

## The Comparative Effect of Personal and Narrative Tasks On EFL Learners' Speaking

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**Abstract:** The objective of this study was to investigate whether there was a significant difference between the impact of narrative task and personal task on EFL learners' speaking. For this purpose 60 intermediate EFL learners were selected from a sample of 100 students based on their performance on a piloted PET and randomly assigned to two experimental groups of 30 participants each. The homogeneity of the participants of the two groups in terms of their speaking was also checked by means of an independent samples t-test run on their speaking mean scores. After the treatment, the participants took another PET speaking and the results were analyzed by means of an independent samples t-test. The statistical analysis revealed no significant difference between the effect of narrative task and personal task on EFL learners' speaking. Therefore the researcher was unable to reject the null hypothesis and concluded that the two tasks bore equal impact on the speaking of the participants.

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### Introduction

According to Richards & Rodgers (2001) CLT claimed that the goal of language teaching was to develop communicative competence in learners and paid attention to all of the four skills. Many other new methods have been derived from CLT, such as Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Competency-Based Language Teaching.

Ellis (2000) believes that tasks are the basic and core units of planning and instruction in TBLT. According to Willis (1996) task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome. Therefore, according to Willis, the notion of meaning.

Is subsumed in outcome. There are two main sources of evidence which justify the use of tasks in language classes. As Lynch and Maclean (2000) mention, the first source of justifications for Task-Based learning is what we might term the ecologic alone; the belief that the best way to promote effective learning is by setting up classroom tasks that reflect as far as possible the real world tasks which the learners perform or will perform. They maintain that task performance is seen as rehearsal for interaction to come.

Lynch and Maclean (2000) further assert that the second source of evidence comes from SLA research and add that, "Those arguing for TBL, drawing on SLA research, have tended to focus on issues such as learnability, the order of acquisition of particular L2 structures, the implications of the input, interaction, and output hypotheses" (p. 222).

Task-based language teaching is also discussed from a psycholinguistic perspective.

According to Ellis (2000), "from psycholinguistic perspective a task is a device that guides learners to engage in certain types of information-processing that are believed to be important for effective language use and for language acquisition from some theoretical standpoints" (Ellis, 2000, p. 197). It assumes that while performing the task, learners engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are useful for language acquisition. Ellis (2006) also asserts that "tasks reduced the cognitive or linguistic demands placed on learner" (p. 23).

According to Chastain (1988), in 1980s speaking became a major goal for many English courses and was practiced through the use of information-gap and other tasks that required learners to attempt for real communication despite the limited proficiency in English. In so doing, communication strategies and negotiation of meaning were developed, both of which were considered essential to the development of oral skills.

This was perhaps due to the fact that speaking a language requires more than simply learning the grammar and the lexicon of that language and requires negotiation of meaning through most effective strategies. Therefore, it seems that the most realistic opportunity teachers can demonstrate to students is to practice the use of second language as a medium of communication during the daily routine of the class. If they speak the language in the class and speak it to express themselves, the class becomes an example of using language to function in a social situation (Nunan, 1989).

Ellis (2000), however, believes that variables of task design influence speaking. According to Nunan (1989), Tasks with a real world rationale

require learners to get involved in the kinds of behaviors they may engage in the world beyond the classroom. He further maintains that tasks with pedagogical rationale, on the other hand, ask learners to do things that are often improbable to occur outside of the classroom.

Two of such tasks are Narrative and Personal tasks. According to Skehan and Foster (1999), narrative tasks are comprised of telling stories based on a set of visual materials. Personal tasks, on the other hand, are based on the experience exchange of learners and are supported by real life topics which are offered by teachers. In this kind of task, learners have negotiation of personal experiences and decisions (Foster & Skehan, 1996). Both of these activities happen frequently in real-life situations and may thus simulate an authentic situation for practicing speaking English.

### **Need of the Study**

This study may provide EFL teachers with a specific language teaching procedure to use in their classroom to enhance their students' speaking ability. Teachers can include task cycling in their daily teaching programs as providing students with the opportunity to perform different kinds of tasks is well worthwhile.

The answer to the research question of this study would be also beneficial for EFL teachers who are faced with lack of time in their classes and cannot use a variety of tasks and can thus focus on the task that is supported by the findings of this study. Therefore, the results of this study may help them to decide on the type of the task that they want to use in their classes. In addition to EFL teachers, the results of this study can be presented to EFL learners and decision-makers in order to improve students' speaking ability by revealing which of the two tasks is more effective on EFL learners' speaking.

### **Hypothesis of the Study**

In this study the following null hypothesis was stated:

"There is no significance difference between the effect of personal and narrative tasks on EFL learners' speaking".

### **Limitation of the Study**

Due to the fact that the researcher is a female teacher and because of the language school regulations, she could not include male participants in this study. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to the male EFL learners.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

The researcher narrowed down the study by including only intermediate level. Most of the advanced learners have reached a high level of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension in their speaking and most of elementary learners may have reached acceptable accuracy but are often not fluent speakers. Their speech is full of hesitation and pausing. Therefore the researcher chose intermediate learners due to the fact that all their speaking components are almost at the same level. Finally, at the intermediate level, the participants can to some extent talk and communicate their meaning in English.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether there was any significant difference between the effect of personal task and narrative task on EFL learners' speaking.

### **Participants**

A preliminary English test was used as a proficiency test for selecting the participants. From among the sample of 100 female intermediate learners, those participants who obtained a score of one standard deviation above and below were selected in the first stage. Therefore, a total number of 60 participants based on their language proficiency and were randomly divided into two experimental groups, each included 30 participants. Then the researcher took a t-test between the speaking mean scores of the two groups to see if they were homogenized in terms of their speaking abilities.

### **Instruments**

In this study, the following instrumentations were used:

- 1- PET (preliminary English test)
- 2- The guidelines related to narrative and Personal tasks instruction
- 3- Oral interview test
- 4- Rating rubrics for oral interview and speaking section of PET

### **Procedure**

To achieve the purpose of the study and to answer the research questions, the following procedures were carried out.

### **Piloting Preliminary English Test**

PET was piloted before selecting the participants of the study. It was administered to 100 students at Zabansara language school having the same characteristics as the target participants. The result of this test was used to estimate item analysis and reliability. No item was discarded from the test.

### **Selecting the Participants**

Having been piloted, the Preliminary English Test was administered to 100 students of Jahad language school. Sixty students were selected who scored one standard deviation below and above the sample mean and were randomly divided into two groups, each containing 30 students. Then, the researcher conducted an independent-samples t-test between the PET speaking mean scores of the two groups to make sure they were homogeneous in terms of their speaking.

### **Instruction in the Narrative Task Group**

Each session the narrative task group received two series of pictures. Each series consisted of ten pictures which were sequenced and numbered from one to 10. Pictures were about different topics including rural life, urban life, Education, parks, cinema, theater, doctor and patient and etc. Working on each series of pictures had four stages. In the first stage which was considered as a warm-up, the teacher showed the class a very big colorful picture based on the topic of a series of pictures. Then, the teacher asked the class to describe the picture for her. During their description they asked the teacher those words which they did not know. The teacher wrote the vocabularies on the board, read them aloud and asked the students to repeat after her. This procedure lasted for 10 minutes.

In the second stage students received the first series of pictures. It showed a story about the topic which was sequenced and numbered from one to 10. The teacher asked the students to compose three groups of five students and share their ideas with each other in each group. During their discussion, the teacher wrote all the new vocabularies of the story on the board, read them aloud, and pointed to the picture of each word in the story picture; This stage took about 10 minutes.

In the third stage, the three groups were supposed to share their stories with each other and with the teacher. During their narration the teacher gave feedback on their pronunciation. For example, when they uttered an incorrect intonation, the teacher repeated the same sentence again and had the students to repeat the sentence after her.

As the students were speaking, the teacher took some notes based on the grammatical mistakes which were committed by the students. At the end, she asked some comprehension questions based on the story. This stage took about 20 minutes.

In the last stage the teacher wrote the grammatical mistakes of the students on the board, corrected them and explained the grammatical rule of the sentences. This stage took about 10 minutes. Generally working on each series of pictures took

about 50 minutes. The same procedure which was used for the first Series of pictures was used for the second series for 50 minutes.

### **Instruction in the Personal Task Group**

The researcher practiced the same topics which were used in the first narrative group in the personal task group. The first stage was considered as the warm-up to prepare the class for the main discussion and gave an idea about the topic. At this stage the teacher wrote the topic on the board and asked the students to tell her whatever they knew about it.

In the second stage the teacher gave them some printed papers that included all the vocabularies with their definitions which were needed for the discussion. The teacher read them aloud and students repeated after her. Then, they were asked to share their experience about that topic. For example, when the topic of discussion was about restaurant, the students discussed their experiences of the times that they went to different fast food and traditional restaurants.

During their discussion, the teacher gave them feedback on their pronunciation, stress, and intonation in the same way which was used in the narrative task group. Also she took some notes from their grammatical mistakes. Then, the teacher wrote two or three questions on the board based on the topic which the students were supposed to discuss. This stage lasted for 30 minutes. In the last stage, the teacher explained on the board the grammatical mistakes which were committed by the students. This stage took 10 minutes. The same procedure was used for the second topic.

### **Administration of the Posttest**

An oral interview which was proposed by Michael Canale (1984), was conducted as the posttest to both experimental groups in order to compare their speaking skill. The interview consisted of a structured conversation between the interviewer and the participants and it included four phases. The time of the interview of each participant was 12 minutes. Each interview was recorded and rated by four raters grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and speaking task designed by Brown (2001).

### **Design**

This research was a quasi-experimental study in which participants were non-randomly selected but randomly divided into two experimental groups and the researcher offered two different instructional treatment. The variables of this study are as follows:

- Independent variable: Instruction mode with two forms of narrative and personal tasks

- Dependent variable: EFL learner's speaking
- Control variable: Language proficiency

students before the treatment in order to homogenize them in terms of their language proficiency. After scoring the PET test, the mean, variance, and standard deviation of the participants' scores were estimated to select a homogenized sample of those students whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean.

### Data Analysis

For analyzing the data of the study, the following procedures were used: the data was obtained from PET which was administered to the

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
TOTAL	100	58.01	1.27	12.71
Valid N (listwise)	100			

The reliability of the 65 items of PET was computed through Cronbach Alpha and came out to be 0.793

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.793	65

The inter-rater consistency was measured through Pearson Product Moment correlation to investigate the correlation between two series of scores that was obtained by the two raters in oral interview posttest to see if the correlation exists.

**Table 3. Correlation between the Two Raters on the Speaking Posttest**

R1 Narrative	Correlation Coefficient Sig. N	R2 Narrative
		.975* .000 30
R1 Personal	Correlation Coefficient Sig. N	R2 Personal
		.988* .000 84
*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)		

Since the correlations were all significant at .01 level (.98 and .99 for narrative and personal group, respectively), the researcher computed the average score of the two ratings for each group. Table 4 demonstrates the final posttest scores for each group based on the average of the two ratings.

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Final Speaking Posttest Scores**

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation	Skewness		
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio
Narrative Task Group	30	8.45	.31	1.7	.552	.427	1.29
Personal Task Group	30	7.85	.34	1.88	.583	.427	1.37
Total	60						

Finally in order to test the research hypothesis, independent samples t-test was used in order to find the differences between the mean scores of the two experimental groups on the posttest.

**Table5. Independent Sample t-test for Comparing Speaking Posttest Mean Scores of Narrative & Personal Task Group**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig	t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)	Meand Difference	Std. Error Difference
Speaking posttes	Equal variances assumed	.329	.568	1.284	58	.204	.593	.462
	Equal variances not assumed			1.284	57.41	.204	.593	.462

According to table 5 there was no significant difference between the posttest mean score of the narrative task and personal task groups. Therefore, the researcher was unable to reject the null hypothesis of the study which stated “ *There is no significant difference between the effect of narrative and personal task on EFL learners’ speaking*”.

### Conclusion

The finding indicated that the students in the narrative task group did not significantly receive better speaking scores in comparison to the students in the personal task group. One justification for the findings might have been the effect of information sharing among the students. Most of the students in the narrative task group and personal task group were classmates in a large public school. Many of them shared the information which was taught and used in their classes because they were really curious about each other and this possibility existed that they may have practiced each other’s treatments in their free time. Another reason might have been the similarity between the two tasks as both of them required learners to talk about the real life topics, discuss with each other, and try to use the new words during their practice.

Although the researcher was not able to find any significant difference between the effect of the two task types on the learners’ speaking, certain merits were identified by the researcher during the study. Throughout the treatments in both groups, the researcher received almost the same feedback from the learners. The most noticeable issue was the progress of the students’ pronunciation which could be attributed to the repetition of the words and phrases as the result of doing the tasks. In both groups, the learners frequently used the new words and phrases while they were talking and giving lectures in turns. The researcher felt the students benefited from both tasks almost at the same level in terms of pronunciation. Therefore, using narrative and personal task in English classes can be a good way or method of improving learners’ pronunciation especially in a short period of time, and English teachers can choose to have narrative or personal

tasks or a combination of the two tasks for boosting the students’ pronunciation.

Vocabularies increased because performing the second important merit the researcher identified as the result of practicing the two tasks was the ability of the learners in both groups to remember the new and difficult vocabularies. Twenty days after the culmination of the treatments and the administration of the post-test, the researcher took a vocabulary test from both groups. The results indicated that almost all the learners could remember 95% of the vocabularies, with the narrative task group having a better performance than the personal task group. The students’ informal comments about this issue indicated that doing these tasks, especially the narrative task, resulted in the establishment of an image about the vocabulary in their minds which in turn resulted in better retention. Therefore, it can be concluded from the findings of this study that there is no significant difference between narrative and personal tasks in improving EFL learners’ speaking and they could be equally effective in improving the speaking, pronunciation, and vocabulary retention of EFL learners. The final conclusion may be that using the combination of these two tasks would better serve the purpose of improving the speaking ability of EFL learners. Conclusively, this study provided another evidence for the effectiveness of using tasks, in general, in EFL contexts.

### Pedagogical Implication

The results of this study can have some pedagogical implications for language teachers, learners, and material developers. In this study the researcher received some positive feedback from the learners in both groups one of which was a higher degree of interaction. The learners asserted they were more enthusiastic to interact and negotiate while performing the task. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986), such an interaction while performing a task facilitates language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning. Thus, EFL teachers can make use of this advantage and include personal task and narrative task in their instruction to encourage their

learners to interact more with each other and negotiate meaning. Moreover, the material developers can include more interactional tasks in EFL books such as personal task and narrative task in which the learners require to interact and negotiate the meaning. Based on the teacher's experience, both narrative task and personal task enhanced the team work among the learners, increased their self-confidence, helped them in problem solving and gave them more responsibility as they were expected to meet the objective of the task. Therefore, EFL teachers should encourage their learners to perform these kinds of tasks to increase their self-confidence and facilitate problem solving.

In addition, as it was indicated before, both narrative task and personal task enhanced learners' pronunciation. Therefore, these two tasks can help EFL learners to improve their pronunciation. Finally, in this research the learner's ability to remember the new and difficult two tasks activated their schematic knowledge. Therefore, the contextual clues which existed in their minds helped them remember the new words better. Thus, EFL teachers in general, and material developers in particular, can make use of this benefit and include more tasks such as personal task and narrative task in their instructional materials which requires learners to activate their schematic knowledge and learn the vocabularies better.

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