

THE EFFECT OF TASK REPETITION ON IMPROVING IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' ACCURACY AND COMPLEXITY IN WRITING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: *Considering that accuracy and complexity are assumed to be intrinsic qualities of performance in all kinds of tasks, the present study aimed at investigating the effects of task repetition as one type of planning on accuracy and complexity in the written production of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). About 40 female Iranian intermediate level EFL learners were randomly selected and divided into two groups (control and experimental). The experimental group received treatment for four sessions where the researchers explicitly focused their attention on the accuracy and complexity loads of their writings by repeating the writing task. The researchers made the participants in the experimental group conscious of where they could use accurate and complex sentences to increase the loads of accuracy and complexity in their writings. However, the control group did not have their writings repeated or checked for cases of accuracy and complexity. The results of immediate post-test showed that task repetition affected positively the accuracy and complexity of the participants' writings in the experimental group. Also, task repetition left its long-term effect one month after the treatment ended. The pedagogical implication is that task repetition is an effective way to improve the learner's writing skills in terms of accuracy and complexity.*

Key terms: Accuracy; Complexity, Task repetition, Long-term effect, Writing skills

Introduction

Ability to write effectively is a main drive to learn a foreign language for many language learners. Skehan (1996) suggests that this general goal is concerned with improving three main areas or dimensions of performance: accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Skehan (1996, p. 46) defines accuracy as concerned with "a learner's capacity to handle whatever level of interlanguage complexity she has currently attained". Therefore, if learners attempt to produce language more accurately, they place their focal attention on form rather than content. According to McLaughlin and Heredia (1996), learners need to control their writings for linguistic elements that they have already acquired. Therefore, controlled processing is preferred over automatic processing. They also point out that since automatic processes develop out of controlled processes, accuracy is considered to be essential for the way language develops and becomes automatic.

Review of Literature

However, according to Skehan (1996, p. 46), complexity is considered to be “the stage and elaboration of the underlying interlanguage system”. But fluency is concerned with “the learner’s capacity to mobilize an interlanguage system to communicate meaning in real time” (Skehan, *ibid*). According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), when learners are producing more fluent language they are prioritizing meaning over form. To improve accuracy, fluency, and complexity, task repetition is viewed to be an effective strategy. According to Ellis (2005, 2008), task repetition is crucially a type of planning. Bygate and Samuda (2005, p. 43) suggest that task repetition is the “repetition of the same or slightly altered task- whether the whole tasks, or parts of a task”.

Bygate (2001) puts forward the theoretical support for the hypothesis that task repetition can help language performance. He (2001, p. 29) believes that this ensues from the fact that “part of the job of conceptualization, formulation, and articulation done at the first time is stored in the learners’ memory and could be used for second time”. Also, another supporting argument comes from Ellis (2008) where he believes that task repetition provides opportunity for the learner to have much more processing time to attend to both form and content of the message. Consequently, as Ellis (2003) suggests, this will increase the quantity of the output, the quality of fluency, and complexity. Here, attention and the role that task repetition can have on language acquisition is highlighted. Attention has been the central focus of research in cognitive psychology (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan, 2003). For example, Skehan (2003) considers attention as a system which is limited in capacity and once learners fasten their attention on one aspect of the language production, some other aspects are possibly to suffer. This is the basis for his idea that a learner’s language production should be divided into fluency, accuracy, and complexity and that each of these should be treated separately. Elsewhere, Skehan (1998) argued that allocation of focal attention to each of these language elements would result in various consequences for learning. For instance, fastening the focal attention on accuracy allows learners to produce slower and less complex speech, but enables them to speak with more confidence. However, complete obsession with complexity encourages learners to produce novel structures of language features, of course, with the risk of making mistakes. Finally, dedicating focal attention on fluency leaves less attention to accuracy and complexity (see also, Skehan & Foster, 1997). This idea finds support in Shiffrin and Schneider’s (1977) Controlled and Automatic processing where they consider that the amount of attention devoted to a task and the degree of practice with the material in the task are the two important elements involved in decreasing the amount of attempt in performing a cognitive task. They introduced a model in order to account for these results in which different tasks required various degrees of processing. Using controlled and automatic as two modes of processing, they stated that automatic processing occurs where a task needs little attention and processing energy. However, controlled processing occurs as a result of a task involving intense focus of attention and a large number of mental operations to process.

Anderson’s (1983) Adaptive Control of Thought (generally called, ACT*, pronounced “act-star”) is another refined model that has been put forward in a detailed account of human cognition. According to Bygate and Samuda (2005, p. 45), task repetition has two phases:

A first enactment of a task, in which learners are likely to organize the cognitive content, scope out the likely useful lexico-grammar, and process it in real time, generating an experientially derived multi-level schema to support subsequent linguistic work; followed by a second enactment, during which the speaker can build on the previous one.

There is plethora of research (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Bygate, 1996, 1999; Gass et.al, 1999; Bygate, 2001; Lynch & MacLean, 2000, 2001) which supports the idea that task repetition influences positively the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of the language used by the learner. For example, Skehan and Foster (1997) found that planning can raise the fluency, complexity, and accuracy with which tasks are performed. They also showed that detailed planning increased complexity and undetailed planning affected accuracy positively. Bygate (1999) suggests that task repetition could help develop the process of integration. A study by Gass et.al (1999) revealed that task repetition affected positively the linguistic output of L2 Learners of Spanish. They also indicated that task repetition impacts on the inclusive proficiency, incomplete accuracy, and lexical complexity. Lynch and MacLean (2000, 2001) reached the conclusion that task repetition not only affected positively the accuracy but also had positive effects on fluency in language production.

Yuan and Ellis's (2003) comparison of the effects of pre-task and on-line planning on learners' accuracy, complexity, and fluency in performing a narrative task revealed that careful on-line planners who were allowed to take more time for task completion produced both more accurate and complex languages. According to Willis (2004), the pre-task phase provides some options for learners. For example, some can be performed with the class or some others can be played on a video or cassette player. This will help students feel more secure if teachers or others show them how to do the task.

In an Iranian context, Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2010) indicated that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition enhanced accuracy significantly in oral production. Wang (2009), and Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012) showed that developing greater accuracy entails rehearsal through strategic planning and repetition and monitoring through on-line planning and using post-tasks. To the knowledge of the researchers no study has ever reported the effects of task repetition on the accuracy and complexity of Iranian EFL learners in their written production. Therefore, the present study was motivated to examine whether task repetition as an effective strategy (also supported in the literature) improves the learners' accuracy and complexity in a private language institute in Tabriz, Iran, and if so, whether this technique leaves its effects in the long term (one month after the end of the treatment) on the learners' accuracy and complexity.

The Study

Research design and procedures

The study included two groups: the participants were randomly selected and divided into two groups (experimental and control) based on their performances on a proficiency test. Then, they were given a pre-test which involved the participants to write on a certain topic. Next to insure the reliability of the scores of the learners, the researchers invited a colleague (who was an EFL teacher) to score the papers both during the pre-test and post-test phases.

The reliability estimates were high and ranged from 76% to 99%. When the researchers finished checking the papers for accuracy and complexity, they handed back the papers of the participants in the experimental group to check their cases of inaccurate and incomplex sentences. Then, they explicitly focused the attention of the participants in the experimental group on accuracy and complexity loads of their writings by repeating the writing task. It took five sessions for the researchers to repeat the task and practice this by all the participants one by one. The rationale for the use of task repetition technique, as Gass et al (1999), Bygate (2001), and Lynch and MacLean (2000, 2001) indicated, is that, it intensifies learners' fluency and complexity and has positive effects on the learners' incomplete accuracy. By the same token, Levi (1988, pp. 76-77) argues that we know things through working with them, through experiences "marked by love and by hatred, by silent, furious battles, enthusiasm and weariness, victory and defeat, resulting in more and more reined knowledge". However, the participants in the control group were not given back the writing assignments and they just followed the regular patterns of their classroom activities. When the researchers finished repeating the task for the participants in the experimental group, they gave an immediate post-test to both groups (experimental and control) to see whether the task repetition improved the writings of the participants in the experimental group in terms of accuracy and complexity. One month later, a delayed post-test was given to both of the groups (experimental and control) to examine whether the repetition of the writing task left its effect in the long term.

Participants of the study

First, about 40 participants ranging in age from 16 to 26 comprised the main participants of the study. It is necessary to note that the participants were of the intermediate level of proficiency. Due to the unavailability of male participants, only female participants were included in the study, and the researchers investigated whether task repetition improves the Iranian female EFL learners' accuracy and complexity in their writing skill.

Research instruments

The following books were employed in the present paper:

Nelson's Proficiency Test and Steps to Understanding (Hill, 1980).

In order to make sure that the participants were of the same proficiency level, they were given a proficiency test. This test consisted of three sections: A) a grammar test which had fifteen items; B) a vocabulary test which had fifteen items, and finally C) a 15-item reading comprehension test consisting of three passages with accompanying items. In fact, it was a test which had *grammar* and *vocabulary* sections from the Nelson's Test (1976) and *reading comprehension* test from *Steps to Understanding*.

Pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test

After the researchers were assured that the participants were at the same proficiency level, they were first given a pre-test and two weeks later an immediate post-test. To examine whether the task repetition had any effects on the participants' writing in the long term the researchers

administered a delayed post-test to them. Both pre-test and the post-tests were about the same topic, namely “*describe a person which is important in your personal life*”. Maximum effort was made to choose a topic with which the participants had enough familiarity and that appealed to their interest. Bygate (1991) argued that when the learner is familiar with a task, planning the message will be an easy job. Also to paraphrase Bygate (2001) and Ellis (2003), if learners know what they talk or write about, they have much more processing time for expressing their opinions.

Data analysis

The Independent-Samples t-test was employed as an appropriate statistical formula to reveal any differences between the two groups (experimental and control). Basing their framework on Errasti (2003), Larsen-freeman (2006), and Storch and Wigglesworth (2009), the researchers measured the accuracy of writing of the participants by dividing the total number of error-free T-units by the total number of T-units. Spelling errors were tolerated as far as the meanings of words were preserved. Once counted, they were not taken into account if they were repeated on later occurrences. Errors of capitalization, prepositions, punctuation and errors of lexical choices were not counted unless they hindered comprehension. Likewise, complexity was measured by calculating the percentage of dependent clauses to total number of clauses. To do this, the researchers first counted the total number of dependent and independent clauses and then dependent clauses. Then, they divided the total number of dependent clauses by the total number of clauses (both dependent and independent) for each text.

Results and Discussion

The results of the Independent Samples T-Test in the pre-test did not show any significant differences in the accuracy and complexity loads of the participants’ writings since the probability value marked as Sig was more than 0.05, as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the pre-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	20	0.8417	0.4226	0.0793	0.0637	0.832	0.311
2	20	0.8365	0.4420	0.0745	0.0551		

Notes: 1= Experimental Group 2= Control Group

In fact, all this, once again, shows that the participants in the two groups (experimental and control) were homogeneous in terms of their English proficiency to write accurate and complex sentences. Once we were made sure that the two groups were approximately equal (see Table 4.1) more specifically in terms of the use of accurate and complex sentences, we were safe to address the following research questions.

Research questions:

RQ1. Does task repetition have any effect on the intermediate level Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in writing in the immediate post-test?

As explained above, no significant differences were observed between the control and experimental groups in terms of producing accurate and complex sentences in their writings. However, the participants in the two groups demonstrated different performances regarding accuracy and complexity loads of their writings in the immediate post-test. As shown in Table 4.2., the experimental group had a higher mean value and performed better than the control group (Sig. was less than 0.05). Thus, it is concluded that task repetition has significant effects on the intermediate level Iranian EFL learners' accuracy in their written production.

Table 4.2 Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the immediate post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	20	0.93430	0.6561	0.04670	0.0915	<i>0.001</i>	
2	20	0.8649	0.4334	0.0766	0.0480		

Notes: 1= Experimental Group 2= Control Group

RQ2. Does task repetition have any effect on the intermediate level Iranian EFL learners' complexity in writing in the immediate post-test?

Like the accuracy result, the experimental group had a higher mean value and outperformed the control group regarding the complexity in the immediate post-test for the reason that the probability value marked as Sig was less than 0.05 (see Table 4.2). Therefore, we conclude that task repetition has significant effect on the intermediate level Iranian EFL learners' complexity in their written production.

The results support Gass et al's (1999), Bygate (1996, 2001), Skehan and Foster, (1997), Lynch and MacLean (2000, 2001), and Bygate and Samuda's studies (2005) who found that task repetition affected significantly fluency and complexity of the learners' performances, Also, task repetition has effect on the inclusive proficiency, incomplete accuracy, and lexical complexity. It is also in line with the argument that task repetition had positive impacts on accuracy.

It lent support to Ahmadian and Tavakoli's (2010) study who revealed that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition enhanced accuracy and complexity significantly in oral production.

The present study also corroborated Wang (2009), Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012) that developing greater accuracy entails rehearsal through strategic planning and repetition, and monitoring through on-line planning and using post-tasks.

RQ3. What is the effect of task repetition on the Iranian EFL intermediate level learners' accuracy and complexity (taken together) in writing?

Research question number three was formulated to see whether the two groups differed in the use of both complex and accurate sentences when the accuracy and complexity loads of their writings are put together. The result revealed that the experimental group had a higher mean value and outperformed the control group (Sig. was less than 0.05) when their writings were considered in terms of both accuracy and complexity loads (see Table 4.3). Therefore, it can be concluded that task repetition has significant effects on intermediate level Iranian EFL learners' accuracy and complexity in writing.

Table 4.3 Independent samples test to compare both the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the immediate post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
1	20	1.5904	0.1066	<i>0.000</i>
2	20	1.2983	0.0886	

Notes: 1= Experimental Group 2= Control Group

This finding corroborated those of Ellis (1987), Crookes (1989), and Skehan and Foster (1997) who revealed that planning (one type of which is task repetition) leads to greater complexity and accuracy. Also, the results support Ahmadian and Tavakoli's (2010) study which showed that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition improve both accuracy and complexity significantly in oral production.

Reports on the Delayed post-test

We also intended to examine whether task repetition affected the participants' writings one month after the treatment sessions ended. As shown in Table 4.4, with reference to the accuracy, on the one hand, the experimental group had a higher mean value and performed better than the control group. On the other hand, task repetition did leave its positive effect despite the passage of time on the writings of the participants in the experimental group since the mean values of the experimental group remained approximately the same (compare Tables 4.2 and 4.4)

Table 4.4 Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the delayed post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	20	0.9282	0.6442	0.0284	0.1553	<i>0.001</i>	

2	20	0.8436	0.4392	0.939	0.0951		
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Notes: 1= Experimental Group 2= Control Group

The same result was obtained with regard to the complexity loads of the participants in the experimental and control groups. As shown in Table 4.4, the experimental group outperformed the control group. A closer look at Table 4.4 shows that the experimental group had a higher mean value and performed better than the control group (Sig. is less than 0.05). Also since the mean values of the experimental group remained approximately the same in the immediate and delayed post-test we conclude, here, that the task repetition had its effects on the participants' use of complex sentences in their writings one month after the treatment sessions ended (compare Tables 4.2 and 4.4). This could be explained by referring to Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) two types of controlled and automatic processing. They believe that once a skill is practiced and automatized, it is established in long-term memory and becomes an internalized part of one's learning. As a result, it will be easy for the learner to retrieve information from the memory for later use. Here, in this study, since we repeated the task, it helped the participants automatize and establish the information and also helped them in the retention of the material.

Suggestions for Future Research

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of task repetition on the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writings in terms of accuracy and complexity. The results of both immediate and delayed post-tests revealed that task repetition as one kind of planning improved the learners' writings. However, it opened up new research avenues for further research projects. The present research chose only female English language learners as the participants of the study. First, the researchers suggest that a future study may choose both male and female learners to see whether gender influences the performances of the participants after they receive task repetition treatment. It is necessary to note that the participants of the present study were of the intermediate level of proficiency. Second, a future study is needed to examine the effects of task repetition on the learners across different levels of proficiency and, which as a result, should reveal how learners at different levels of proficiency respond to task repetition treatment. Finally, to reach more generalizable results, it is recommended the future research may add fluency to accuracy and complexity which were investigated in the current study to give us a better picture of how task repetition could affect them altogether.

Conclusion

Doughty (2003) argues that a task allows learners to integrate form and meaning, raises their metalinguistic awareness, and increases their noticing capacity which, as a result, enhances successful intake processing and ultimately leads to language development. One way by means of which this can be carried out is the repetition of the task. The importance of task repetition which is an effective strategy to help the learner develop his or her interlanguage has been brought to attention of the teachers and language learning and teaching program developers in recent years.

The current study was another attempt to investigate the effects of task repetition on accuracy, and complexity of EFL learners' written production in an EFL context in Iran. The results

corroborated the importance of task repetition technique in improving the learners' written performances where it helped the learners not only produce accurate sentences but also complex ones. The implication is that task repetition as one type of task planning (Ellis, 2005, 2008) can be one of the effective techniques to improve the students' writing. Therefore, it is suggested that language teachers simply design task conditions in a way to include task repetition technique in order to allow the learners to automatize and establish the language being learned. However, according to Wang (2009), Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012) developing greater accuracy and complexity entails rehearsal through strategic planning and repetition, and monitoring through on-line planning and using post-tasks.

We conclude the current study by suggesting that the task repetition of the type employed in this study might be a useful pedagogic procedure and that the same technique could help different learners develop different areas of their interlanguage.

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