stages of monolingual speakers. When introducing oneself, a second-language speaker must first choose the content (her name, for instance) and then activate individual words to convey that information. She forms phrases, sentences, and explicit speech using the terms. She repeats the same steps sequentially for her subsequent overt speaking after the first round of speech creation. On the other hand, a native (L1) speaker processes both her first and second overt presentations concurrently because of automaticity. Concepts from semantic memory and L1 and L2 episodic memory are activated when L2 speakers conceptualise (Kormos, 2011). During the lexical, syntactic, phonological, and phonetic encoding stages, both the speaker's native language and their second language are activated; however, the speaker's second language competency level determines how much competition there is for selection. More research into the model and how it might be adjusted to L2 task performance is necessary in light of these unique features of bilingual speakers or L2 production.

Task design elements can be linked to the Leveltian model, according to Skehan (2018), who asserted that the model serves as an effective framework for analysing the cognitive processes of L2 oral production. Research by Wang (2014) on the use of online preparation and repetition by EFL students led her to the conclusion that when students practice the same oral tasks over and over again, they go through the stages of conceptualisation, formulation, and articulation. Skehan postulated that familiarity with the material might reduce the conceptualizer's cognitive burden and that task repetition could aid in conceptualisation and formulation processes.

Two main tools have been used to study the connections between cognitive processes, task design characteristics, and task effects. The more common tool is the CAF, which measures complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Changes in CAF under various settings may be attributable to variations in learners' attention orientation, according to prior research (Bui, 2014; Wang, 2014) that examined the impact of task design elements on L2 oral production. Several studies have recorded the speakers' stimulated recalls of their inner thoughts to study how task elements impact learners' attention orientation and achieve methodological triangulation (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). Retroactive claims that task repetition reduced conceptualiser cognitive burden and focused participants' attention on syntax triangulated with the conclusion that EFL learners' accuracy rose with task repetition in Fukuta's (2016) study. The researchers in this study used these two tools to understand better how learners' oral production was affected by task characteristics.

Content familiarity

When students speak about topics they are already familiar with, it is called "content familiarity" (Carrell, 1987,16). Whether or not students have background knowledge on a subject determines how familiar or unfamiliar a topic is. Thinking about students' prior knowledge of the subject matter is

crucial when developing a task; the element in question has Robinson classified it as a factor that distributes resources because it might make tasks more complex due to a lack of prior information. Topic familiarity improves second language (L2) reading and listening comprehension (Leeser, 2004; Markham & Latham, 1987), but the impact of subject familiarity on oral production has received less attention.

The impact of subject familiarity on second language learning and instruction is still debatable, while some studies have shown that it positively affects second language production (Bui, 2014; Bui & Huang, 2018; Lambert & Robinson, 2014). In two monologic tasks, Bui (2014) looked at the effects of content familiarity on the speech production of 80 ESL students. We asked our participants, who were all pre-med or pre-CS majors, to explain medical viruses and computer viruses, respectively. Based on their results, Bui concluded that students could describe viruses within their fields with higher fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speech. This familiarity with the material may have helped them during the ideation and formulation processes. Phung (2017) and Qiu and Lo (2018) both assert that second language learners' emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement in task performance is enhanced by subject familiarity. In contrast to previous research, Khabbazzashi (2015) found that known themes did not significantly influence speech production (small effect sizes). Analyzing the oral output of ten themes picked from the IELTS speaking test and the learners' familiarity with those topics did not significantly alter their test scores. Consequently, she argued that utilizing familiar and unknown participants in language exams did not provide many conclusions. These conflicting results highlight the need for additional study to determine the relationship between topic familiarity and task performance.

Repetition of Tasks:

Repeating activities with different processes and traits may impact the ability to produce speech in a second language. Researchers have shown that while students are more likely to concentrate on language form and increase their CAF through exact task repetition (same procedure, same content), procedural repetition (same procedure, different content) enhances syntactic complexity (Fukuta, 2016; Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013). Lambert et al. (2016) state that practicing the same tasks with varied interlocutors can help build language fluency.

This study highlights repetitive tasks involving the same data for the same target audience. While it is widely accepted that practicing a task to a high degree improves second language speech production, the exact extent to which this is true is debatable (Bygate, 2001; Wang, 2014). Bygate (2001) asserts that fluency and accuracy in second language (L2) oral performance are enhanced with exact task repetition. According to Wang (2014), it enhanced all three aspects of CAF for L2 learners. Improvements in accuracy and lexis were noted by Fukuta (2016). This research suggests that as students perform tasks accurately, their attention moves to form (Van de Guchte et al., 2016). According to reports from EFL learners looking back, task repetition helped automate speech production, free up conceptualization, and focus more on syntactic encoding (Fukuta, 2016)..

Task repetition and subject familiarity may interact with proficiency in speaking a second language. Qiu and Lo (2018) found that when EFL students repeat tasks with unfamiliar subjects instead of familiar ones, they are more invested in task performance. This is likely because they perceive more opportunities to enhance their fluency and accuracy. Whether they can improve their oral production has received minimal attention. This study uses the Leveltian model to examine how task repetition and content familiarity affect EFL learners' speech production. This is driven by the fact that there is a dearth of data regarding the interplay between these two factors and contradictory results regarding their effects.

The Study:

Content familiarity (familiar vs. unknown themes) and task repetition (first vs. second performance) were two independent variables within the participants in this experimental study's 2×2 full-factorial design. Task complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) were used to evaluate the dependent variable, EFL learners' performance. Three research questions and their associated hypotheses guided the study's design.

1. How does subject familiarity influence the complexity, correctness, and fluency of oral production in monologic tasks for EFL learners? When it comes to attention orienting, how does content familiarity play a role?

Hypothesis 1: As subject familiarity helps the conceptualisation stage (Skehan, 2018), it is expected that participants will exhibit higher levels of complexity, accuracy, and fluency when speaking about familiar issues (prior knowledge) as opposed to new topics (-prior knowledge) (Bui, 2014).

2. How does task repetition impact the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of oral production in monologic tasks for EFL learners? What effects does task repetition have on the focus of one's attention?

Hypothesis 2: Theoretically, because task repetition concentrates attention on the formulation step (Hawkes, 2012), participants' subsequent performances should be more sophisticated, precise, and fluent than their first attempts (Fukuta, 2016; Wang, 2014).

3. How do task repetition and subject familiarity influence the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of EFL learners' oral production? To what extent are these interactions influencing the direction of focus?

Hypothesis 3: The premise is that unfamiliar-topic repetition activities should work better than familiar-topic repetition tasks to improve participants' speech production. According to the pilot study results and the stimulated recall data from the study by Qiu and Lo (2018), the focus is directed towards the formulation stage when new topics are practised repeatedly.

Participants:

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 30 and included 60 first-year undergraduates (35 men and 25 females) from a university in Pakistan. Everyone on the team had grown up in Pakistan and studied English for at least six years; nobody had been

spent more than a month outside of the country when the data was being collected. This meant that their cultural origins were comparable. To ensure that participants' backgrounds in any one field would not bias their results, we recruited 30 people from the social sciences, the humanities, and science and technology.

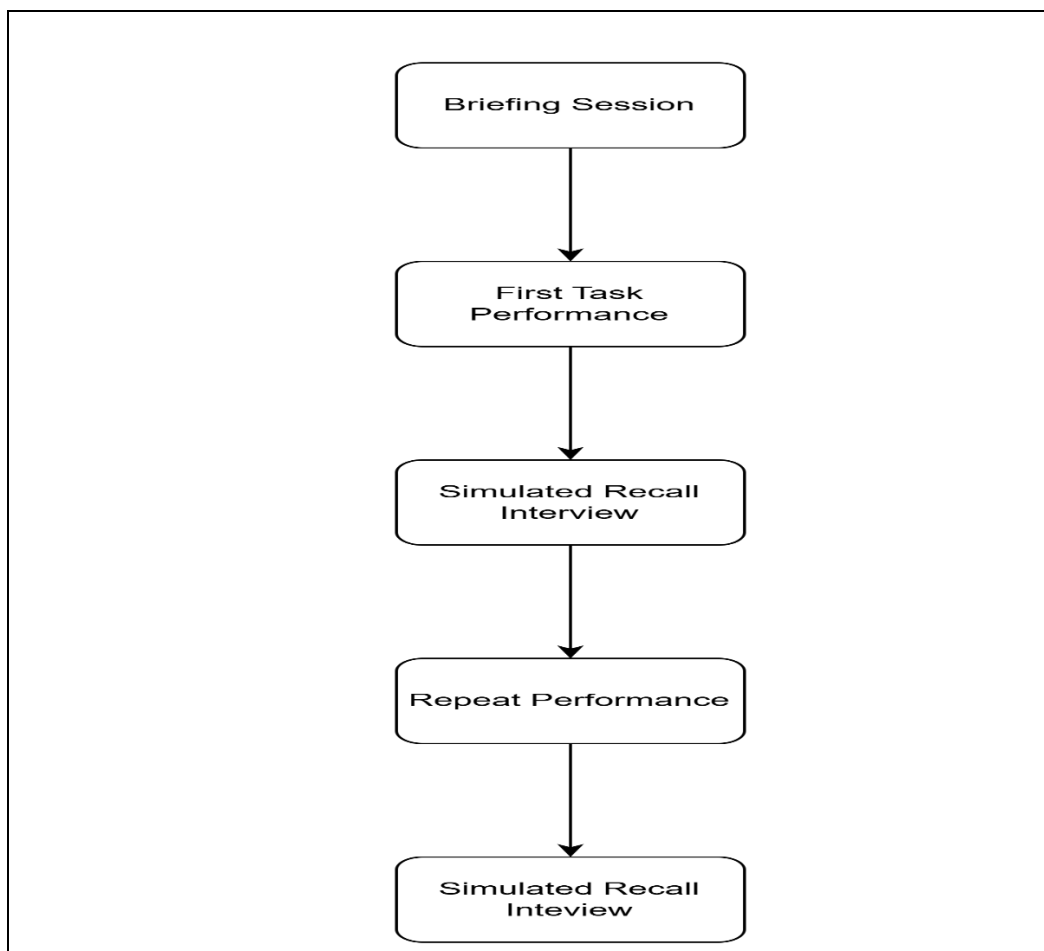
Prior to data collection, participants took a C-test, which is a type of cloze test, which consisted of five short passages taken from three C-tests that had already been published but had 102 deletions made to them (Babaii & Ansary, 2001; Dörnyei & Katona, 1992; Raatz & Klein-Braley, 1981). 56.34 per cent of people were accurate, with a standard deviation of 15.20 per cent. Consequently, their level of English proficiency varied between lower-intermediate and intermediate.

Data Collection:

All participants were assured that their interviews and performance would be confidential and not impact their academic standing. They were recruited using in-class marketing and posters. The data-gathering technique is illustrated in Figure 1. Before data collection, all participants were asked to meet in an office for a briefing session lasting no more than five minutes. The four oral tasks were administered to participants in a counterbalanced order; each group began doing a different task in a different sequence. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. Because eight out of ten participants in the pilot trial said they spent about three minutes planning for each task, we gave participants three minutes to do so. So that they could give full accounts without feeling rushed, there was no time restriction on the participants' actual speech production.

The author used words like "okay" and "right" to establish a conversational atmosphere, but the data analysis did not include those responses.

Each task took an average of 100.26 seconds to complete (SD = 61.46).



Data Analysis:

Task performance and stimulus responses were the two main methods of data collection. Both the uncut and cut versions of oral speeches can be manually transcribed according to the method proposed by Kormos and Dénes (2004). Words are pronounced, pauses are full duration, and pauses are filled in the uncut form, in contrast to the chopped version. Pauses greater than 250 ms conveyed more significant information, according to Préfontaine and Kormos (2016), who randomly selected the oral discourses of 10 participants. Four hundred and eighty-two minutes were devoted to the four hundred and forty-two oral lectures. A research assistant assessed 48 of the oral discourses, or 10% of the total, and achieved an intercoder reliability (the proportion of words agreed upon by both sides) of over 95%. The triggered memories were first translated from Chinese to English by hand. When the research assistant compared the original and back-translated versions of four participants' evoked memories, she found that more than 90% of the transcripts were consistent.

To evaluate the assignment's success, we used four CAF metrics. In order to gain a general idea of oral production, we used global CAF measures. The problem of linguistic complexity first was typically further broken down into structural complexity and lexical complexity. According to Ellis (2012) and Hausen and Kuiken (2009), it reveals that students can use the target language at a high level and are ready to employ different structures. When measuring structural complexity, the analysis-of-speech unit (AS-unit) is considered the gold standard. It was used in this research. According to Foster et al. (2000), this goal was achieved by analyzing different types of sentences, phrases, and speech units.

To do this, we used Guiraud's lexical complexity index from 1954. This index is determined by dividing the number of word types in a speech sample by the square root of the number of word

tokens produced, as stated by Malicka and Levkina (2012) (p. 52). We chose the G index over other lexical indices since it doesn't consider conversation length. In this case, the number of errors per unpruned hundred words was used to quantify grammatical accuracy, which is defined as the "degree of deviancy from a particular form" (Housen & Kuiken, 2009, p. 463) (Goulding, 2003). A measure of the student's general accuracy performance is the degree to which their work is grammatically correct. To measure how natural the speakers' second-language speech was, they used mean lengths of runs (MLR). According to Segalowitz (2016), MLR is a composite index that considers the total number of syllables and pauses in speech as well as the velocity of the speech as determined by temporal factors. According to Kormos and Dénes (2004), using rate-evaluated scores yields the strongest correlation with MLR.

Discussion

While this study's results lend some credence to the first hypothesis and those of other research (e.g., Bui, 2014) showing that familiar environments facilitate the production of structurally more complex speech, there was no statistically significant difference in the performance of participants across the two conditions concerning other CAF components. Six participants reported adding information to expand message content because of their familiarity with Chinese culture (Xiao Hong's experience) and their personal experiences with locating lost objects. They might have been more inclined to provide more detailed explanations and make more logical connections between pertinent elements as they were already familiar with the material, which would explain why their sentences were lengthier. This lends credence to Skehan's (2014) idea that stimulated recalls can indicate that familiarity with the material makes conceptualisation easier.

This study tested participants' cultural knowledge (e.g., about Western and Chinese wedding traditions) and personal life experiences, unlike Bui's (2014) research that used preexisting subject knowledge as task themes. Despite participants' polarised views on the task's familiarity, they all agreed that the subjects were relevant to what they already knew. Even though they did not know much about Western culture or the job search process, they could describe the wedding gift pictures and give a few pointers. Other CAF factors were not significantly affected, possibly because their familiarity with all four subjects mitigated the effect of content familiarity.

Conclusion and Limitations:

Results from the stimulated recollections provide another theory; six people said they avoided terms, grammatical structures, and details of which they were unsure. These methods of evasion may reduce the impact of content familiarity,

For this simple reason, students will avoid unfamiliar expressions or facts if they want to sound natural and accurate when they speak.

Also, lacking L2 vocabulary in familiar and unfamiliar situations may show the same lexical richness. 67 question-and-answer episodes showed participants were unsure about L2 expressions; 30 dealt with tasks involving familiar topics, while 37 dealt with activities involving unfamiliar topics and participants' performance on those. Participants may have faced limitations due to their limited command of the target language, which was at an intermediate or lower level, and may have worked to expand their vocabulary in comfortable settings. According to the results, participants' conceptualization was helped, and their structural complexity increased when they became familiar with the material. The beneficial effects of repetition on conceptualization, lexical choice, and grammatical encoding may explain why exact task repetition—i.e., giving the identical task with the same material to the same interlocutor—increased CAF. When applied to new work themes, task repetition improved CAF more than it did to familiar ones.

These results show the potential connections between task design, speaking processes, and second language task performance, and they give empirical evidence to evaluate the roles of monologic tasks with varying design/implementation aspects. The idea of subject familiarity can be expanded by selecting familiar task themes and using exact task repetition to acquaint learners with the message content (Figure 6). In addition to the known benefits of task repetition and content familiarity on second language oral production, the results indicate that it may be more effective to repeat new themes in order to facilitate speech production, raise CAF, and motivate second language learners to participate in task performance (Qiu & Lo, 2018). Before choosing new material for second language

students, teachers should consider whether repetition is needed to relieve the conceptualiser's cognitive burden and shift the focus to formulation. Before drawing any firm conclusions, further research is required on many types of task repetition, including various CAF metrics.

Some limitations exist in this investigation. In the experiment, participants' familiarity with the material was handled as either high or low. However, in practice, prior information can be provided in a more nuanced or continuous form, meaning that one might only partially understand the job. Consequently, the findings may be oversimplified due to the research design's dichotomous approach to content familiarity. Also, the results might not apply to other kinds of tasks because this study only used two kinds of them (personal narratives and visual descriptions). Third, participants might have changed their second performance based on the researcher's expectations if they were given stimulated recollection sessions following the first performance (Leow & Morgan-Short, 2004). Findings from this study show that vocabulary and task repetition help English as a foreign language (EFL) students improve their oral presentation skills. The results should help with task design and implementation, according to the researchers and language teachers who will be using the data.

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