Research on Foreign Languages
Journal of Faculty of
Letters and Humanities
Year 51 No. 208

Impact of Task Condition on L2 Learners' Oral Performance*

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Abstract

One of the most widely discussed task distinctions in task-based language teaching is the one between open and closed tasks which refers to the flow of information in the task. Both are information gap tasks, in which information is transferred between task participants. It is thus hypothesized that task condition affects L2 learner's performance in terms of fluency and accuracy which in turn contributes to the development of overall proficiency and consequently creates a favorable condition for language learning .In line with this theoretical rationale, this study investigated the impact of task conditions on L2 learner's performance to find if these two different task conditions produce different kinds of performance. Oral performance of 50 L2 learners at the intermediate level was collected by means of open and closed tasks. The data was statistically analyzed. Results of statistical analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between the open and closed conditions in terms of fluency but no significant difference between the closed and open conditions in terms of accuracy. Of course there was a trend towards greater accuracy in the closed condition despite the lack of statistical difference. The implications of the study in syllabus design and testing will be discussed

Key words: task-based language teaching, oral performance, task types, fluency, accuracy, task condition.

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*- تاریخ وصول: ۸۸/۶/۱۷ تأیید نهایی: ۸۸/۸/۱۷

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a growing body of research investigating various aspects of task-based language teaching (Ellis, 2003, 2005, 2006; Foster & Skehan, 1996, 1999; Long and Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 2004, 2005, 2006; Robinson, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005, 2007; Robinson and Gilabert, 2007; Gilabert, 2007; Rahimpour, 1997,2002, 2007, 2008; Rahimpour & Yaghoubi - Notash, 2008a, 2008b; Rahimpour and Hazar, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Skehan, 1996, 2003; Skehan & Foster 1997).This paper has focused only on one aspect that is task condition to show how this variable impacts on the fluency and accuracy of L2 narrative production.

The choice of task condition as the variable for investigation in this research is motivated both by its theoretical and practical significance in SLA which consequently will be of great practical help and value to language teachers, syllabus designers and language testers and will provide a forum for establishing a theoretical framework for SLA researchers. Task types and task condition and their role in task-based performance are of both theoretical interest to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and of practical significance to language teachers.

Among the many factors, task condition also contributes to task variation, as the same task administered under different conditions will yield different outcome (Larseen-Freeman and Long, 1992: 32). The open versus closed task condition is one task condition that has been discussed at some length in the SLS literature (Long, 1985; Robinson, 1995, Rahimpour, 1997, 2007). Open tasks have little or no predetermined outcome, e.g. giving one's opinion while closed tasks have a predetermined end that the task participants work toward. Evidence suggests that closed tasks lead to more negotiation (Loschky, 1989; Long, 1990); greater grammatical core vocabulary (Kim, 1995); greater accuracy (Rankin, 1990) and greater fluency, Rahimpour (1997, 2007, 2008). Thus it appears that closed tasks are superior to open tasks because they are likely to facilitate comprehension and promote focus on the form of utterance input or output (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993). This superiority is also stressed by Robinson (1995), who argues that open tasks are less demanding and less motivating than closed tasks.

This paper is an attempt to examine the impact of task condition: the closed/open tasks on learners' narrative performance as a source of variation in L2 discourse.

Distinction between Open and Closed Tasks:

The distinction between open and closed tasks is made on the basis of the goal of the task. An open task is one in which there is no single predetermined solution, but rather a range of possible outcome. Free conversation, discussions about individual likes and dislikes, or things to take to a desert island, etc. are good examples of open tasks (Loschky, 1988). Closed tasks are those tasks whose outcome is predetermined, in the form of a correct answer, or small subset of answers. Problem-solving discussions involving technical topics are examples of closed tasks. Long (1989) suggests that it is crucial that participants know whether the task is open or closed .

Closed tasks are assumed to produce more negotiation work than open tasks: " the idea is that the quantity and quality of negotiation for meaning will be higher on closed tasks, when participants know that task completion depends on their finding the answer, not setting on any answer the choose when the going gets rough and moving on to something else (Long, 1989: 18)." Closed tasks will elicit more topics and language recycling, more feedback, more incorporation, more rephrasing, more precision, and generally better negotiation (Loschky, 1988).

Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) argue that closed tasks appear to be superior to open tasks in at least two ways. First, they promote negotiation of meaning and thus are likely to facilitate comprehension. Second, they seem to promote focus on the form of utterance input (or output). Loschky and Bley-Vroman argue that for both of the above reasons, closed tasks are better suited for use in teaching grammar than open tasks, since they can be designed so that grammatically enclosed information is essential to task success .

Open tasks are so named because the final outcome or resolution to the task is relatively open-ended. Closed tasks, on the other hand, are more predetermined. Long (1989) characterizes the two tasks as follows:

> **By an open tasks, I mean, one in which participants know there is no predetermined correct solution, but instead a wide (in some case, infinite) range of acceptable solutions. Free conversations, a debate, ranking favorite leisure time activities, explaining how something works 9how you think it works, competence after your explanation-not necessarily how it really works, and discussing and eventually choosing (individually or by**

> **consensus) the ten greatest world figures, would be examples of 'open' tasks (Long, 1989: 18).**

In contrast,

> **By a closed task, I mean one in which the task itself (as opposed to some control put on it by the participants) requires that the speakers (or listeners, readers and writers, of course) attempt to reach either a single correct solutions determined beforehand by designer of the task and again (crucially) known to the participants to have been so determined (Long, 1989: 18) .**

There is also an interaction between the open/closed task condition and the informational flow in the task. Newton (1991) investigated the relationship between task condition and whether the information exchange was one-or two-way. He found that more negotiation on closed tasks that were two-way rather than one-way. Also two-way/closed tasks led to a focus on language and task content, while one-way/open tasks resulted in focus on opinion and learning .

Loschky (1988) characterizes the open and closed distinction as being either ' indeterminate' or ' discrete' (determinate). In an open task, the information which learners must exchange is relatively unrestricted or indeterminate (e.g. ' what to take to a desert island). In a closed task, the information needed for task success is very determinate or discrete (e.g. ' spot the difference' or ' match the design'). Again, closed tasks appear to lead to more negotiation of meaning (Loschky, 1988), and more learner speech modifications towards target language (TL) norms (Pica et al., 1989). Task condition is thus an important factor affecting the learner's performance. It is practical that closed condition is more demanding than open condition.

The above review of the related literature generated the following research question and research hypothesis:

Research Question

What is the impact of task condition on learners' performance?

Research Hypothesis:

The closed condition task will elicit greater accuracy and fluency than open condition task.

Participants

The participants of this study were 50 male and female non-native speakers of English who were recruited on a volunteer basis from intermediate level classes.Students were aged 18-40 years (with an average of 26.7).

Elicitation Material

Picture stories were used for data collection procedure. The strips were given different titles and each began with a brief prompt written on the top of each story. The participants were required to read each story prompt out loudly before they began each story, and to begin the stories like the prompts.

Procedure

Participants were seated at a table, next to the tape-recorder. In performing the narrative tasks in the open condition, which was administered to the first 25 participants, no other person, a part from each participant and the researcher was present. The participants were required to review the picture for one minute so that they could relate the story as clearly as possible. In the closed condition, which was administered to the second 25 participants, apart from each participants and the researcher, a peer, student was present. Participants were required to tell the stories to this student as explicitly and as clearly so that this student could understand the story. More specifically, the participants were required to tell the story in such a way that the listener could select relevant pictures and arrange them in the right order .

Transcription and Coding

Recorded narratives were transcribed and coded for scoring and statistical analysis of fluency and accuracy by the researcher and two other researchers for the inter-rater reliability purposes. Inter-rater reliability showed 98 percent agreement.

Data Analysis and Results

The hypothesis that the closed condition task will elicit greater accuracy and fluency than open condition task was partially supported. Test of hypothesis indicated that the results are in line with

the hypothesis for superiority of closed condition task at both levels of accuracy and fluency.

The means and standard deviations for the dependent measures in the open and closed conditions are presented in Table 1.

Table1. Means and Standard deviations for Open *vs*. Closed Condition Tasks

	Open		Closed	
Measures	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
EFTU	1.98	1.86	2.10	1.54
WPP	7.34	1.93	14.66	9.73

First to be reported here are the results of accuracy while measuring Errors –Free T-Units (EFTU). As illustrated in the above table, the closed condition elicited more Error-Free T-Units ($\bar{X}$ = 2.10), than open condition ($\bar{X}$ = 1.98), but statistically speaking, the difference did not reach significance at the $p<.05$ level. However, despite this lack of statistical difference, the closed condition had a slightly higher mean number of Error-Free T-Units than open condition, partially supporting the hypothesis.

This slight difference among the tasks for accuracy reflected in the number of Error-Free T-Units are illustrated in Figure 1.

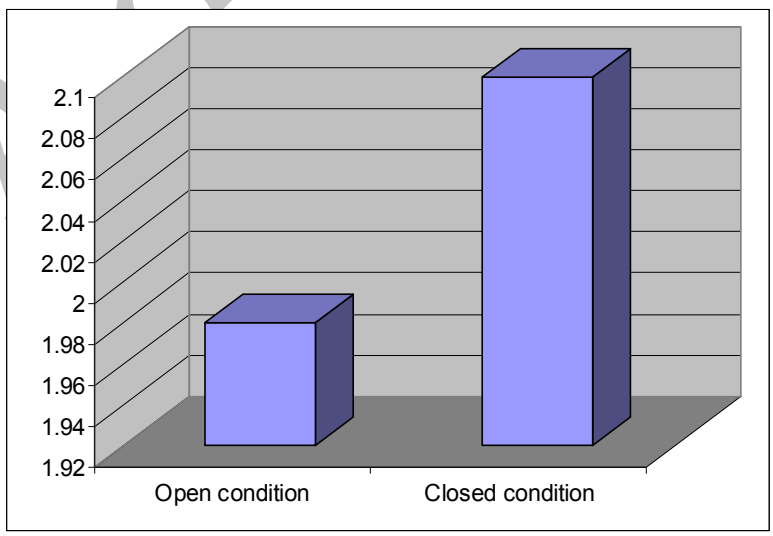

Figure 1. Accuracy Measure for Open *vs* Closed Condition Tasks

Next results to be presented here are the results for fluency measure reflected in the number of Words Per Pauses (WPP). There was a significant main effect for Task condition for fluency F (1, 96) = 27, p<.05.* As illustrated in Table 1, mean difference between the two task conditions for the fluency is obvious. More clearly, the closed condition task elicited greater fluency ($\bar{X}$ =14.66), as reflected in the greater number of words per pause, than open condition ($\bar{X}$ = 7.34).

This difference among the tasks condition, in terms of fluency while measuring words per pause are presented in Figure 2.

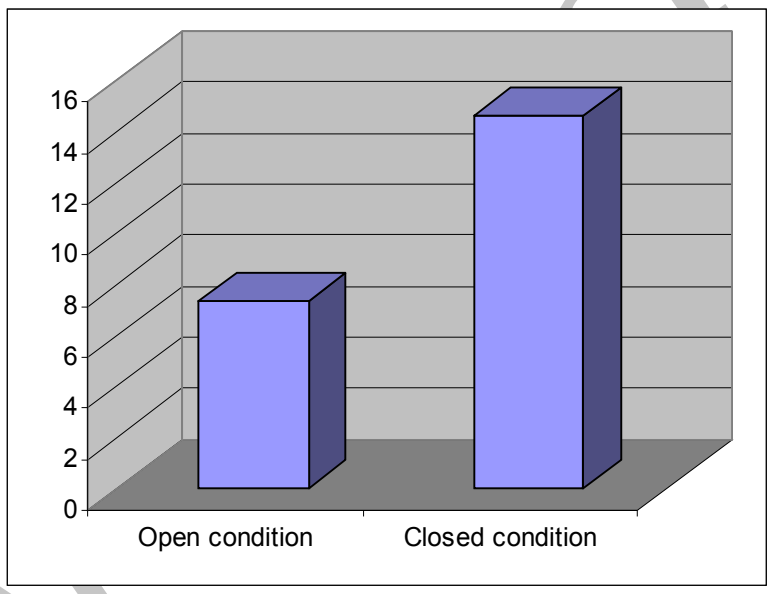

Figure 2. Fluency Measure for Open *vs* Closed Condition Tasks

This result is therefore consistent with the research assumption, and thus supports the hypothesis that the closed condition task elicits greater fluency than open condition task.

Summary of Results

A significant difference was found between the closed and open condition tasks for fluency measure. Though statistically there was no significant difference between the closed and open condition tasks in terms of accuracy, according to the means comparisons, there was a trend towards the general assumption that the closed condition task

elicits greater accuracy than open condition. Therefore, our hypothesis that "The closed condition task will elicit greater accuracy and fluency that open condition task" was partially supported.

Discussion

The tasks in the open condition had no predetermined correct solution and were administered by the researcher, in the absence of any other observer. The participants simply had to describe the picture and there was no exchange of information between speaker and researcher who was present during the tape recording the narration. These tasks are similar to the "opinion gap tasks" proposed by Prabhu (1987), in which there is no attempt to meet the listener's demands and needs. In contrast, closed condition task required the speaker to deliver information necessary for the listener with predetermined correct solutions, like information-gap tasks described by Pica et al (1993). A non-native student was present as a listener who was responsible for placing sets of pictures in the correct order. Participants were required to narrate the story as explicitly as possible, so that the listener could select the relevant pictures and arrange them in the right order. Although the observer did not ask questions, the speaker was still keenly aware of the need to produce an understandable description so that the observer could successfully order the pictures. In sum, our prediction that the closed condition task will elicit greater fluency and accuracy than the open condition task was based on the assumption that the presence of the student observer and the closed-ended nature of the response would make the task more demanding and motivating for the speaker and this was manifested in participants better performance in the closed condition.

Implications

This study was an attempt to identify and examine the impact of task condition on learners' performance. The findings of this study are of immediate relevance for task-based language teaching and learning. This study also attempted to provide a framework for task condition and oral performance. The results of this study will have pedagogic implications in syllabus design, teaching and testing.

*** Note**: **This is only a small part of a big project and ANOVAs were performed for each dependent variable to examine the effect of the factors task and Condition.**

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