

## The Effect of Choice Theory-Based Instruction on EFL Learners' Speaking Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency

**Raziyeh Mashayekh**, Master of TEFL

**Nasim Shangarffam**, Assistant Professor

English Department, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

### Abstract

The present study attempted to investigate the effect of choice theory-based instruction on Iranian EFL learners' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency. To this end, 60 female upper-intermediate EFL learners of 18 to 42 years of age were selected from among 70 learners through their performance on a piloted sample Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) and were then randomly assigned into control and experimental groups. The learners' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency were quantified by a PET speaking pretest. Both groups sat in class for 14 sessions of 90 minutes, for five weeks, and were taught the same materials. In the experimental group, the students underwent the treatment based on choice theory principles, whereas the learners in the control group received task-supported instruction. A parallel test of speaking was used at the end of the treatment the data of which were analyzed utilizing Multivariate analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) and the results demonstrated that applying choice theory-based instruction had a significantly positive impact on EFL learners' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

**Key words:** Choice theory, Speaking Complexity, Speaking Accuracy, Speaking Fluency

### Introduction

Speaking is a highly frequent modality of human expression containing a complex process of constructing meaning. Among the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, speaking is regarded as the most complicated by many L2 learners, as a result, mastering the skill of speaking has been the concern to a great number of L2 learners and practitioners (CelceMurcia & Olshtain, 2000; Wood, 2007; Nowicka & Wilczyn'ska, 2011; Sadeghi Beniss & Edalati Bazzaz, 2014, as cited in Marashi & Doolatdoost, 2016). Hence, the topic of abundant research has been improving the skill of speaking from various perspectives.

One of these perspectives is to explain what makes a more or a less proficient speaker. Many L2 practitioners and SLA researchers hold that L2 proficiency is not a unitary construct but, rather multi-componential in nature, and that the notions of complexity, accuracy and fluency, or CAF for short, can be fruitfully captured as its principal components (Housen, Kuiken & Vedder, 2012). It is not thus surprising that various methods have been attempting to enhance CAF in speaking with some oriented towards human personality and motivation. Motivation is perhaps the most important drive helping humans pursue learning and enhancing the quality of their lives (Marashi & Erami, 2018).

Among a number of theories to understand and define human personality and motivation, one is Glasser's (1998) choice theory, first introduced in his book *A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*. Choice theory stated that the chosen behaviors are driven by five genetically driven needs; the need to survive, to love and belong, to be powerful, to be free, and to have fun (Glasser, 1998 as cited in Marashi & Erami, 2018). Glasser's choice theory is an alternative to behaviorism and other external control psychologies. It contends we are not externally motivated by reward or punishment, but we are actually motivated by a never-ending quest to satisfy the five basic needs which are woven into our genes, so our behavior is not separate from our choice (Marashi & Erami, 2018).

Generally, all human behavior depends upon choices made at any given time aiming to satisfy one or more of these needs at a subconscious level. However, the way we feel and the desire to improve our conditions is completely conscious (Glasser, 1988). In line with the aforementioned desire, there is a key concept proposed by choice theory, the notion of *Quality World* which is created in the mind of each human being as a unique and personal world serving as a supplement world to the real world where one lives by using one's senses namely tactile, auditory, gustatory, visual and olfactory senses. Regarding quality world, an individual retains specific images of what brings about good feeling (Glasser, 1998). According to Wubbolding (2010) individuals learn from the consequences of their decisions throughout life and make a growing list of wants including images of satisfying activities, desired people, preferred situations, enjoyable events, treasured possessions, optimal beliefs and that's their quality world (Wubbolding, 2010).

Glasser (1998) believes that improvement in education can only be attained by changing the way classroom functions, and that trying to force students to learn or behave properly will not succeed. His work, therefore, focuses on providing a naturally attractive curriculum, and on working with students in ways that encourage making responsible choices that lead to personal success (Glasser, 1998). In particular, quality in curriculum, teaching, and learning is emphasized by Glasser, and that schools must be redesigned to emphasize quality throughout if they are to survive. According to Glasser students must willingly pursue matters they find interesting and meet their needs for security, belonging, power, fun, and freedom, force does not work, therefore, schools must give up trying to coerce or force students to learn or behave in a

particular manner (Glasser, 1998). Glasser feels the basic needs are built into the genetic codes. Educators can entice students to engage in meaningful learning while conducting themselves appropriately by genuinely trying to meet those needs. No pressure needs to be applied (Glasser, 1998, as cited in Charles, 2005).

## Review of Literature

The notions of CAF, as three principal components of speaking proficiency have been agreed upon by many researchers. Complexity has been commonly characterized as ‘the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied’ (Ellis, 2003, p. 340), accuracy is defined as ‘the ability to produce error-free speech’ (Ellis, 2003, p. 340), and fluency is described as ‘the extent to which the language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation, or reformulation’ (Ellis, 2003, p. 342). Recently, the emergence of CAF triad as a complement to other established proficiency models such as the traditional four-skill model and sociolinguistic and cognitive models of L2 proficiency has been notable (e.g. Bachman, 1990; Bialystok, 1994; Canale & Swain, 1980, as cited in Housen, Kuiken & Vedder, 2012). Consequently, CAF have abundantly been the major dependent as well as independent variables in second language acquisition (SLA) research (e.g. Freed, 1995; Bygate 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Collentine, 2004; Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004; Muñoz, 2006; Kuiken & Vedder, 2007; Spada & Tomita, 2007, as cited in Housen & Kulken, 2009). CAF have been used as performance descriptors in oral and written assessment of language learners, also been used for measuring progress in language learning as indicators of learners’ proficiency underlying their performance (Housen & Kuiken, 2009). According to Skehan (1998), an everlasting struggle for practitioners is how to develop both accuracy and fluency in learners’ speaking since one often seems to come at the expense of the other. On top of that, there is the greater challenge of persuading learners out of their comfort zone toward more complexity (Skehan, 1998).

Glasser’s (1998) choice theory first introduced in his book *A New Psychology of Personal Freedom* puts an emphasis on self-directed learning. In addition, Louis (2009) has presented the consistency between choice theory and three major postulations of Vygotskian educational theory as the ZPD, assistance given by a more knowledgeable person (scaffolding), and psychological tools. Scaffolding is made possible by social interaction, paramount to meet Glasser's five needs. Louis also outlines how the meeting of these needs might unfold in a classroom setting (Louis, 2009). Moreover, the five basic needs of survival, power, freedom, love and belonging, and fun identified by Glasser (1998) are closely related to the main concepts of self-determination theory (SDT), which specifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). There are also links between Glasser's (1998) choice theory and Purkey's invitational theory (Zeeman, 2006). Strong similarities between the two

theories are pointed out by Zeeman, essentially, both Glasser and Purkey believe that we perceive the world looking for people or things that will satisfy what we want (Zeeman, 2006).

Choice theory-based instruction has been applied in different contexts including educational contexts specifically classroom management with overwhelming positive results (e.g, Belodeau, 2010; Beebe & Robey, 2011; Smith, 2011; Mateo, 2014; Mirzaei Fandokht, 2014; Valinezhad, 2015; Badrkhani, 2015). However, to the researchers' best knowledge, few studies (e.g, Kianpour & Hoseini, 2012; Marashi & Erami, 2018) have been reported on the efficiency of using Glasser's choice theory in EFL settings. It can be concluded that perhaps this therapeutic approach could contribute to ELT.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 60 adult female upper-intermediate EFL learners studying in a language school in Tehran, selected from a larger sample of 70 learners through their performance in a sample PET previously piloted among another sample of 25 who shared characteristics with the target sample. Accordingly, the 60 selected students were assigned to experimental and control groups comprising 30 learners each. The writing and speaking sections of PET were scored by two raters whose inter-rater reliability had been established a priori (writing:  $r=.850, p=.000<.05$ ; speaking:  $r=.842, p=.000<.05$ ).

### *Instrumentation*

***Preliminary English Test (PET):*** In order to measure participants' general proficiency level, PET was utilized. PET is made up of three sections, designed to test the key language skills\_ *Reading* and *Writing* last 90 minutes including 35 reading questions, and 7 questions in writing. *Listening* takes 35 minutes, containing 25 questions, and *Speaking*, lasts 10-12 minutes per candidate pairs. The scoring scale used was the *Cambridge English: key*. The reliability of participants' scores came out 0.856 (using Cronbach's alpha).

***Speaking pretest and posttest:*** Two parallel versions of PET speaking section were used as the pre and posttest. Speaking performances were recorded, transcribed, coded and quantified. Complexity was quantified by measuring the mean length of T-units to operationally define it. T-unit is the minimally terminable unit or the shortest grammatically allowable sentence into which writing or utterance can be split (Hunt, 1965). Accuracy was operationally defined and measured by counting the number of error-free clauses divided by total number of clauses (Wolfe-

Quintero, 1998), and fluency was operationalized by counting the number of meaningful words per minute of speech (Wolfe-Quintero, 1998).

### ***Materials***

***Course books:*** In both groups two units of *Touchstone level 4*, second Edition (McCarthy, McCarten & Sandiford, 2014), and four units of *Oxford Word skills*, intermediate (Gairns & Redman, 2008) were covered.

***Extra-curricular materials:*** In addition to the books, some extra-curricular slides and videos on different familiar and interesting topics such as personality, the environment, success, and happiness were designed or downloaded and used by the researchers. The purpose was to activate the L2 knowledge they had prior to the course as well as giving them the chance to practice speaking individually and or in groups both inside and outside the classroom. Also, some extra slides and videos to teach metacognitive strategies, and to introduce the main concepts of choice theory were used.

### ***Procedure***

Once the 60 participants were selected and groups were set, the treatment began. The treatment period spanned 14 sessions of 90 minutes stretched over 5 weeks with all sessions held for both groups using the same syllabus, materials, extra-curricular activities, and instruction, and were taught by the same instructor. However, the experimental group received some additional instruction based on choice theory principles, whereas the control group received instruction adopted from task-supported teaching (Ellis, 2008).

It is to be elucidated that there is no claim of choice theory-based instruction being solely restricted to what has been practiced in this study. On the contrary, a variety of strategies and techniques could be applied as choice theory-based instruction. What has been emphasized in this study is the integration of the conceptual principles of choice theory with task-supported teaching techniques.

### ***Treatment in experimental group***

The following instructions designed by the researchers based on choice theory principles, attempted to cater for the five basic needs, and to familiarize learners with the significance of quality world with an emphasis on self-directed learning, autonomy, self-regulation,

enhancement of internal motivation, and importance of social relationships. Processes involved are, how to learn to set goals, monitor and control learning, and evaluate own regulation.

***The need of power, belonging, freedom, and the concept of quality world:*** In order to cater for this need, in the first session, after greetings, students were instructed to sit in pairs and make a list of their expectations of the course without having any restrictions. They were given free choice to discuss freely in pairs or small groups what they would like to have achieved by the end of the course, how they would like to be assessed, what they would prefer to do every session in order to enjoy the class, how they like to study outside the class, and what they like to be added or subtracted from the course compared to previous terms. Afterwards the students talked briefly in the class.

Next, the teacher explained to students that they were provided with a pre-determined progress chart by the language school defining certain parts and topics to be covered every single session. Consequently, their general needs and wants needed to be pruned, narrowed, expanded or changed to meet the goals of the course. General topics needed to be covered were written on the board. Students talked and took notes briefly in their groups about how their general expectations and goals could be changed considering the topics and goals of the course, and discussed them while the teacher took notes. Some of the preferences were boarded and rated by the teacher and students. The students were then informed that a more detailed plan for the course would be expanded and given to students, and they would be asked to make their own individual plans to meet the goal of each session to know what they needed to do in and outside the class.

The teacher clarified the concept of quality world according to which learning is meaningful and purposeful (Glasser, 1998), adding that they could have a sense of belonging and power when they chose their own path to success, and that what had been defined by the language school was a general plan giving direction to their needs, but individual plans were what really determined their success. She delineated the uniqueness of their quality world, and the need to discover their own path.

The teacher explained that assessment was done differently to satisfy their need to be free and powerful as well as promoting their sense of love and belonging. Students were to make their own portfolios, keeping anything related to their work, including writing assignments, recorded voices, personal notes, feedback given by teacher or peers, and self- assessment notes. They needed to reflect on their recordings regularly, and estimate their progress, strengths and weaknesses, and on how to move toward their desired goal. They were informed that a part of all assignments, both individual and group, was to assess the quality of what they and others did, of course, refraining from harsh criticism in order to encourage cooperation as opposed to competition to cater for need of belonging. At the end of each session, there was a ten-minute

feedback time so that the students could share their comments and suggestions with the teacher assuring them that their suggestions would be taken into account for the following sessions.

Finally, in order not to neglect students' basic need for survival, they were allowed to have light snacks and soft drinks in class if they wished while observing the general order.

The general theme of the class was established as non-coercive, needs-satisfying, and caring. The activities were conducted on psychological basic needs (fun, power, love and belonging, freedom) in all 14 sessions of treatment. Accordingly, below are the concrete techniques employed in the experimental group.

***The need to have fun:*** In order to fulfill this in the learning context, debate game, storytelling, and role-plays were integrated every session to make the lesson challenging, enjoyable, competitive and fun. As students were engaged in the tasks or games some music was played in the background for more dynamic task complete the tasks completion. Students were free to stand up, and change their partners or groups.

***The need to be powerful:*** Based on choice theory, power is defined as the sense of competence and achievement and the need to be listened to and have a sense of self-worth; accordingly, mini lectures were assigned to students on four sessions throughout the treatment. Students were divided into groups of 2-3 and asked to assess the performance of their peers, hence learners were provided with peer-scaffolding suggestions to improve their further lectures.

***The need to love and belong:*** This includes the need for relationships, social connections, reciprocal affection, and being part of a group. While doing tasks, students were asked to initially validate each other's feelings by talking about their problems and expressing their opinions on different topics which is congruent with choice theory's caring habits in which validations are defined as confirmation and affirmation of one's feelings (Glasser, 1998). While offering solutions to the problems posed, students were encouraged to employ the strategies, vocabulary, and grammatical structures which they had learnt.

***The need to be free:*** Taking into consideration the importance of freedom in choice theory, the teacher sent some videos and slides downloaded from YouTube to introduce to students some metacognitive learning strategies based on Lovett's (2008) classification: (1) teaching how to plan for success and set goals, and (2) giving ample opportunities to monitor or evaluate their learning through recordings in portfolios.

### ***Treatment in control group***

Students in the control group performed speaking through task-supported teaching strategies commonly practiced at the language school adopted from Ellis (2008) which follows;

**Principle 1: ensuring an appropriate level of task difficulty.** To ensure that students possessed the necessary strategies to engage in task-based interaction and adapt to task difficulty, the teacher set an interesting, sustainable, familiar, and engaging context from the beginning based on which the target language was taught and the final speaking performance was drawn, the tasks were challenging yet attainable.

**Principle 2: establishing clear goals for each task-based lesson.** The instructor asked students questions to guide them in the process of setting clear short- and long-term goals for learning English from the current term onwards. The main objective of these questions was to make students aware of the importance of using the target language.

**Principle 3: developing an appropriate orientation to performing the task among students.** Post- task options play a crucial role in making students aware of not treating the task just for 'fun'. Accordingly, learners were provided with post task options.

**Principle 4: making sure that students adopt an active role in task-based lessons.** A main element of being active is negotiating meaning when communicative problems arise. To this end, the significance of being an active participant in performing tasks was clarified by the teacher.

**Principle 5: encouraging students to take risks.** When performing tasks, students need to expand their interlanguage resources, necessitating them to be prepared to experiment the language. Accordingly, the teacher assigned them to complete challenging yet achievable tasks which required some degrees of risk taking and gave learners a sense of achievement.

**Principle 6: ensuring that students are primarily focused on meaning when they perform a task.** When performing tasks, students must be primarily concerned with achieving an outcome and this can only be achieved if they are motivated to do the task. In this regard, a non-linguistic outcome was set for each task by the teacher ensuring that learners were focused on meaning. In addition, the students were observed directly or indirectly to insure their engagement.

## Findings

**Speaking pretest and posttest:** Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of speaking pretest and posttest administration. As the data was not normally distributed, 7 participants of experimental and 7 participants of control group whose data had depressed normalcy were excluded from the data.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the pretest and posttest in experimental and control groups**

Groups			Complexity	Complexity	Accuracy	Accuracy	Fluency	Fluency
			Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Experimental group	N	Valid	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Mean		8.42	11.14	.44	.72	1.23	1.54
	Std. Deviation		1.17	1.95	.17	.13	.16	.20
	Skewness		.325	.689	.792	-.714	.045	-.809
	Std. Error		.481	.481	.481	.481	.481	.481
Control group	N	Valid	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Mean		9.42	10.13	.61	.67	1.49	1.54
	Std. Deviation		1.04	1.10	.12	.11	.26	.23
	Skewness		.747	.150	-.709	-.174	-.238	-.784
	Std. Error		.481	.481	.481	.481	.481	.481

**Testing the hypotheses:** To test the research null hypotheses, 1) choice theory-based instruction has no significant effect on EFL learners' speaking complexity, 2) choice theory-based instruction has no significant effect on EFL learners' speaking accuracy, 3) choice theory-based instruction has no significant effect on EFL learners' speaking fluency, Multivariate analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to statistically adjust the posttest scores for the pretest differences. The related assumptions such as homogeneity of variance, equality of covariance matrices<sup>a</sup>, were checked, and met beforehand. Table 2 illustrates the main MANCOVA among groups means, as shown in the table, the *p*-values were less than .05 ( $F = 5.106, 4.34, 4.85$ , and  $p = .029, .043, .033 < .05$ ), indicating a significant difference among independent groups for the covariates.

**Table 2. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
group	Complexity Posttest	12.139	1	12.139	5.106	.029	.111
	Accuracy Posttest	.060	1	.060	4.348	.043	.096

	Fluency Posttest	.145	1	.145	4.854	.033	.106
Error	Complexity Posttest	97.482	41	2.378			
	Accuracy Posttest	.562	41	.014			
	Fluency Posttest	1.224	41	.030			

According to MANCOVA, while controlling pretest, there was a significant difference between the groups' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency, therefore the three null hypotheses of the study were rejected. Choice theory-based instruction had significant effect on EFL learners' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency and the effect was 11.1%, 9.6%, and 10.6% respectively.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the impressive positive impact of choice theory in education, learning achievement, and therapeutic treatments has been demonstrated by numerous studies (e.g. Badrkhani, 2015; Beebe & Robey, 2011; Belodeau, 2010; Mateo, 2014; Marashi & Erami, 2018; Mirzaei Fandokht, 2014; Smith, 2011; Valinezhad, 2015). Accordingly, the results of this study demonstrated that applying choice theory-based instruction had a significantly positive impact on EFL learners' speaking complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

The present study demonstrated that the use of main principles of choice theory (Glasser, 1998) through practicing instructions to cater for the basic needs of students, and enabling them to form their quality world which is a main concept in choice theory can assist them with the improvement of their speaking proficiency on three dimensions of complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

The application of choice theory in the classroom provides learners with a more stimulating, non-threatening, and friendlier environment where learners can fulfill their basic needs and take responsibility and ownership for their learning. In such non-coercive environment, they feel more secure and comfortable to share and exchange their ideas and move toward accomplishing their goals. This is very much demonstrative of learner autonomy which is of course the foundational goal of not just language learning but any kind of learning for that matter, which is in line with Vygotskian trend of moving from other-regulation to self-regulation (Marashi & Zargari, 2017).

The development of speaking accuracy might be due to the fact that in the non-coercive, stress-free environment of the classroom learners feel more secure and comfortable to focus on form in order to produce grammatically correct, error-free, and accurate language. At the same time, ease of articulation, and more fluency can be fostered while the learners are more involved in cooperative, meaning-focused activities. When learners act autonomously to plan for their success, they push their interlanguage resources, and get out of their comfort zone toward more complexity. While through extra-curricular, topic-based activities, and mini lectures, students' background knowledge is activated, individual reflection and self-regulated learning assists them with more elaborate, varied or more complex language.

Generally, when students feel that their teachers are caring, and encouraging, and as they further realize that the fear of failure and being harshly judged by their performance is not an option in the classroom, they consider putting those teachers into their quality world, a key concept which is the core of willingness to learning, and satisfying their needs.

Furthermore, the feedback given by learners in this study revealed that they generally appreciated being given a step-by-step process to understand the tasks and to take control over their learning and consequently growing toward being more responsible, autonomous, productive, and satisfied. Therefore, the teachers and school counsellors' awareness of their roles in removing the existing psychological and affective barriers to learning is imperative since such barriers might ultimately have negative effects on students' achievement, consequently, teachers need to make sure to instruct learners effectively by giving them tasks perceived as meaningful and applicable to real life (Kianpour & Hosseini, 2012), tasks which are enjoyable, satisfying, and treasured are put into learners' quality worlds, and promote their quality work. Additionally, portfolios as a means of assessment can foster self-determination, and autonomy while fulfilling the need to be free, and powerful.

In sum, throughout the instruction period, compared to other methods that the researchers had experienced throughout their teaching career, they vividly observed in the experimental group that choice theory-based instruction is more readily conducive to providing an environment for learners to feel valued, involved, and comfortable in class. Consequently, more willingness to learn through collaboration among learners was witnessed in the experimental group. Knowing how to build social relationship, deal with different viewpoints, and eventually participate in group activities for peer assistance and cooperation need to be taken into consideration in EFL learners who are to be responsible and accountable for their own learning. All this, of course is the foundational tenet of choice theory and will be attainable through practicing instruction based on this theory in the classroom.

The present study can bear significant implications in the classroom, contributing to both teachers and syllabus designers' effective use of choice theory in their teaching programs. In practice, prior to introduction of choice theory to ELT programs, teaching training centers and

institutions need to familiarize teachers with this concept and its techniques. This training can be done for both novice and experienced teachers who are already engaged in the process of pedagogy in the form of in-service courses.

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