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# The Effect of Using Task-based Activities on Reading Comprehension Skill among Iranian Intermediate Pre-university Students

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**Research Article**

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# Abstract

Within the framework of Task-based Language Teaching / Learning, it is believed that since learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunity to interact. Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning. The research study reported herein was designed to investigate the effects of using task-based activities on reading comprehension skill among Iranian intermediate pre-university students. To this end, sixty male EFL participants from pre-university level in Hamedan were selected and assigned to two groups (experimental and control) on the basis of their performance on the Oxford Placement Test as pre-test. Then, the subjects in experimental group underwent practice on reading passages through using different kinds of task-based activities during a one-month period. During the treatment, the experimental group participants had the opportunity to produce output (use language) through negotiation based on doing task-based activities both orally and in written form. The control group did not produce but answered some cliché comprehension exercises (true/false, multiple-choice items). They received some placebo activities with no treatment. Both groups were exposed to the same passages but did different tasks. At the end of the experimental period, the subjects in the two groups were given the post-test of reading comprehension. The raw scores were submitted to a series of t-tests. The results showed that using task-based activities during treatment period contributed significantly to the performance on reading comprehension in experimental group. In addition, the experimental group showed significant difference in their general language proficiency. Further studies are needed to investigate the impact of other task-based criteria on reading comprehension skill as well as speaking, writing and also listening comprehension by changing the type of elicitation instruments, the time of experimental treatment and the subjects' proficiency level.


# Introduction

Most approaches to language teaching can be described as 'from-based'. Such approaches analyze the language into an inventory of forms which can then be presented to the learner and practiced as a series of discrete items.

In contrast to form-based approaches, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) which grew out of the more general notion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) involves the specification not of a sequence of language items, but of a sequence of communicative tasks to be carried out in the target language. Central to the notion of a communicative task is the exchange of meanings. Nunan (1993) defines a communicative task as 'a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form'.

J.Willis (1996) defines a task as an activity 'where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome'. Language in a communicative task is seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings.

Some advantages of TBLT are as the following:

1. TBLT has a richer potential for promoting language learning than do other syllabus types (Long and Crookes, 1993).
2. TBLT is learner-centered, rather than language-centered (Ellis, 2003).
3. Students can work with authentic texts from the beginning (Breen, 1984).
4. Students learn by doing (Wilson, 1986).
5. Students will be intrinsically motivated when the course is based on their immediate needs (ibid).
6. Students can be evaluated on their ability to perform a task according to certain criteria rather than their ability to successfully complete a discrete-point test (Ellis, 2003).

Tasks, then, hold a central place in current SLA research and also in language pedagogy. This is evident in the large number of recent publications relating to task-based learning and teaching (for example, Willis 1996; Skehan 1998; Lee 2000; Language Teaching Research Vol.4.3.2000; Bygateetal.2001).

TBLT has increasingly achieved popularity in recent years and has been recommended as a way forward in ELT. Various influential experts, Prabhu (1987), Nunan (1989), Willis (1996) and their definitions for tasks are popular. Prabhu stands as the first significant person in the development of TBLT. His main contribution has been raising awareness of the ELT world to TBLT. Prabhu (1987) defines a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process”.

The best documented application of a task-based approach is probably Prabhu’s procedural syllabus (Prabhu 1987). Prabhu headed a project in schools in South India in which learners were simply presented with a series of problems and information/opinion gap activities which were solved under teacher guidance through the medium of English. Prabhu argued that a focus on language form actually inhibited language learning. Language development was seen as the outcome of natural processes. Evaluation of this project (Beretta and Davies 1985) suggests that Prabhu’s learners were more successful than their counterparts who were taught in a more traditional way.

Willis (1996) is another figure who contributes to the use of tasks in language classroom. Willis presents a Task-based Learning (TBL) approach where tasks are used as the main focus of the lesson within a supportive framework. She holds that “the aim of tasks is to create a real purpose for language use and to provide a natural context for language study”.

The work of Long (1983a, 1998), Doughty and Pica (1986) and Swain (1995) shows that the interaction generated in language use does lead learners to modify and develop their language system even without the intervention of instruction. This is reinforced by the findings of Skehan (1992), Foster (1996) and Bygate (1996).

R. Ellis (2000) exemplifies the effects of some factors when examining task use from a 'socio-cultural perspective', arising out of the theories of Vygotsky (1986) and Lantolf (2000).

One of the first to argue for effectiveness of tasks as a stimulus to learning was Allwright (1981) who questioned the need for language instruction and emphasized the need for language use.

The DART (Directed Activities Related to Texts) model was developed by Davies and Green (1984), and Davies (1995) in reaction to traditional reading exercises, such as multiple-choice, that, they argue, are extremely limited in their potential as learning activities.

Swain (1985) and Scarcella and Oxford (1992) emphasized the importance of students' providing comprehensible output in task situations, often through interaction with others.

Long (1981) found that native speakers engaged in modification of both their input, for example, by using simpler grammar and vocabulary, and the interactional structure of the conversations, for example, by requesting clarification, and noted that the latter was more common. In fact, modified interaction occurred even when there was no input modification.

Mackey (1999) found that learners who took part in negotiated interaction showed greater developmental gains in English question forms than learners who did not do so.

Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993), in a small-scale study, showed that two adult learners who reformulated their deviant utterances as a result of negotiation, subsequently improved their accuracy of past tense use.

Pica and Doughty (1985a) found that when they compared performance on an optional information exchange task there was no difference, mainly because there was little negotiation in their participatory condition.

A study by Nakahama, Tyler and van Lier (2001) found that although a required information exchange task resulted in more negotiation exchanges, these exchanges were rather mechanical, centering on lexical items. In contrast, the interactions derived from a conversation task, where there was no required information exchange, resulted in greater negotiation of global problems.

Reading can undoubtedly be labeled as the most applicable skill in a foreign language environment. On the other hand, our schools have long been entrapped in the old, traditional methods of teaching reading, grammar, etc. Task-based teaching, a rather new trend, has proved to be effective in many contexts. It is a very good idea to put to the test its efficiency in the context of our schools. In order to achieve the above goals the following research questions were posed:

1. Does using task-based activities have any effect on reading comprehension skill among Iranian Intermediate pre-University students?
2. Will the students' general proficiency be enhanced using task-based activities?

# Method

# Subjects

Sixty male students participated as subjects in two groups of thirty in this study. They came from the second semester of pre-university courses and were randomly chosen from two pre-university centers in Hamedan. Ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 20. After the administration of the pre-test, participants were assigned to an experimental group (EG, n = 30) and a control group (CG, n = 30). The two groups were homogeneous as far as general knowledge of English was concerned.

Instrumentation

**a)** Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

The homogeneity of the subjects in terms of their relative English language proficiency was controlled through their scores on the Oxford Placement Test. In this test which was administered as a pre-test across the two groups to check their general knowledge of English, the subjects were asked to answer 100 multiple-choice items.

**b)** The students' English textbooks taught in pre-university centers and also some authentic reading passages out of their textbooks were used as the sources of tasks during the treatment period.
**c)** A posttest consisting of 30 multiple- choice items (MCI) was given to the subjects to answer. It was based on reading passages. This test was administered after a two week interval of time.

# Procedure

All the materials used in this study were designed especially for adult EFL learners as those in this pre-university program. In the control group class, the teacher introduced the new words and phrases, and the students began to translate the passages and answer the cliché comprehension questions. For the experimental group, the same passages were redesigned to fit a task-based framework.

Task –based language teaching requires the teacher to set up and monitor a situation in which task-based learning can take place. Therefore, following Estaire and Zanon (1990), Gatbonton (1994), and Willis (1996), the class time was divided in to three phases: **pre-task**, **task cycle**, and **post-task** (Language focus).

In pre-task phase, the teacher's responsibility is to introduce and create interest in doing a task, then (s) he activates topic-related words and phrases that will be useful in carrying out the task; that is, (s) he provides linguistic and conceptual input for a given task.

In task cycle, students are actually involved in doing the task and using whatever linguistic resources they possess to achieve the goals of the task. In this phase, teacher may provide help or elucidation in the case of a breakdown in communication.

In post-task (language focus) phase, the teacher has an opportunity for form-focused work. Some of the specific features of the language that occurred during the task are identified and analyzed. Therefore, the teacher can work on functions, syntax, words, categories of meaning or use, and phonological features.

Because of the fact that texts were used as the main source of input in this study, some criteria were followed in order to choose texts and control the difficulty of the tasks. Following Wilson (1986), texts were selected according to criteria such as the density of information, the author's style, the amount of unfamiliar lexis, and the diagram to print ratio. The difficulty of the task was also controlled-without interfering with the principle of authenticity- by keeping these criteria in mind: information density, redundancy – rephrasing and restatements used to simplify, length, speed at which a task should be done, and visual support.

On the basis of texts, at elementary stages, the students were assigned to do a variety of tasks such as labeling a diagram or table (location and transfer of information), choosing a topic or the main idea for a paragraph or text (extraction and transfer of information). At more advanced stages, students were assigned to study a text, e.g. about grinding or turning, and then write down the steps to machine a work-piece to the specified dimensions. After two weeks, all the participants in both experimental and control groups took a posttest.

# Results And Discussion

To examine the effect of using task-based activities on FL readers' performance on reading comprehension skill and also their general proficiency, a series of t-tests were conducted. For the purpose of comparison, each of the t-tests was computed on the basis of group performance in post-test of reading comprehension to see whether there is a non-random, systematic variation between each group's performances on post-test. To this end, the means and the standard deviation obtained from each group's performance (on post-test) were submitted to the t-tests.

Table 1

*T-test analysis of the means of the two groups in Pre-test*

| Gro Group | Mea Mean | SDS SD | df | t-obs t-observed | t-critic t-critical |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ExperE **Experimental** | 11.3g 11.3 | .6 .6 | 58 | .2 | 2.02 |
| **Control** | 11.2 11.2 | .7 .7 | 58 | .2 | 2.02 |

The result of the t-test indicated that the two groups did not differ in view to their English knowledge in the pre-test of the study. This suggests that the two groups were indeed equivalent on the pre-test prior to the treatment.

Table 2 presents the results of the post-test in which the experimental group exhibited an increase in the score of correctly chosen answers.

Table 2

*T-test analysis of the means of the two groups in the Post-test*

| Group | X | SD | df | t-obse t-observed | t-critic t-critical |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Experimental** | 25.26 25.26 | 3.60 3.60 | 58 | 3.76 | 2.02 |
| **Control** | 16.83 16.83 | 4.72 4.72 | 58 | 3.76 | 2.02 |
| **Note**: The difference between the experimental group and the control group on this test | | | | | |

was statistically significant at **0.05** level of probability.

The t-observed turned out to be 3.76 which was well above the t-critical (2.02). This was an indication of differences between the two groups. A significant difference was observed between the performance of the experimental group and the control group on the post-test. This significance indicates that the experimental group outperformed the control group after the treatment period.

With reference to the distribution table of critical values of t and the above table (Table 2), it is evident that the t-value (3.76) is high enough for us to reject the null hypothesis. That is, it allows us to cite the evidence as support for our claim about the positive effect of using task-based activities on reading comprehension skill. In fact, the results revealed that the systematic variation between groups' performance on post-test was due to the manipulation of experimental treatment. The end result should be better comprehension (Stanovich and West, 1989). Accordingly, it can be speculated that using task-based activities affected the comprehension of the experimental group. Besides, the results obtained in this study are compatible with the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1980). From the IH viewpoint, negotiation facilitates comprehension.

# Conclusions And Implications

According to the results of this study, it can be cogently concluded that assigning students real-world tasks conveys to them the value of reading for message and influences their reading comprehension positively. Task-based activities provide students with something to do after reading and enhance interest and recall on the part of students. In other words, if students are involved in the process of learning, they feel that they are doing something that will be later use; consequently, better comprehension takes place. Furthermore, task-based language teaching places learners in situations that require authentic use of language in order to communicate (Fried-Booth, 1997). As a result, learners find they need skills to plan, organize and make their points. Task-based language teaching also implies that education and learning must be recognized as an act in which a learner plays the role of an active constructor of knowledge. It will also provide teachers with an enhanced estimation of the thinking and learning potential of students (Norton and Toobbey, 2004).

And finally, although genuine task-based textbooks are not available on the market yet, teachers may adapt the present materials if they wish to use a task-based approach. Doing so, by locating and

designing goal-oriented communication tasks and designing post-task phases, teachers may develop materials to create a situation in classroom which generates the type of behavior required for successful completion of a given task. The tasks designed should take into account both target situation needs and learning needs; therefore, by adjusting the level of difficulty of the tasks, teachers may work with authentic texts from the start.

# Declarations


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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

As the only author I confirm that I agree with the authorship and finalizing of this paper.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

### ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER

Ethical approval number is not applicable in the context of this study.


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# Figures

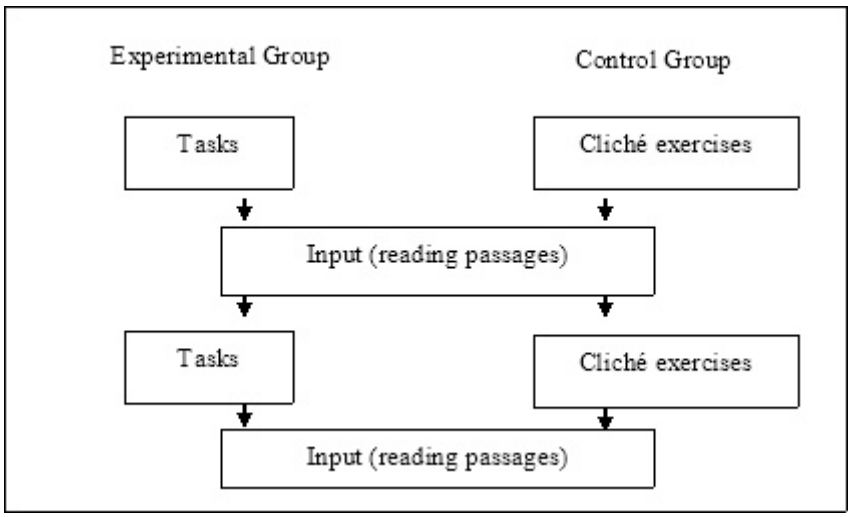



Figure 1

*The Experimental Procedure*