

## AN INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTS OF RECIPROCAL AND NON-RECIPROCAL LISTENING TASKS ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING ABILITY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Recent research into task-based language teaching and learning claims that manipulation of task characteristics and processing conditions can focus a learner's attention on the competing goals of accuracy, complexity, and fluency. The objective of this study is to understand whether reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks have different effects on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability in terms of fluency. For this purpose, forty students of intermediate level were chosen and then randomly were assigned into two groups of experimental and control groups. Data analysis showed that performing reciprocal listening tasks had different effects on students' fluency, compared to those that didn't receive these types of activities. Based on the results of this study, it is imperative that teachers consider the types of listening activities that can have influence over language learners' speaking ability.*

**KEYWORDS:** Input, Reciprocal Listening Task (Interactive), Non-Reciprocal listening Task (Non-Interactive), Fluency

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### INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching and learning grew out of analytical approach to language pedagogy. Task based teaching was popularized by Prabhu while working in Bangalore, India. Prabhu (1987) deserves a credit for originating the task – based teaching and learning based on the concept that effective learning occurs when students are fully engaged in language tasks, rather than just learning about language. Task based learning offers a holistic language experience. It can be traced back to Hymes (1972), who proposed that knowing a language involves more than knowing a set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological rules.

There are two main sources of evidence which justify the use of tasks in language classes. As Lynch and Maclean (2000, p.80) mention, “the first source of justifications for task-based learning is what we might term the ecological one: 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.” Task-based language teaching is also discussed from a psycholinguistic perspective. Ellis (2000) noted that “From a 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/or for language acquisition from some theoretical standpoint” (p.197). Ellis (2006) asserts that “tasks reduce the cognitive or linguistic demands placed on the learner” (p.23).

The main purpose of this study is to optimize the learners' production by focusing on reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks used in Iranian EFL learners' educational system and the influence these types of listening tasks have on improvement of the speaking ability.

## **Research Question and Hypothesis**

The present study attempted to answer the question raised about the impact of ‘reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening task on Iranian EFL learners’ oral performance. The objective of the study can be expressed in the following question:

Do reciprocal listening tasks improve the “fluency” of Iranian EFL learners’ speech as compared to non-reciprocal listening tasks?

According to the above question, the following research hypothesis was developed. The negative counterpart was the null one.

Reciprocal listening tasks don’t improve the “fluency” of Iranian EFL learners’ speech as compared to non-reciprocal task.

## **REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Strong and Weak version of CLT**

Howatt (1984, cited in Ellis, 2003) distinguishes two versions for CLT namely *weak* and *strong* version. Weak version claims that "the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught" (p.28). In this respect, a weak version of CLT reflects White's (1988) Type A approach to language teaching, i.e., an interventionist and analytic approach. Thus, a weak version of CLT proposes teaching learners how to realize specific notions such as 'duration' and 'possibility' and language functions such as 'inviting' and 'apologizing' instead of teaching them the structural properties of language (Ellis, 2003).

In contrast, a strong version of CLT is based on the assumption that, language is acquired through communication. It means that "learners do not first acquire language as a structural system and then learn how to use this system in communication but rather, discover the system itself in the process of learning how to communicate" (Ellis, 2003, p.28). Therefore, the strong version of CLT involves providing opportunities for learners to experience the use of language in communication. This approach reflects White's (1988, cited in Ellis, 2003) Type B approach, i.e., a non-interventionist and holistic approach.

### **Types of listening**

There are many different types of listening. According to Nunan (1999), we can classify listeners in relation to whether they take part in the interaction (known as reciprocal listening) or they have no time or chance to provide answers and they are cast in the role of non-reciprocal ‘eavesdropper’ on a conversation.

### **Classification of Production Variables**

Ellis (2003, p.117) discusses the results obtained by the different studies in relation to production variables. The following table classifies some of the specific measures used in the various studies in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity:

**A classification of production variables used in Task-based research**

**Dimensions**

**Measures**

**1 Fluency**

- number of words per minute
- number of syllables per minute
- number of pauses of one/two second(s) or longer
- mean length of pauses
- number of repetitions
- number of false starts
- number of reformulations
- length of runs, i.e. number of words per pausally defined unit.
- number of words per turn

**2 Accuracy**

- number of self- corrections
- percentage of error-free clauses
- target –like use of verb tenses
- target-like use of articles
- target-like use of vocabulary
- target-like use of plurals
- target-like use of negation
- ration of indefinite to definite articles

**3 Complexity**

- number of turns per minute
- anaphoric reference (as opposed to exophoric reference)
- lexical richness, e.g. number of word families used, percentage of lexical to structural words , type- token ratio
- proportion of lexical verbs to copula
- percentage of words functioning as lexical verbs
- percentage of occurrence of multi propositional utterances
- amount of subordination ,e.g. total number of clauses divided by total number of c-units
- frequency of use of conjunctions
- frequency of use of prepositions
- frequency of hypothesizing statements

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Adapted from Ellis (2003, p.117)

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 40 male intermediate students studying English at a private language institute whose main focus is on communicative approach toward language learning and teaching. The sample was selected out of a population of 70 intermediate students using the Preliminary English Test (PET). Those whose scores ranged from 50-60 out of 65 were selected to participate in the study.

### **Instrumentations**

The Preliminary English Test (PET) was used to see if the two groups are homogeneous in terms of their L2 proficiency.

The participants' PET scores were entered into an 'Independent Samples t-test', the results of which confirmed the two groups' initial homogeneity. After ensuring the initial homogeneity of the groups in general language proficiency, the pretest including four speaking tasks was administered, and on the basis of the scores obtained from the pretest, the students were classified into two groups: Experimental and Control groups.

Computers, cassettes and tape recorder, microphones and post-test were other key instruments for recording the oral production of all the participants of the study.

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of the program the PET exam including three sections of listening, reading and writing were administered to assure the initial homogeneity of the groups in terms of their L2 proficiency, then the pretest including five speaking tasks was administered. The tasks were written on sheets of paper and handed on to the students to read and answer them orally. All oral answers were taped-recorded and then transcribed. In order to score the oral pretest data the raters listened to each audio-tape recording and then transcribed it. Fluency' measurement was achieved by calculating the number of words per minute.

The instructional treatment was provided during five sessions, each of which lasted approximately 30 minutes. In control group, the students were asked to answer the listening tasks in the form of multiple-choice questions without any interaction between the teacher and students. Experimental group received the same listening tasks but the difference was that before answering the multiple-choice questions, the researcher asked questions about the listening tasks such as wh-questions and descriptive questions. At the end of the program, the participants in both groups were post- tested. The post- testing procedure was exactly the same as pretesting. Five speaking tasks were administered in one session. The procedure for scoring the posttest was the same as the pretest. The speeches of the participants in second performance were transcribed by the researcher in order to measure. The transcriptions were coded, and evaluated in terms of fluency.

### **Measures**

In order to score the data the measures used by Foster and Skehan (1997) were adapted for scoring the 'fluency of the participants' performance. Fluency' measurement was operationalized as the number of words per minute.

## Design

This study employed an experimental design, in which participants in the control group completed the listening tasks, and participants in the experimental group completed the same listening tasks along with an independent variable as 'structured interaction' in which the organization and procedure of the interaction, as well as the questions and the order in which they were presented was constructed by the researcher in order to make more interaction between the teacher and students or between the students themselves. Participants in the study were 40 adult learners of English at the intermediate level.

## Statistical Procedures

In this study, the following statistical analysis and procedures were utilized in order to analyze the collected data:

1. Independent Samples Test was utilized to compare the means of each group's PET examination scores to see the homogeneity of two groups, and
2. Independent Samples Test was utilized to compare the means of each group's task response characteristics in pretest and posttests in terms of fluency.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In order to test our hypothesis and to investigate the way 'Structured Interaction' affected task response characteristics of participants the researcher employed the measures to obtain every participant's score for fluency. In the following sections, discussion of descriptive statistics employed for comparing the means for research question of the study, and the Levene's Test for equality of variances in both participants' PET examination and task response characteristics in terms of fluency will be explained.

Table 1 depicts the results of descriptive statistics and an independent t-test. The necessary condition for comparison of the means is the equality of variance in both control and experimental groups, which is shown by Levene's test for equality of variances.

**Table 1: Independent Samples Test for the homogeneity of control and experimental groups**

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		Sig. (2-tailed)
					F	Sig.	T	df	
PET scores	Control	20	54.800	3.054	1.293	.263	.507	38	.615
	Experimental	20	54.350	2.540					

As the results of Table 1 show, regarding the significance level of Leven's test (0.263), which is more than 0.05, equality of variances is verified.

The mean score of the PET test in control group is (54.8), and in experimental group (54.3). Significance of the t-test was calculated, 0.615. As the significance of t-test is higher than 0.05, therefore equality of PET scores' means in two groups of control and experimental is not rejected. As a result, the means of PET scores in control and experimental group do not have meaningful difference, so these two groups are homogeneous.

### Results of the Pretest

A t-test analysis was run to determine if there was any statistically significant difference in scores of the pretest, measuring fluency of participants' oral performance.

### Comparison of the "fluency" of two groups in pretest

The results of descriptive analysis for the fluency of discourse produced by the control group and experimental group are shown in Table 2. The pretest mean scores were 75.9 for control group and 75.9 for experimental group and the standard deviations were 3.84 for the control group and 3.89 for experimental group.

(Table2) Descriptive Statistics of the Pretest results

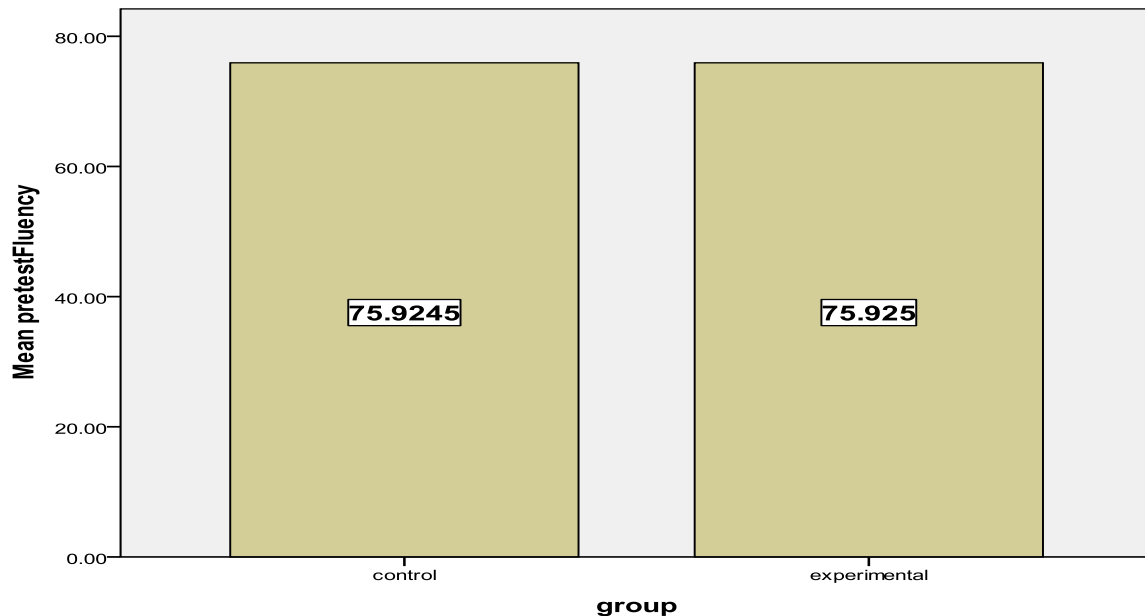
group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
control	20	75.9245	3.84369	.85948
experimental	20	75.9250	3.89527	.87101

(Table3) Independent Samples t- test for the comparison of 'fluency' means in pretest

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Pretest Fluency	Equal variances assumed	.021	.886	.000	38	1.000	-.00050	1.22366	-2.47768	2.47668
	Equal variances not assumed			.000	37.993	1.000	-.00050	1.22366	-2.47769	2.47669

Independent sample t- test was utilized to compare the fluency scores of two groups. The necessary condition for comparing the means is the equality of variances of the control and experimental groups. Therefore, Levene's Test for equality of variances was utilized to compare the variances of two groups. As the results of Table 3 show, Significance of Leven's test is calculated, (.886), which is more than 0.05; therefore, equality of variances is verified. Mean scores of fluency in Control group is calculated ( $M=75.924$ ,  $SD=3.84$ ) and in experimental group is ( $M=75.925$ ,  $SD=3.89$ ). Significance of the t-test is calculated, (1.0). As

the significance of t-test is higher than 0.05, therefore equality of means of fluency scores in two groups of control and experimental in pretest is not rejected. As a result, there doesn't seem meaningful difference between the fluency score of control and experimental groups. This difference is not statistically significant ( $P>0.05$ ,  $df=38$ ,  $t=.000$ ). These means differences are clearly illustrated in Figure 1 which displays the means for fluency variable in both control and experimental groups in pretest.



**Figure 1 Comparison of the means of fluency scores**

### Results of the post-test

The results of descriptive analysis for the fluency of discourse produced by the control (non-reciprocal) group, and experimental (reciprocal) group in performing a listening task are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the post test results**

group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
control	20	76.7060	3.73071	.83421
experimental	20	86.6720	4.04232	.90389

**Table 5:Independent Samples t- test for the comparison of ‘fluency’ means in post test**

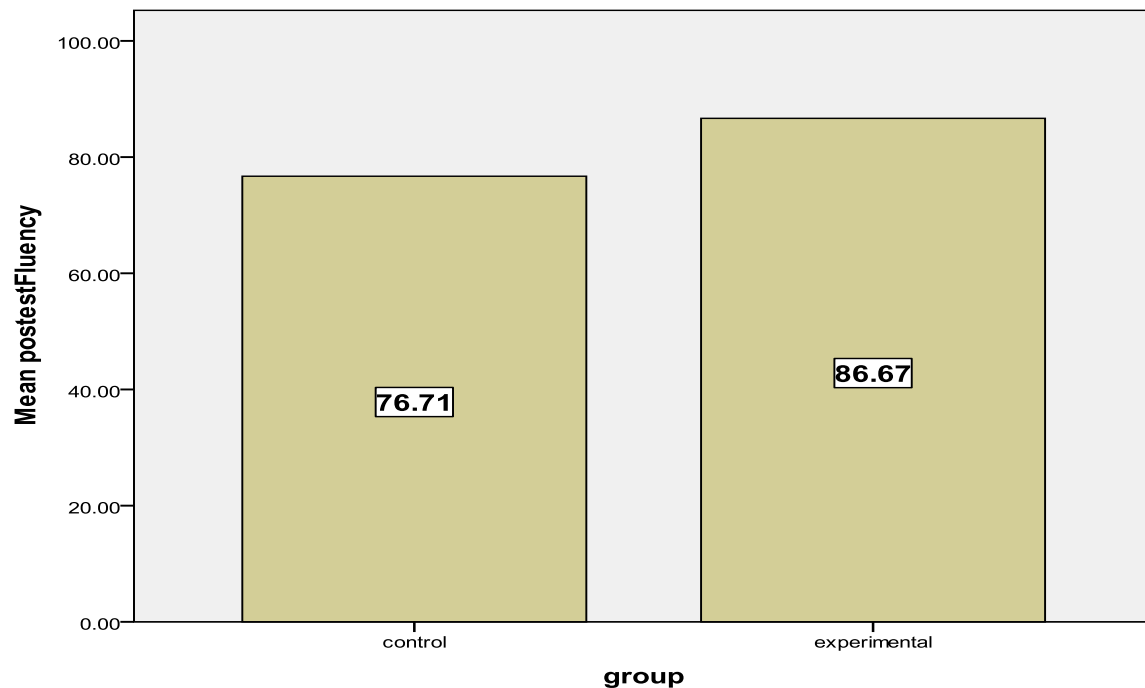
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Posttest Fluency	Equal variances assumed	.005	.944	-8.102	38	.000	-9.96600	1.23001	-12.45603	-7.47597
	Equal variances not assumed			-8.102	37.758	.000	-9.96600	1.23001	-12.45655	-7.47545

Independent samples t-test was utilized to compare the fluency scores of two groups. Again the necessary condition for comparing the mean differences is the equality of variances of the control and experimental groups. Therefore, Levene's Test for equality of variances was utilized to compare the variances of two groups. As the results of Table 5 show, regarding the significance level of Leven's ( $P > 0.05$ ,  $df = 38$ ,  $t = -8.102$ ) (sig, .944) which is more than 0.05, equality of variances is verified.

Mean scores of fluency in control group is ( $M = 76.70$ ,  $SD = 3.73$ ), and in experimental group is ( $M = 86.67$ ,  $SD = 4.04$ ). Significance of the t-test is 0.000. Because the significance of t-test is smaller than 0.05, therefore Null Hypothesis (equality of fluency mean scores in two groups of Control and Experimental) is rejected. Consequently, mean scores of fluency in Experimental group is meaningfully higher than the Control group in post -test.

These means differences are clearly illustrated in Figure 2 which displays the means for fluency variable in both control and experimental groups. Comparison of the means presented in Figure 2 shows that the participants who were provided with ‘structured interaction’ produced more fluent discourse.





**Figure 2 Comparison of the means of fluency scores**

## DISCUSSION

The immediate study focused on the effects of “structured interaction” in listening tasks on intermediate EFL learners’ oral performance. The underlying reason in this study is that Iranian English teachers, trying to teach spoken English, don’t pay enough attention to effects of reciprocal and non-reciprocal listening tasks on speaking ability. Dependent variable measured was ‘fluency’ (operationalized as the number of words per minute). Chang and Read (2006) state that listening is a kind of ability that requires variety of features such as linguistic, paralinguistic and even pragma linguistic which must support the students while they are listening. So the present study intended to provide the EFL learners with some supports by making them aware of the task response characteristics in terms of ‘fluency’ through raising attention by means of ‘structured interaction’. The findings of the study are also supported by Swain’s (1985) output hypothesis, that in order to speak we have to actually speak. Through interactional listening task, learners may be pushed to notice their problems and try to overcome tensions between a concern to be fluent, a concern to be accurate, and a concern to take risks and use more complex language which is needed to be balanced and try to repair them in the second attempt, because “under certain circumstances, output promotes noticing” (Swain, 1998, p. 67).

It was found that ‘structured interaction’ in listening task resulted in the high number of words per minute in the participants’ discourse. The low number of words per minute was observed in the performance of the participants who experienced the ‘without structured interaction’ technique. It can be explained by hypothesizing that making interaction between students enables the participants set the conversation goals and organize the conversation content. This organization would result in less processing load and more self-confidence for each interactant, which according to Yuan and Ellis (2003), would in turn lead to greater fluency.

## **IMPLICATION TO RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The most important contribution of this study is that it provides learners and L2 educators with a clear explanation of how ‘structured interaction’ through listening task affected the L2 learners’ performance in terms of fluency. Regarding the results of the study, it is predicated that the purpose of a task is an important factor which contributes to the decision as to provide ‘structured interaction’. The present study has implications for both pedagogy and research. In terms of pedagogical practice, the findings of this study suggest that ‘structured interaction’ through listening task can promote an optimal balance of attention between the planning of meaning and planning of form in language production. There are certain likely implications taken from this study for language teachers and material preparation experts. Teachers can include ‘structured interaction’ in their daily teaching of listening tasks. Providing students with the opportunity to interact between teacher and students while performing listening tasks is well worthwhile. Listening and interaction with teacher or with other students enable learners to work with a language problem in a reasonably stable site.

Based on the results of the present study, ‘structured interaction’ through listening task is suggested as complementary methodological options for taking care of language form where meaning negotiation has centrality. It can help learners to integrate what they already know into what they do.

## **CONCLUSION**

According to Ellis (2003), the aim of a task-based class is stimulating language use, activating whatever language the students have, and providing learning opportunities for students. With regard to the discrepancy among the researchers, it seems that it will be better for both the teachers and researchers to explore various ways of improving L2 production, particularly on fluency. Thus the main concern of this study was to investigate the probability of enhancing the fluency of Iranian EFL learners’ task-based oral performance through listening tasks.

In this research the researcher presented ‘structured interaction’ technique as a way of maintaining an acceptable means of improving fluency. The findings of the present study indicated that the experimental group performance in terms of fluency was more accurate than the control group’s fluency.

### **Future Study**

In order to enable better accumulation of knowledge in this research, sufficient numbers of primary studies are needed. Hopefully, the issues raised and discussed in this work have offered insights for improving research practices. Replication studies are obviously advisable in order to permit greater confidence in the results. The following areas for further research are suggested:

1. Replication of the study for male vs. female learners;
2. Replication of the study with different age group;

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