

## Improvement of Iranian EFL learners' autonomy through task-based speaking activities

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### Abstract

*Using tasks for learning a second or foreign language has been a recently debated subject. It is supposed that it triggers motives of the learners in subconscious learning processes. The goal of this study was to examine whether using task-based speaking activities has any effects on autonomy of the learners. This study employed an experimental method in which two classes of Iranian Intermediate students of Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Bojnourd, Iran were chosen and instructed by the same teacher as experimental and control groups. Eighty subjects, selected from 230 students based on their scores in PET test and Learner's Autonomy in Language Learning Questionnaire, participated in the study. Learner's Autonomy in Language Learning Questionnaire was used as the pretest and posttest. Also, some qualitative data were collected through interviews. The participants in experimental group received twenty sessions of task-based speaking activities. Then, the collected data from pretest and posttest were analyzed through SPSS. The results revealed the fact that task-based speaking activities had positive effect on improving learners' autonomy in experimental group.*

**Keywords:** Task-Based Speaking Activities, Learner's Autonomy in Language Learning

### 1. Introduction

In the past few years, one of the most popular approaches among language teachers, learners, educationalists and researchers has been task-based language learning and teaching. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is based on the assumption that learners learn a language through communicating, as in first language acquisition and naturalistic L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2005).

Task-based language is a practical approach which provides many advantages in teaching English as a foreign language because it focuses on learners using language naturally, allowing them to share ideas, think freely and increase their competence and creativity (Nunan, 2004).

Task-based language learning can improve learners' oral communication by placing them in authentic real-life situations for doing a specific task (Nunan, 2004). In the same line, there are many different types of tasks and activities that give opportunities to learners for promoting their speaking (Willis, 1996).

Considering the importance of using task-based activities in language learning and teaching, the researchers would like to study its impacts on the EFL learners and understand whether task-based speaking activities are effective in improving Iranian intermediate EFL learners' autonomy.

Speaking is an important skill for EFL language learners; they take many language courses in different institutes to improve their speaking abilities. Today, language schools are using various new methods in their educational systems toward increasing learners' interactions and communications positively; one of these methods might be task-based language learning. However, these teaching methods have essential roles but also there are a large number of factors dealing with their learning process to improve learners' speaking skill.

Based on related studies (e.g. Littel, 1991; Lier, 2010) one of major points affecting language learning is autonomy. Foreign language learners are supposed to play an active role in their learning, applying the knowledge acquired in the classroom to other situations and have the ability to perform specific tasks. It seems Iranian learners are not autonomous in their language learning development. However, this study examines the amount of Iranian students' autonomy who participated in task-based speaking classes. The researchers have attempted to investigate the effect of task-based speaking activities as an almost new method of teaching in Iran and as an active method of teaching on students' speaking skills on improving learners' autonomy. This study embraces the following questions:

Q1. Can task-based speaking activities significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' autonomy?

Q2. What are students' opinions about the use of task-based speaking activities?

To avoid subjectivity the following null hypothesis was proposed:

H01. Task-based speaking activities can not affect Iranian EFL learners' autonomy.

## 2. Review of Literature

The number of studies dealing with autonomy and EFL learning success is limited but autonomy in language learning has been the topic of many researchers and practitioners for a few decades.

Since language learning has become an essential component in people's life, educational research has emphasized on the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. It goes without saying that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners is the result of changes in the curriculum towards a more learner-centered learning. Thus, in order to contribute to the development of learner-centered education in language classrooms, it is vital that students be involved in taking control of their own learning.

In this respect, many conceptions have been proposed and many educators have tried to explain learner autonomy, for example; to define autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981, p. 3) who considers it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning".

Benson (2001, p.2) claims that the "Concept of autonomy is grounded in a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning", in addition Royce (2002) identifies autonomy as "The ability to understand the combined potential of various modes for making meaning" (p. 92).

Nunan (1995) conducted a project to investigate the effect of an autonomous learning environment on learners' learning process for over a twelve-week period. During this process, learners took part in a language program designed with different modes such as co-operative learning, whole class work, pair and group work, learning beyond the classroom and individualized learning. At the end of this process, several changes were observed in learners' learning behaviors. They became more communicative than before, preferred a more process-oriented approach to language learning rather than a product-oriented approach and began to take the control of their own learning. Also, they became more successful in their English courses than before. In short, it is clear from the study that autonomous learning environment affects students' learning in a positive way. Littlewood (1999, p.73) comments that if we define autonomy in educational terms as involving students' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners everywhere, since it is obvious that no students, anywhere, will have their teachers to accompany them throughout life.

On the other hand Benson (1997) claims, "autonomy is a complex and multifaceted concept" (p.29). Also, he suggests that "Three major versions of learner autonomy should be considered in the field of language learning: the technical, the psychological, and the socio-political." The technically autonomous learners are those who are equipped with the necessary skills and techniques which enable them to learn a language without the constraints of a formal institution and without a teacher. The psychological version defines autonomy as the capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning, whereas the political version focuses on the control over the content and process of one's own learning (p. 25).

Sinclair (1997) suggests that autonomy included social, individual, psychological, and political features and should be thought of as a concept which accommodates different interpretations.

According to Lee (1998), all students need to be assisted to gain awareness of independent learning outside the classrooms. He adds that promoting independence in learners will help them to continue their language development and take increasing responsibility for their learning. The main aim of the classroom-based activities will be self-directed learning program. For gaining this result, he designed a research for the first year students who were taking an English Communication Skills class. The results indicated that it was a help for students to become more autonomous with necessary skills and take control over their learning.

A study was conducted by Nematipour (2012) to determine Iranian EFL learners' autonomy level and its relationship with learning style in a sample of 200 undergraduate students at the Department of Foreign Languages. Their major were Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Translation. In his research, three questionnaires were used. The first one was Perceptual Learning Style Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) developed by Reid (1987) that was used to explore the learning style preferences of the students. The next questionnaire consisted of randomly arranged sets of 5 statements on each of the six learning style preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile, group learning, and individual learning). Also, a Learner Autonomy Questionnaire developed by Zhang and Li (2004) was administered to see how autonomous the participants were in learning English as a foreign language. His study has provided a rich source of information on students' autonomy level about their learning styles and gender. Results obtained from study showed that most participants believed in their abilities in learning English, they were studying English due to their own interest, they thought their success and failure were due to their attempt, and they preferred pair and group work. On the other hand, they did not like to preview lessons before class, keep record of their study, prepare self exams and reward themselves due to their success.

Mineishi (2010) did a research on East Asian EFL Learners' Autonomous Learning and Learner Perception, and takes as its focus the autonomy of adult EFL learners in Japan. Initially, he examines two samples of Japanese tertiary-level students' perception of learner autonomy, in accordance with Littlewood (1999). Two hundred and ninety, first year Japanese university students from four different departments participated in the study. The course included: vocabulary and grammar instruction, portfolio development, reading strategy training, speed reading, writing process explanations and instructions, summary writing, and writing sessions such as quick writing, jigsaw reading and writing activities, and peer editing tasks. Throughout the last session of class, all the participants were given a questionnaire about learner autonomy. The data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively then, a t-test was employed. Based on the test scores, two groups of learners were identified in order to get two significantly different types of learner samples, successful and less successful. There were some differences between successful and less successful learners with regard to their perception of learner autonomy. Less successful learners tended to prefer working together in groups, they often felt more hesitant to 'stand out' by voicing their opinions and questions, they tended to expect the teacher rather than themselves to be responsible for evaluating how much they had learnt more strongly than successful learners did. Findings of the study showed that teachers should develop their teaching methods appropriate to promote less successful learners' autonomy in the classroom and there are some necessity to develop a new framework of Japanese adult EFL learners' autonomy.

Ayfer (2003) investigated whether students attending English Language Preparatory School at Baskent University were ready to be involved in autonomous language learning. This study also argues that before any interventions aiming at fostering autonomy are implemented, it is necessary to explore learners' readiness for autonomous learning in four different areas. These areas are as follows: Learners' motivation level in learning English, Learners' use of meta-cognitive strategies in learning English, Learners' responsibility perception of their own and their teachers' in learning English and Learners' practice of English in the outside class activities. The questionnaire used in this study was administered to 186 students. Nevertheless, the results of the study indicated that majority of the students had high motivation. Another result showed that the learners considered the teacher as more responsible for most of the tasks during their own learning process. Third, majority of the students tended to be spending little time for out-of-class activities to improve their English.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants and Setting

Participants in this study were selected from university students who were taking English classes at Kish Institute of Science and Technology in Bojnourd, Northern Khorasan, Iran. All participants were Iranian EFL female and male learners who were Persian native speakers, and their age ranged 20 to 34.

One hundred learners were selected from 230 learners based on their scores in PET test who were placed into the intermediate level. Then, out of one hundred learners, only 80 learners who were not autonomous (based on autonomy tests) were invited for the study. These participants were randomly assigned to two groups, control group (N=40) and experimental group (N=40).

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

Three types of instruments were employed in the study: a placement test, a questionnaire, and an interview.

##### 3.2.1. Preliminary English Test (PET)

A placement test was used in order to determine students' level in the language school. The researchers used the PET test (Preliminary English Test) as a placement test, because PET is a general standard test in reading, writing, listening and speaking skills and it is at level B1 of the Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Level B1 shows the intermediate level of language learning. The assessment aim of PET is to ensure that the test reflects the use of language in real life. The question types and formats have been devised with the purpose of fulfilling these aims. PET corresponds closely to an active and communicative approach to learning English, without neglecting the need for clarity and its reliability calculated through Alpha Cronbach's is 0.775 (which is acceptable and also up to standards).

The final mark a candidate receives in PET is an aggregate of the marks obtained in each of the four papers (Reading and Writing, Listening, and Speaking). Each skill (i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) carries equal weighting, providing 25% of the total marks each. In this test, intermediate level means ordinarily students should acquire around 70% of the total marks.

##### 3.2.2. EFL Learner's Autonomy Questionnaire

In order to collect the required data, participants were required to respond to a questionnaire as a pretest and posttest. The questionnaire was adapted from Learner's Autonomy in Language Learning by Kashefian (2002), and Zhang and Li (2004). This questionnaire consists of 30 items in a five-point Likert scale. As to the internal reliability of the questionnaire that the researchers calculated, Cronbach alpha was used which turned out to be 0.89. Time allocated for this test is 35 minutes. Learners were supposed to give their opinion by marking

one of the five choices for each item: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree.

To check the localization and validity of the questionnaires, a detailed discussion was undertaken with some experts in the field and their suggestions were incorporated into the questionnaires. In this case, the experts suggested some changes in the content and face of the questionnaires items. The revised questionnaires were piloted, through which the respondents were asked to state the probable difficulties and probable lack of understanding of the questionnaire items. The time allotted to responding the questionnaire was calculated in the pilot study too. Then, the questionnaire was revised based on the comments and then submitted to the experts for their confirmation. The final version was piloted on a representative of 20 intermediate EFL learners who were not involved in the study. The estimated reliability values were 0.89.

### 3.2.3. The Interview

A semi-structured interview was prepared for this research and fifteen volunteers, who were keen to utter their ideas and emotions freely, participated in it. The purpose of conducting interview is to fully understand the issue and finding more details about learners' point of view. Four descriptive questions were asked in relation to the theme of autonomy and task-based speaking activities in English classes and everyone could speak around 10 to 15 minutes. Their speech was recorded by an mp3 player.

### 3.3 Procedure

In this study, at first, 230 participants took a PET placement test and the researchers chose 100 learners who had got around 70% out of the 100% total scores as intermediate level learners based on CEFR.

Next, the researcher employed a questionnaire on learning autonomy; it was related to learners' opinions towards autonomy. Continually, a questionnaire key was developed for checking learners' answers by the researchers.

Subsequently, based on these pretests, eighty students who were not autonomous were selected for the purpose of the study, and randomly separated into

two equal groups, experimental (N=40) and control (N=40).

Afterwards, the researchers employed task-based speaking activities for 20 sessions for students in experimental group, three sessions every week, each session one and half hour. During these sessions, the researchers tried to make creative and individual task-based speaking exercises via *Four Corners 4* student's book plus its workbook, audio CDs and video DVD.

In control group, the participants were given the same book, *Four Corners 4*, and accessories during the equal class sessions but they did not receive any task-based speaking activities at all. Even though the foundation of the book is based on cooperative and communicative methodology, they just worked on the entire content of the book; it means learners practiced the sections on reading, writing, speaking, listening, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary that were included in the book, and there was not any clear focus on task-based speaking activities.

After passing these steps, the researchers administered the same questionnaire of pretest to both experimental and control groups. Then, fifteen volunteers participated in a semi-structured interview that was prepared for this research. The researchers clarified four questions and kept a record, then wrote a transcript in details. Finally, they were categorized and analyzed.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results of the Quantitative Data Analysis

#### 4.1.1. Test of Normality of the Data

Before choosing the statistical method for comparison of data from two groups, a test of normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) was carried out to account for the normality or lack of normality of the data. Table 1 indicates the result.

As it is clear from Table 1, the result of the normality test shows that p values of the two groups (.491, and .524) are more than the significance level (0.05). Therefore, we can accept the assumption of normality and we can use parametric test such as t-test for comparing the results of the pretest and posttest in the control and experimental groups.

**Table 1** One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Test for Experimental and Control Groups in Autonomy

		Pretest control	Pretest experimental
N		40	40
Normal parameters (a, b)	Mean	8.65	9.03
	Std. deviation	7.915	7.464
	Absolute	0.096	0.096
	Positive	0.096	0.091
	Negative	-0.096	-0.096
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		0.491	0.524
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		0.969	0.946

**Table 2** Independent Sample T-Test for Autonomy 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
Equal variances assumed	0.181	0.671	-2.689	78	0.09	-4.625	1.72	-8.05	-1.2
Equal variances not assumed			-2.689	77.734	0.09	-4.625	1.72	-8.05	-1.2

**Table3** Independent Sample T-Test for Autonomy Posttest

	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
Equal variances assumed	0.711	0.402	43.269	78	0	61.9	1.431	59.052	64.748
Equal variances not assumed			43.269	77.431	0	61.9	1.431	59.052	64.748

**4.1.2. Independent T-test for Autonomy Pretest and Posttest**

The researchers wanted to check whether there was any significant difference between experimental and control groups of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' autonomy before and after applying task-based speaking activities. The total score for EFL Learner's autonomy questionnaire is 110. Table 2 shows the data analysis related to the data from pretest of both groups.

As shown in Table 2, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the participants' scores for control and experimental group before treatment. Based on the results on Leven's test for equality of variance in autonomy pretest, because sig value was more than .05, variance of two groups was homogeneous (p-value was .671 which was > .05). Because sig (two-tailed) = .090 and it was more than .05 ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) thus there was no significant difference between control and experimental groups at their pretest [ $t(78) = -2.689, p = .090$  (two-tailed)]. This indicated that the participants in both groups had similar autonomy in their language learning. Therefore, based on pretest the participants did not have any significant difference in their autonomy at the beginning of study and they were homogenized.

The researchers inspected participants' autonomy differences in two experimental and control groups after treatment by using a posttest. Table 3 indicates the results.

This independent sample T-Test was conducted to evaluate the effect of 20 session treatments on learners' autonomy. Due to the analysis of data shown in Table 3, it

is concluded that variances of two groups' posttest were homogeneous and Sig =.402 was more than 0.05; it means that p-value > 0.05 in both groups. As seen in Table 3, because Sig (two-tailed) = 0.00 and it was less than 0.05 ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ), there was high significant difference between experimental and control groups [ $t(78) = 43.269, p = 0.00$  (two-tailed)]. Therefore, the results showed that after treatment, participants in experimental group changed significantly in their autonomy, therefore, the research hypothesis can be rejected.

Consequently, learning English through task-based speaking activities positively affected these intermediate Iranian EFL learners' autonomy.

**4.3. Results of the Qualitative Data Analysis**

The researchers investigated the ideas of learners who participated in the interview in order to find out about their opinions about the use of task-based speaking activities.

These findings are presented based on the questions asked in the interviews. The significant and major points revealed from the qualitative analyses were that learners' specific focus was on using real life activities, tasks and situations, improving their speaking skill in a short time, being aware of their strengths and weaknesses in learning English, the possibility of exploring novel techniques for solving difficulties and finding the best ways of learning English, and finally managing their learning and studying time.

The overall findings of interviews showed that the mentioned critical factors supported the impact of

implementing task-based speaking activities in the classrooms on improving their autonomy as considerable aspect of language learning. High autonomy, as an internal motivation, gave learners opportunity for truly communications based on social cognitive theory in the context of foreign language learning and learners were more responsible and independent for their learning process.

#### 4.4 Discussion

The researchers have done a comparison on the subject of autonomy between previous studies and current research. For instance, Nematipour (2012) determined Iranian EFL learners' autonomy level and its relationship with learning style or having the same goal in mind, Nunan (1995) conducted a project to investigate the effect of an autonomous learning environment on learners' learning process. They were reported that at the end of the processes, learners became more communicative than before, preferred a more process-oriented approach to language learning rather than a product-oriented approach and began to take the control of their own learning. Furthermore, Gültekin and Karababa (2010) revealed that there was a relationship between language learning styles and the autonomy level of the learners.

To answer the research question and check the null hypothesis, a t-test was conducted. As the results of the analysis in Table 2 show, there was no significant difference between experimental and control groups at the beginning of study but after treatments the participants in experimental group changed significantly in their autonomy.

Consequently, comparison of the findings of the precedent studies demonstrated that the results obtained from this study seem to be partly matching with the findings of the earlier studies. Based on the results of the collected data, learning English through task-based speaking activities positively affected Iranian EFL learners' autonomy and the null hypothesis was rejected. Hence, task-based speaking activities can make the learners more responsible for their learning, and it can make them have a control on their own learning.

#### Conclusion

It appeared that for the past decades attempts have been made to find ways to address the educational and learning needs of Iranian EFL learners. As one of the attempts in the same line, this research investigated the effect of task-based speaking activities on EFL learners' autonomy.

In general, a descriptive statistics was presented with the purpose of summarizing the available data of pretest and posttest scores. Based on the results from the questionnaires and interviews a summary of major results will be described as follow:

The findings of the study after treatment have revealed the fact that participants in experimental group changed significantly in their autonomy. Therefore, the results showed task-based speaking activities positively affected intermediate Iranian EFL learners' autonomy.

Based on the results of the collected data from interview, task-based speaking activities made the learners more responsible for their learning, they could take control of their own learning, learners' confidence and also their abilities for performance of tasks increased by using task-based speaking activities.

From the results of this study, the researchers would like to propose several pedagogical implications. First of all, it showed that Iranian EFL learners were not familiar with the necessary strategies and skills needed for doing task-based activities, also they were suffering from lack of autonomy. It would be worthwhile to investigate how effective task-based learning can be for learners. Therefore, the instructors can use classroom outcomes for improving their teaching process and comprehend learners' changes.

The results of the study revealed that task-based learning has increased learners' autonomy, however, a replication of the study could be conducted with other researchers or educationalists who are interested in doing second or foreign language research to find the relationship between different teaching methodology elements and their effects on other psychological aspects in language learning domain.

Finally, from the findings of the study, it has emerged that more attention needs to be paid to how material developers should develop second and foreign language textbooks and other educational materials. They should design and prepare materials that use task-based activities as an almost new method of teaching and learning to improve Iranian language learners' speaking abilities.

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