

THE EFFECT OF TASK REPETITION ON EFL LEARNERS' ORAL PRODUCTION

Jayarajoo Santhanam

University Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
jayarajooanthanam@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to investigate the effective way of using task repetition on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' oral production and provide some enlightenments to teachers when employ task retelling in teaching English speaking. Learners' oral production was recorded and measured through the level of content integrity and level of speaking fluency. Besides, the two types of knowledge input (visual input and audio input) also been tested in this study. The results of this study indicated that the task repetition improved learners' oral performance in both content integrity and speaking fluency. However, there was no significant difference between the two types of language inputting.

Keywords: *Task repetition, content integrity, speaking fluency, visual input, audio input.*

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been regarded as one of the central research issue in second language acquisition as well as in English language teaching activities which engage learners in real language use through designing different types of tasks. Essentially, a task is a classroom activity that requires learners to use a second language as media in order to achieve certain goals, during which learners are more likely to be involved in cognitive process as natural language use (Ellis, 2003). Different task variables and task features are the priority issues that teachers may confronted with when regarding task as a unit of syllable design. Task repetition is one of the task variables. The advantages of task repetition are many and varied. Previous researchers (Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman, 2005; Ruso, 2007) indicated the requirement for learners to repeat the same task but with different planning time or partners lead to better use of vocabulary and higher level of English fluency and accuracy.

At the same time, researchers in second language acquisition claimed that frequency or task frequency is one of the essential causal factors in SLA. Harrington and Dennis (2002) believed that language learning is to establish the link between the language features, and contact strengthening relies heavily on frequently practice. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the effect of task repetition on EFL learners' oral performance and explore whether different ways of imputing knowledge result diffidently. This study was expected to make contribution to task-based language teaching and provide learners' an effective method to practice their oral English.

Research Objectives

In the task-based language teaching (TBLT), task variables and task features are two main aspects which have direct impact on the results of teaching and learning when task is regarded as a unit of syllable design. Task repetition is one of the task variables that should be taken into consideration. Thus, the purpose of this research is attempted to explore the effects of task repetition on the performance of learners' oral English, particularly in their language fluency. Besides, attempt to investigate the difference of learners' oral production under two kinds of language input; visual input and audio input.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, the following are the research questions for this study.

- (1) Can task repetition exert any effect on the speaking performance of EFL students?
- (2) Is there any difference between visual input and audio input in EFL students' information processing and oral production?

Significance of the Study

This study was carried out to investigate the effects of task repetition on EFL students' oral production. This is significant in task-based language teaching since how to design a task and how to control the task variable place dominant role when task is regarded as a unit of syllable design. Those factors such as planning time of tasks and different ways of knowledge input should be taken into consideration in designing certain tasks for classroom use. Therefore, in task-based language teaching (TBLT), task repetition, as an effective method to improve learners' cognition familiarity and release their mental nervousness, provide significant enlightenments to draw on (Harrington & Dennis, 2002). Teachers should be fully aware of the complexity of task repetition in order to design effective practice methods, make full use of the teaching materials to help students master the knowledge and learning skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous scholars have been explored the attention resources distribution in task completion from the respective of cognition point of view. Many researchers focused on the effect of task characteristics on performance and the impact of different conditions under which tasks were completed (Skehan, 1996). Among them, task repetition was one branch of the study of task conditions.

The study of frequency or task repetition has been a long time, trace back to Skinner in 1969 and Lado in 1964. According to Skinner (1969), the more frequently a language unit appears, the easier to be strengthened and then acquired. Learning language is a process that learners are constantly contact with the language materials and accumulate learning experiences in order to shape a language learning habit. Repeating increased the

contact. For this reason, scholars in two dimensions try to investigate the effect of task repetition.

The first dimension is in second language acquisition. Ellis stated:

“Task frequency is the key to language acquisition, because frequency is not only reflect the distribution of language features but also reflect the experience of contacting this kind of language.”

(Ellis, 2000, p.193)

Attention to language form is considered to be the goal of language learning, but the limitation of attention resources hinders the realization of this goal. In this context, human being is usually pay attention to content rather than language form which brought opposes result. Task repetition is an effective way to shift attention resources from content to language form. It helps learners to reach the goal of language learning.

The second dimension focuses on task-based language teaching (TBLT). Skehan (1996) indicated that task repetition helps learners get familiar with the learning task, each repeat equivalent to a post-planning and rehearse to the next one. Pre-mission preparation helps learners reduce burdens of information processing when completing task, therefore, learners are able to develop language comprehensively. The present study will concentrate on task repetition in task-based language teaching.

Many researchers further proof their evidences. For instance, Hieke (1998) designed a listening, reading practice, expected to explore the influence of task repetition on oral speaking fluency. After training, learners increased significantly in speaking speed. Maurice (1983), Nation (1989) and Arevart & Nation (1991) investigated the 4/3/2 practice repeating method on oral production (in Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). Subjects in this study were requested to retell a same event three times in 4 minutes, 3 minutes and 2 minutes respectively. The result showed that, repeating the same material several times lead to the increase of learners' speaking fluency and accuracy. In Bygate's (1999) study, subjects were required to retell a story and repeat it every three weeks. Conclusion from the findings demonstrated that repeated content has become more complete and accurate. Besides, diversified vocabulary and complicated sentence structure were raised as task been repeated. More recently, Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres and Fernandes-Garcia (1999) also utilized story repetition through retelling same or different stories, learners were able to improve in lexical, vocabulary of oral production. This study also confirmed that task repetition or practice frequently enable learners to get more familiar with the material, so that their attention gradually shifted to control language forms.

In short, the majority of previous studies provided great evidence in the effect of task repetition on learners' oral performance especially on the influence of speaking fluency. Thus, in this study, more attention will be given to explain the reason of why speaking fluency increased with two types of knowledge input. Hence, this study aims to explore an appropriate operation to control task repetition for the sake of better task-based language teaching.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research method. Two participants' oral performance were observed through micro-genetic method which is a new research method developed following cognition psychology in recent two decades. This research method requires researchers with high ability of observation, are able to record the whole process of how learners master a kind of knowledge or skill in a relatively short time (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001). This study was expected to through high density of observation and high accuracy of analysis exploring the effect of task repetition on learners' oral production.

Participants

Two Chinese EFL postgraduate students from the Economy Faculty of University of Malaya were selected for the current study. They are both first semester students and aged at 23. They share the same level of English ability which scored 6 in IELTS speaking test and listening test. In the whole process, the two subjects keep highly positive and cooperative spirit.

Research Instrument

The current study employed two lessons in New Concept 2 as instrument which tell two stories, first is about a girl's experience about catching a storm and how she survived and another is about an interesting event happened in a park. These two stories have 120-140 words and contain about 23 detailed language units. There are no unknown sentence structure and vocabulary for the subjects. In summary, the two stories share the similar level of task difficulty. One participant (Student A) was required to retell the story after reading the context, while, another (Student B) listened to the second story and then repeat what he heard. After each task, the researcher also did an interview to these two students, talking about what difficulties and feelings they came up with when they retell the story.

Research Procedure and Data Collection

It took three days to collect data. In the first day, Student A was requested to repeat the story twice and each time allowing two minutes reading and one minute preparing. In the second day, after only one time reading the subject was required to repeat the story twice. The third day did the same with the second day. At the same time, Student B was tested by listening tape of the second story and required to repeat the story. Two times of repeat each after listening for the first day and only one time of listening and repeat twice for the rest of days. Each task was recorded and transcribed into text form in order to analysis data.

Table 1: Procedure of the Study

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Student A	2 reading 2 retelling	1 reading 2 retelling	1 reading 2 retelling
Student B	2 listening 2 retelling	1 listening 2 retelling	1 listening 2 retelling

The first test was used to analyse whether or not there exist the influence of task repetition on language learners' oral production by observing the student's performance before and after task repetition in terms of two aspects; content integrity and language fluency. Meanwhile, the second test aims to investigate the influence of different ways of input on the performance of second language learners' oral production.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The recorded sample of each task repetition by the two subjects were carefully transcribed and analysed from two aspects. The first is the effect of repeating story on learners' oral performance which can be reflected in content integrity and language fluency. The second finding reflected the difference between visual input and audio input.

The Effect of Task Repetition on Content Integrity

First, I divided the story into small pieces based on detailed content. Each story contains 23 points of content. If the subject accurately retell one point then he can get one score, otherwise lose one mark.

The result of two types of input (Student A used visual input--reading, Student B used audio input-- listening) and their marks are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Content Integrity Table

	1 time	2 time	3 time	4 time	5 time	6 time
Student A	10	16	15	20	20	19
Student B	8	13	13	17	16	16

(Total language point: 23)

From this table we can see two subjects had performed better after repeating the same task, they were able to remember more details of the story and tried to express out in the original words of the text. More specifically, in the fourth time of repeating, two subjects reached the highest mark, after that few fluctuations occurred. In addition, in the third time of repeating, a little decrease appeared which is possibly because of the time gap from first day to the second day. This is undiscovered in previous studies. What's more, we found that both the two subjects performed better in the same day testing, an significant increase can be seen in the same day which means the effects of task repetition works better in a short time period rather than longtime memory. The last two tests failed to show a valuable change that the subjects may had reached the highest limit of their understanding of the text. Therefore, from the content integrity, we can conclude that task repetition can perform better in short time memory and no evidence show that more repeat time will resulted a better performance.

The Effect of Task Repetition on Language Fluency

Fluency means language learners are able to use certain language without improper pause or hesitation in a real situation (Foster & Skehan, 1996). This study uses the rate of speech, “en, er” pause or simple repeat as criteria for fluency rate.

Table 3: Fluency Change

	“en, er” long time pause (times)		Simple repeat (times)		Speed rate (syllable/minutes)	
	Student A	Student B	Student A	Student B	Student A	Student B
First time	10	13	4	7	116	120
Second time	8	10	6	6	120	128
Third time	6	8	5	7	133	130
Fourth time	7	8	6	5	139	140
Fifth time	8	9	6	6	130	133
Sixth time	9	9	6	6	130	129

Generally speaking, fluency change showed an upward trend, but with few fluctuations during the middle of the test. “en, er” and longtime pause decreased significantly both in Student A and Student B, the reason for this could be the subjects were more and more familiar with the text, they were no longer to pause or use “en, er” to manage their understanding of the text. From the interview, students used pause when they tried to manage the right sequence or relate of the text, but after few times of repeating, they were quite familiar with the plot of the story. However, they felt it was still difficult to repeat with the original words or sentences. The number of simple repeats witnessed a few times of fluctuations. This could be explained by the redistribution of attention resources. The subjects attempted to shift from content focused to language focused so that they repeated and added more information. When inputting new information, human attention will be more focused on the content. Therefore, the subjects used simple repeat strategy to obtain more time. It is absolutely that thinking about how to express new information takes more time and fluency decreased. Speed rate comes from: $\text{Speed rate} = (\text{total number of syllables}/\text{time to complete the task})$. Total number of syllables should exclude repeated, reformed and exchanged words or phrases. Based on the result, the speed rate reached the highest level at the third or fourth time, but gradually downed at the following test, the possible reason was that both subjects had reached their memory peak after three or four times of repeating, since it was the best time of short memory of human being. The subjects also felt that they were in best condition after three times of memorizing, but a little bit bore if they were asked to repeat more.

The Difference between Visual Input and Audio Input

Compared to visual input through reading the text, Student A felt it was more difficult in audio test. However, from the final result we can see, there was no significant difference between the two types of language inputting. The possible reason was that, in the audio input (listening) the subject paid more attention to understand the plot, rather than memorising the content. Therefore, he performed well in content integrity but less satisfied in language fluency. Interestingly, audio subject used the original words and sentences more frequently.

Task Repetition in Classroom Use

The study of task repetition should be taken into teaching practice. Actually, this method has been highly applied in classroom. However, so rules and principle of how to control the quantities of task repeat, and how to choose the appropriate knowledge input should be given more attention. Task repetition could be applied into teaching practice in the following ways:

- *Teachers should moderate the times of retelling.*
This study showed that more than three times of repetition could not ensure better command of a language of the subject. Besides, subjects are more likely to perform better oral production in a relaxed and friendly setting. More pressure will only increase the anxiety and negative attitude towards learning.
- *Multiple-inputting of knowledge.*
Knowledge input should base on a principle that from simple to complex. Different students may prefer different inputting. Therefore, teachers should provide either one way or multi-way inputting and others more diversified methods.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that:

- (1) Task repetition improves language learners' oral performance in terms of content integrity, speaking fluency to some extent in which happened in both visual input and audio input.
- (2) Different ways of knowledge input require learners to pay attention on different places. Visual input requires more attention on words and sentences, while, audio input needs more attention on content of text.

The outcome of this study confirmed the findings of Bygate (1999; 2001) and Gass, Mackey, Alvarez-Torres and Fernandes-Garcia (1999), that the task repetition enable to increase the quality of learners' oral production, particularly in language fluency. Meanwhile, this study also examined the difference between visual input and audio input in order to provide diversified method to meet the needs of individual learner. However, the

result showed that there was no significant difference between the two types of language inputting.

More efforts should be assigned to real teaching. In the modern foreign language teaching, various tasks were found in classroom but a few of them focused on repeat the same or similar teaching materials. Therefore, students have been in a consistent changing language environment. A lot of attention resources are consumed in the adaption of unfamiliar type of tasks rather than strengthen their previous knowledge. This study tells us, task repetition not only works on the fluency of learners' oral production but also works on different type of input. In task-based language teaching, selecting and designing task should not only focus on the variety of task itself, but more thinking and controlling must be provided when instructing students to complete a task. Therefore, students' potential was explored in more effective way, leaning became more active and interesting, and learners are gradually master the knowledge as well as learning skills.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study provides some valuable information and discussions to the perspectives of task repetition in task-based language teaching (TBLT). However, these findings should be viewed in light of some limitations.

- *Inadequate sample size.*
This study belongs to qualitative research paradigm, employed micro-genetic method through carefully observing and analysing of data, seeking to investigate the better use of task repetition. However, data collected from two participants only, which was hard to be generalized. For future study, more samples are essential. Besides, how to choose these samples should be considered, randomly or based on certain criteria. The choice of samples can impact the result of the study directly.
- *Short time of data collection.*
Only three days of data collection is obviously inadequate. This study spent three days of data collection. Subjects were required to retell the story six times in total. The time of testing was too close to each other. A question was raised if more time allowed and more time of repeating required, wasn't there any difference to the original outcome? Researchers in their future work should control the testing time more rigorously.
- *Other extraneous variables.*
In qualitative research, apart from dependent variable and independent variable, usually other extraneous variables would have impact on the result (Ellis, 2003). In this study, the main interference variables include the speaking ability of the two subjects, the anxiety level, the environment of testing and subjects' self-planning of oral production. As testing in the first day, subjects felt nervous when the material was given at the first time. For future improvement, researchers could select subjects randomly, create a relaxed testing environment and inform subjects about the purpose of the study which may reduce the effects of extraneous variables.

REFERENCES

- Arevart, P. (1991). Fluency improvement in a second language. *RELC Journal*, 22(1), 1.
- Bygate, M. (1999). Task as context for the framing, reframing and unframing of language. *System*, 27, 33-48.
- Bygate, M. (2001). Effects of task repetition on the structure and control of oral language. In M. Bygate, P. Skehan, & M. Swain, (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing* (pp. 23-48). Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Bygate, M., Skehan, P. & Swain, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Researching Pedagogic Tasks: Second Language Learning, Teaching and Testing*. London, UK: Longman.
- Ellis, R. (2000). Task-based research and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 193-220.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, P. & Skehan, P. (1996). The influence of planning on performance in task-based learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18, 299-324.
- Foster, P. & Skehan, P. (1997). Modifying the task: The effects of surprise, time and planning type on task based foreign language instruction. *Thames Valley University Working Papers in English Language Teaching*, 4, 86-109.
- Foster, P. & Skehan, P. (1999). The influence of source of planning and focus of planning on task-based performance. *Language Teaching Research*, 3(3), 215-247.
- Gass, S., Mackey, A., Alvarez-Torres, M. J. & Fernandez-Garcia, M. (1999). The effects of task repetition on linguistic output. *Language Learning*, 49, 549-581.
- Gass, S., Mackey, A. & Ross-Feldman, L. (2005). Task based interactions in classroom and laboratory settings. *Language Learning*, 55(4), 575-611.
- Harrington, M. & Dennis, S. (2002). Input-driven language learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24, 261-268.
- Hieke, A. E. (1998). On the dynamics of casual and careful speech. Retrieved March, 2016, from <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED420173>
- Ruso, N. (2007). The influence of task based learning on EFL classrooms. *Asian EFL Journal*, 18, Article 2. Retrieved April, 2016, from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_February_2007_nr.php
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17, 38-62.