

Full Length Research Paper

The effect of task repetition on fluency and accuracy of EFL Saudi female learners' oral task performance

Ebrahim Bamanger

College of Education, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: ebra1982@hotmail.com. Tel: +9661 4674610. Fax: +9661 4674609.

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This study aimed to examine the effect of task repetition on foreign language output. Twenty eight Saudi female students in the Preparatory Year (PY) at King Saud University were randomly selected to conduct an oral information-gap task. The participants were asked to perform the task two times with two-week interval between the two performances. The oral performances were transcribed and analyzed to measure fluency and accuracy of language output. The collected data were coded for the two dimensions of oral production (fluency and accuracy), based on the established criteria. A within group dependent t-test for paired samples was computed to find out whether or not there were significant differences between the mean scores of the first and second performances. The findings revealed that task repetition resulted in significant differences in subjects' oral discourse in terms of fluency and accuracy. The findings of the current study recommend that researchers and teachers might find it very beneficial to devote some of their time to design effective task repetition to help language learners improve their oral production.

Key words: Task repetition, language output, accuracy, fluency.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, there are many calls for a move in language teaching toward task-based approaches to instruction (Ellis, 2003). Language learning can be improved through engaging learners in task performance which could be seen as rehearsal for interaction to come. Focusing on tasks as pedagogic tools might open up wider perspectives for enhancing language learning. It is assumed that while language learners perform the tasks, they engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are very beneficial for language acquisition.

Ellis (2003) argued that tasks can reduce the cognitive or linguistic demands placed on the language learner. However, the trade-off assumption suggested that language learners have available limited attention capacities, that the different components of language production and comprehension compete for such limited capacities, and that the choice to devote attention to one area may well be at the expense of other areas (Ellis, 2005). Thus, manipulating language learners' attention to

focus on linguistic forms has become a key priority in research. Exploring this could result in better understanding of how attention could be directed toward various language components, and in turn better language acquisition.

Ellis (2005) distinguished between two types of task-based planning, namely pre-task planning and within-task planning. Pre-task planning is then divided into rehearsal (or repetition) and strategic planning. Repetition involves conducting a task before the main performance with the first performance of the task is seen as a kind of preparation for the next performance (Ellis, 2005). When language learners are asked to perform a task, which is by its nature meaning-focused and outcome-oriented, this normally induces them to deal with what they intend to say first "conceptualization" (Skehan, 2009). During the first task performance, the speakers are primarily concerned with the processing of the preverbal message, consequently, only little attention is directed to lexicogrammatical search which takes place during the

formulation stage. However, when the speaker repeats the task, a considerable part of the conceptualization, formulation and articulation has already been conducted in the first performance (Bygate and Samuda, 2005), and as a result, attentional resources are freed up to be allocated to various dimensions of oral output. This may lead to enhance language production of the same meanings conveyed in the first performance of the task. Bygate (2001) stated that task repetition is particularly beneficial to enhance learners' fluency. Probably because when learners already know what they will say in their task, they have more processing space available to be used in the formulation of the language required to express their thoughts with the result that the quantity of the performance will be enhanced (Ellis, 2003).

Some of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers conceive of repetition as mainly a kind of planning which is promising to channel second language learners' limited attentional resources (Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011; Bygate, 2006; Bygate and Samuda, 2005; Ellis, 2005, 2008, 2009; Skehan, 2007). Bygate (2001) argued that the theoretical logic behind the assumption that the repetition of the task can assist language performance, is based on the fact that part of the work of conceptualization, formulation and articulation carried out on the first occasion is kept in the speakers' memory store and can be retrieved on the second occasion. During the initial task performance, language learners are primarily concerned with the planning of content of what they are going to say (Bygate, 2001). Language learners can scan their memory for the language that suits the performance of the task and thus they start to be familiar with the content to be produced. On the second performance of the task and due to the fact that language learners are already familiar with the content, they have ample time and attentional resources to shift their attention from content to the selection and editing of the appropriate language, which in turn could result in enhanced language output (Bygate, 2001). However, Ellis (2009) suggested that there is no clear evidence that task repetition assists acquisition.

One of the earliest studies in task repetition is Lynch and McLean's (2001) study which was conducted in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In this study, fourteen English language learners performed a poster-carousel task that required the participants to respond repeatedly to the same or similar questions from fellow students about a poster they had prepared. Lynch and McLean concluded that task repetition would benefit both linguistic accuracy and fluency. In another study by Bygate (2001), the researcher compared the performances of forty-eight ESL learners on narrative and interview tasks, on two occasions with a 10-week interval in between. He found that task repetition had a significant effect on fluency of learners' performances. However, Bygate reported no statistically significant effect on his general measure of accuracy.

Sheppard (2006) explored the effects of task repetition accompanied by feedback on accuracy and fluency. The provided feedback was designed to draw participants' attention to the linguistic form between the first and second performances. Sheppard's study indicated that repetition accompanied by feedback positively affects the fluency and accuracy of language performance. Taguchi (2008) investigated the enhancement of language fluency in spoken production among second language learners who performed repeated practice of grammatical features as constituent units of discourse. The participants of this study were twenty two learners enrolled in an elementary Japanese course at a university in the US. They were taught forty grammatical features through communicative drills and memorization of dialogues containing the target features. The performers completed two conversation tasks in Japanese at five week intervals during the first semester. Taguchi found no significant gains in fluency of oral production. The researcher explained that as the beginning-level, participants learned a great deal of linguistic expressions, thus it took them some time to survey a range of features and choose the most appropriate ones which might lead to slow the overall speaking process.

On the other hand, Hawkes (2012) found that task repetition could be used as a pedagogic tool to direct second language learners' attention towards form. In a more recent study in task repetition, Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) investigated the effects of the simultaneous use of task repetition on task performance. This study showed that the simultaneous use of task repetition would advantage both fluency and accuracy. Takimoto (2012) explored the effectiveness of two types of repetition for teaching polite request forms to Japanese English as second language learners: the task-type repetition and the identical task repetition. The results implied that identical task repetition was more effective than task-type repetition in learners' production of second language.

Reviewing the previous studies in task repetition, it could be concluded that most studies found positive effect of repetition on language production (Lynch and McLean, 2001; Sheppard, 2006; Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011). However, some studies failed to find positive effect on either dimensions (Bygate, 2001; Taguchi, 2008). The effects of task repetition condition on the fluency, and accuracy of oral task production are thus still open to question. The simultaneous use of task repetition was found to advantage both fluency and accuracy (Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005), while longer intervals, that is, 10-week interval as in Bygate (2001), and 5-week interval as in Taguchi (2008), failed to find improvement on fluency or accuracy of language output. Thus, the current study will further explore the effect of repeating the task with a two-week interval in between. Also, as far as this study is concerned, there was no study conducted to explore the effect of repetition with information-gap

task type. In order to address this limitation in the previous studies, the current study intended to explore the effect of planning with the information-gap activity. Furthermore, to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, no study to date has explored the effect of task repetition on the performance of EFL learners in the Arabic context. Thus, the aim of the present study is to develop a greater understanding of the influence of task repetition on the accuracy, and fluency of foreign language oral productions, among a population of Arabic-speaking learners of English. In this current study, the researcher investigated if there is evidence of language production enhancement when the need to focus on meaning has been minimized through task repetition, thereby freeing learners to attend to form.

Research questions

1. Does repeating the same task lead to improvement in EFL oral task performance?
2. Does task repetition increase fluency of EFL learners' oral production?
3. Does task repetition increase accuracy of EFL learners' oral production?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study was conducted with twenty eight Saudi female post-beginner level students in the Preparatory Year at King Saud University. They were selected and assigned into pairs using a simple random selection method. Most of them had been learning English as a foreign language in Saudi schools for six years. Their mother tongue is Arabic. None had ever been to an English-speaking country, and they had little opportunity to use English for communicative purposes outside the classroom (Rahman and Alhaisoni, 2013). They were between 19 and 22 years old at the time of data collection.

Materials

For the purpose of the present study, a task about spotting the differences between two pictures (information-gap) was adopted as the input material. The task was developed by Alshumaimeri (2010). It was piloted and tested by Alshumaimeri to check its validity and reliability to suit Saudi post-beginner students. It was a task with two-way, information-gap activity. The participants were required to exchange information about ten differences between two versions of a picture. The language included common vocabulary related to the task (refer to Appendix).

Procedure

Before performing the task, the participants were

instructed about the specific task and were told what they were supposed to do. The participants were required to work in pairs. Every pair was asked to do the task. Learners were given two versions of a picture and asked to find out the differences in the two pictures. The participants had no exposure to the task before. The participants had not been informed in advance about the repetition of the task in order to diminish the practice effect. They were asked to perform the task for the first time, and they were instructed not to look at the other one's picture during the practice. After an interval time of two weeks, the participants were asked to repeat the same task but this time the researcher changed the roles of the participants. The conversations were recorded using an MP3 recorder. The first 1.20 min of the conversations were transcribed and analyzed in terms of accuracy and fluency.

Data coding

The audiotaped data were transcribed and coded to assess the fluency and accuracy of the learners' oral performances.

Fluency

Fluency has been defined as the production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). It could be defined also as 'the extent to which the language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation, or reformulations (Ellis, 2003). Following Foster and Skehan (1996), Skehan and Foster (1999), Elder and Iwashita (2005), fluency was measured by counting the number of repetitions (of the same word or phrase), false starts (utterances abandoned before completion), reformulations (phrases or clauses repeated with some modification to syntax, morphology, or word order) and replacements (substitution of one lexical item for another).

Accuracy

Accuracy is defined as the ability to produce error-free speech (Housen and Kuiken, 2009). Ellis (2005) stated that accuracy can be defined as the ability to avoid errors in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language as well as a conservative orientation. In the current study, accuracy was measured by calculating the number of error-free clauses. All errors in syntax, morphology, and lexical choice were counted. High means indicate less number of errors and as a result better performance. The same measure was used in some previous studies (Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Guara-Tavares, 2008).

RESULTS

To answer the research questions, a within group

Table 1. The t-test and mean scores results of the accuracy for the first performance and the repetition.

Accuracy	Performance	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig. (Two-Tailed)
Error-free clauses	First	6.428	2.026	7.558	0.00
	Second	24.50	1.789		

Table 2. The t-test and mean scores results of the fluency for the first performance and the repetition.

Fluency	Performance	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-Value	Sig. (Two-Tailed)
Repetitions	First	13.821	3.972	8.023	0.00
	Second	10.357	3.703		
False starts	First	12.964	3.132	4.825	0.00
	Second	10.785	3.107		
Reformulations	First	9.285	3.309	2.187	0.038
	Second	8.285	2.929		
Replacements	First	7.178	2.553	3.932	0.001
	Second	5.250	2.757		
Total	First	43.25	8.094	8.890	0.00
	Second	34.678	7.092		

dependent t-test for paired samples was computed to find out whether or not there were significant differences between the mean scores of the first and second performances.

Table 1 shows the t-test and mean scores results of the accuracy for the first performance and the repetition. It shows that during the first performance, the accuracy mean score of the participants was 6.428, whereas during the second performance it increased and became 24.50. A statistically significant difference between the first performance and the repetition scores was found at the $p < 0.05$ level [$T = 7.558$, $p = 0.00$]. This means that accuracy was significantly improved as a result of the repetition. Students committed fewer errors in the second performance.

Table 2 shows the t-test and mean scores results of the fluency for the first performance and the repetition. A look at the mean scores for fluency in Table 2 tells us that the participant showed better performance in the second performance ($M = 34.678$) than in the first one ($M = 43.25$) in terms of the total fluency measurements. The enhancement was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level [$T = 8.890$, $p = 0.00$] in the total measurements. It means that performing the same task for the second time with the time interval of two weeks had a significant effect on the participants' fluency.

DISCUSSION

The present study has focused on the impact of task

repetition on fluency and accuracy of oral language performance. The results showed some evidence that task repetition resulted in improvement in learners' oral performance. The current study is consistent with some previous studies (Lynch and Maclean, 2001; Sheppard, 2006; Ahmadian and Tavakoli, 2011) that found support for the beneficial effect of repetition on accuracy. This study also supports the previous studies of Bygate (2001), Lynch and Maclean (2001), and Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) that found repetition to be beneficial with the fluency of oral performance.

The repetition of the oral task performance could assist foreign language learners with low level of proficiency who do not have ready-made plans to facilitate language production under real time. In the first performance, language learners would be concerned with planning the content of the message. On the second performance, they would be more concerned with paying attention to the formulation aspect of the task. Bygate and Samuda (2005) stated that at the first encounter, the language learners are supposed to rely on the most automated aspects of their language, than at the second one. In contrast, at the second encounter, they are not only cognitively prepared, but furthermore, their vocabulary and grammar are primed, so that there is a chance on the second task performance that the learner will generate more accurate and fluent output.

The results of the present study suggested that the experience of the first performance of the task is available for speakers to build on in the second

performance, which leads to more accurate and fluent language production. It could be argued that performance can be more fluent and accurate due to the fact that doing the task a second time would involve less planning work. Also because the task has already been formulated previously, fewer false starts and self-corrections can be expected.

Conclusion

The present study tried to cast some light on the effect of task repetition on the accuracy and fluency of foreign language oral performance. The findings of this study concluded that when EFL learners are asked to repeat the information-gap task, they are likely to get some improvements in their accuracy and fluency. It also supported Bygate's (2001) claim that in the first task performance, language learners can familiarize themselves with the content to be produced, and later in the second performance of the task, they have ample attentional resources to focus on the selection and editing of the appropriate language, which in turn may result in better language production. Task repetition can play a critical role in providing the language learners with in-built planning opportunity. It also provides a beneficial context for students and teachers to plan their subsequent language work. Repetition could be seen as a task performance condition that can be used to manipulate the learners' attention through freeing up processing resource capacities. Further research is needed to investigate the effects of identical task repetition and task-type repetition on the complexity of EFL oral language performance. The current study contributed to our understanding of the effectiveness of task repetition in the acquisition of foreign language in two important ways: Firstly, identical task repetition is effective in promoting gains in enhancing the oral production through enabling language learners to perform tasks more fluently. Secondly, more effective learning occurs with identical task repetition, which seems to reinforce the accuracy of language learners. Thus, one implication of the current study is that researchers and teachers might find it very beneficial to devote some of their time to designing effective task repetition to help language learners improve their oral production.

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APPENDIX: INFORMATION-GAP TASK (SPOT THE DIFFERENCES)

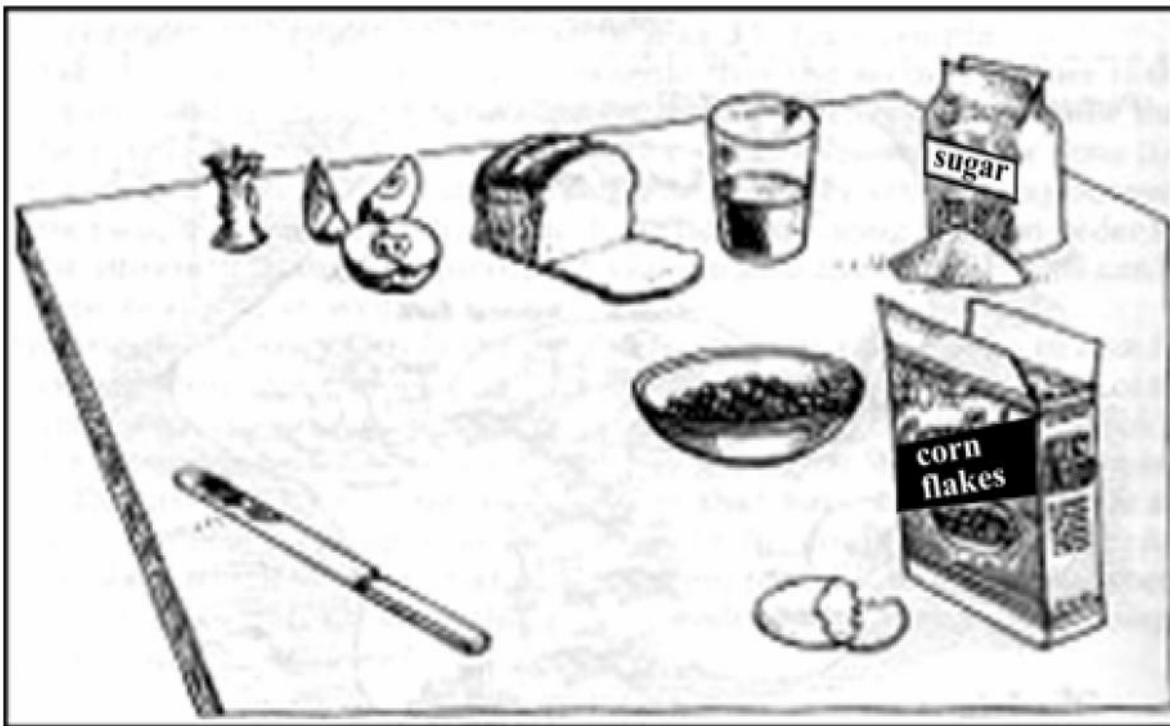
Student Handout: Spot the difference!

Work in pairs. You are trying to find 10 differences between two pictures.

Follow the instructions below.

1. Student A: You have one picture. Student B: You have another picture. "Do not show" your picture to your partner! There are TEN differences between the pictures.
2. Look carefully at your picture. Think of how you can describe it to your partner.
3. Student A: Describe one thing about your picture and then ask your partner about her picture. For example: There's one tree on a hill in my picture. Are there any trees in your picture?
4. Student B: Answer Student A's question and add some more information about your own picture. For example: No, there aren't any trees in my picture, but there's a big house on the left. Have you got that?
5. Write down any differences you find or mark them on the picture. For example: I have got a tree and you haven't, so that's one difference. The winner is the pair who can find all ten differences first.

Student A picture



Student B picture

