



## The Impact of Generic Features of Task and Proficiency Level on EFL Learners' Written Task Accuracy

Nahid Zarei<sup>1</sup>, Sima Razi<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Over the past decades, there has been a plethora of attempt to find out the role of the task in second and foreign language teaching and learning. Task-based language teaching takes task as its unit of analysis and emphasizes the creation of meaning without any prior prescription of forms. Therefore, learners are free to use any strategies or forms to perform the task and achieve the task goal. Several studies have been done on the issues of task-based language teaching, task and its different features. However, the issue of the effects of generic features of task on L2 learners' task performance has not been well-attended in the literature of TBLT. As a result, this study aims to explore the impacts of generic features of task on L2 learners' written task in terms of accuracy between advanced and intermediate male learners. To achieve this goal, 20 intermediate and 20 advanced learners in an English Institute were selected as the participants of the study. They were given two tasks with two different generic features namely descriptive and narrative to elicit their written task performance. Then the written productions were quantified and measured by the measure introduced by Ellis. The results of the study showed that there were significant differences between the performances of both intermediate and advanced male learners in descriptive and narrative tasks. The results of this study can be useful for language teachers, task designers, and the researchers in the field of task-based language teaching and learning.*

*Keywords: descriptive task, narrative task, generic features of task, accuracy, proficiency level*

### 1. Introduction

Research into task-based language teaching is mainly conducted because of dealing with the problem of determining the relevant grading and sequencing criteria for designing and classifying tasks for task-based syllabi [1] [2] and has mostly focused on investigating the effects of task design and task characteristics on task performance [3] [4]. Tasks and their different features- the generic features of tasks, task structure, task condition, planning time, task complexity- can have distinctive effects on L2 learners' oral and written performance in terms of three linguistic domains of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Previous studies have addressed the effect of several variables, individual and non-individual factors, on task performance. Foster and Skehan [5] studied how guided and unguided planning affected learners' performance. Gilabert [6] attempted to explore the impact of task complexity and strategic planning conditions on language performance. Tavakoli and Skehan [4] conducted a study in which they explored the influence of planning time conditions, task structure and language proficiency on task performance. Ishikawa [7] explored the effects of different task demands of international reasoning on L2 learners' oral task performance. Shafaei, Salimi, and Talebi [8] investigated the impact of gender and strategic pre-task planning time on EFL learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy. However, research on the effect of generic features and proficiency level is scant; thus this study set out to investigate the effect of these individual (language proficiency) and non-individual (generic feature) factors on the learners' task performance.

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. What is the impact of generic features of task on EFL learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy?
2. What is the impact of proficiency on EFL learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy?

---

<sup>1</sup> Islamic Azad University, Maragheh Branch (Iran)

<sup>2</sup> Islamic Azad University, Maragheh Branch (Iran)



## 2. The Study

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 40 male EFL learners, 20 Intermediate and 20 Advanced, in an English Institute in Tehran, Iran with the age range of 18-28 years. They were selected out of four classes after taking proficiency test (those whose scores fell between one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected). They all spoke Persian as their first language and had been taking English classes for at least a year. They were rarely allowed to use their first language in the class.

### 2.2. Instruments

TOEFL proficiency test was given to advanced students and PET test was administered to intermediate students to serve homogeneity purpose. Plus, two pictorial tasks were employed as the means of data collection.

### 2.3. Procedure

The participants of both groups were instructed according to task-based language teaching principles and strategies by the researcher for a term of sixteen sessions. Intermediate students were taking Top Notch 3A course and Advanced students were taking *Summit 2B*. Therefore, they did the writing tasks from the books. The focus of the instruction was on meaning and communication of meaning rather than on the linguistic forms of the target language. We waited for the end of the course so that they would learn all types of writing tasks assigned by the books. Two tasks were used as the means of the study. The first task was a narrative picture prompt which required the learners to narrate the story of the pictures. The other task, which was taken from *Four Corners (4)* written by Richards and Bohik (2010), was a descriptive task that required the learners to describe what they saw in the pictures. First, the participants of the study were asked to do the narrative task and narrate the story of the picture prompt. Each learner was given the picture and the necessary explanations on how to do the task. Having performed the first task, the participants were asked to perform the second task, descriptive task. In this stage of the data collection process, the participants were provided with the pictorial descriptive task and the necessary elaborations on how they should perform this task by the researcher. The written performance of the participants was analyzed in accordance with the purpose of the study and the measure of accuracy. Accuracy was measured by the number of error-free T-unit per T-units [9]. T-unit is defined as "the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them" and error-free T-units are those that contain no grammatical, lexical, or spelling errors [9].

### 2.4. Data analysis

After quantifying the written production of the participants in the study, the raw scores of accuracy of the participants' written task performance were fed into SPSS (Version 19) for further analysis. T-test and ANCOVA were employed as the statistical means of analysis.

## 3. Results

The following table shows the comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate male learners performing descriptive task.

Table 1.

*The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate male learners performing descriptive task.*

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.41	0.04
Intermediate	20	0.33	0.07

As the data presented in table 1 indicates, male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.41) than intermediate male learners (0.33) when they performed descriptive task.



That is, the advanced male learners performed better than intermediate male learners in terms of written task accuracy.

The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate male learners performing narrative task is presented in table 2.

Table 2.

*The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate male learners performing narrative task*

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.48	0.04
Intermediate	20	0.38	0.06

As the data presented in table 2 shows, male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.48) than Intermediate male learners (0.38) when they performed narrative task. That is, the advanced male learners performed better than intermediate male learners in terms of written task accuracy of narrative task performance.

As the data in both tables reveal although advanced students outperformed intermediate learners in both narrative and descriptive tasks in terms of written task accuracy due to their proficiency level, both groups did better on narrative task than descriptive task.

#### 4. Discussion and implications

The aim of conducting this study was to find out the possible effects that generic features of task (descriptive and narrative), and EFL learners' proficiency (intermediate and advanced) can have on their task performance in terms of accuracy of their production. The results of statistical analysis of the written data showed that male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language in both narrative and descriptive task in comparison to intermediate learners. Furthermore, both advanced and intermediate learners performed better in narrative than descriptive task. Therefore, it can be concluded that generic features of task along with EFL learners' proficiency level had significant effects on advanced learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy.

The findings of this study are similar to some other studies in terms of accuracy. Foster and Skehan [5] studied how guided and unguided planning affected learners' performance. Their findings showed that planners performed more accurately than non-planners. Tavakoli and Skehan [4] conducted a study in which they explored the influence of planning, time conditions, task structure and language proficiency on task performance. The results indicated that the structured tasks generated more accurate language than unstructured tasks.

The findings of this study can be useful for language teachers in that they can adapt their teaching practice in the classroom with different proficiency levels. They can employ tasks with different generic features to make their learners familiar with them and make them practice and produce language in different forms that tasks with different generic features require. The results, also, can be of use for task designers and task-based researchers.

#### References

- [1] Long, M., & Crookes, G. (1992). Three approaches to task-based syllabus design. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(1), 27-56.
- [2] Robinson, P. (2006). Task complexity, theory of mind, and international reasoning: effects on L2 speech production, interaction, uptake and perception of task difficulty. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 45(3), 193-213.
- [3] Tavakoli, P. & Foster, P. (2008). Task design and second language performance: the effect of narrative type on learner output. *Language Learning*, 58(2), 439-473.
- [4] Tavakoli P., & Skehan, P. (2005). Strategic planning, task structure and performance testing. In R. Ellis (Ed), *Planning and task performance in a second language* (pp. 239-277). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- [5] Foster, P., & Skehan, P. (1996). The influence of planning and task type on second language performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 9, 12-20.



- [6] Gilabert, R. (2005). *Task complexity and L2 narrative oral production*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Barcelona, Spain.
- [7] Ishikawa, T. (2008). The effects of task demands of international reasoning on L2 speech performance. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 5(1), 29-63.
- [8] Shafaei, A., Salimi, A., & Talebi (2013). The impact of gender and strategic pre-task planning time on EFL learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(4), 746-753.
- [9] Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.