In the Name of Allah

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The Effect of Task Complexity on Learner Uptake

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ABSTRACT

There has, recently, been a large body of research investigating the effects of task complexity on learner production in terms of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. However, the effects of task complexity on interaction and uptake of linguistic items made salient in the input has, rarely, been explored. To investigate the effect of task complexity on learner uptake, 38 male learners who have been in lower-intermediate of EFL in Iran National Institute, Miandoab, Iran and their cohort, 22 male learners from Jihad Daneshgahi Language Institute, Uremia, Iran were randomly assigned into two groups. For the purpose of the data collection, two versions of the same decision-making task at two level of task complexity were employed. One group did the simple task and the latter one transacted the complex task. The data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded. Considering the independency of the two groups, the independent t-test was employed. The results of the statistical analyses revealed that participants in the complex task group tended to produce more uptakes both in terms of rate and success. This high rate of uptake can be attributed to the cognitive demands of the complex task which imposes extra burden of information processing, memory capacity, and attentional resources on learners' mental capacity. The present study would like to argue that task complexity is one of the predictors of learner uptake. This study, moreover, has a number of pedagogical implications for SLA researchers, and syllabus design.

Dedicated to:

Prof. Massoud Rahimpour

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Chapter One

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0. INTRODUCTION

As a teacher of English as a foreign language, I repeatedly observed students' inaccuracy while performing pedagogical tasks. I thought that the choice of the Focus on Form and the type of corrective feedback was not a straightforward one. With this in mind, I baffled by different ways of focusing on form, e.g., pre-emptive vs. reactive and different types of corrective feedback and their effectiveness within the task-based interaction. Gaining insights from the work of Robinson within the framework of The Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson 2001a, 2001b, 2005a), I learned that the case was different from simple to complex task performance and there would be more opportunities for Focus on Form in complex tasks compared to simple ones. This was the first motive for me to go forward and investigate the uptake moves across task complexity as an indication of more opportunities for interlanguage development.

1.1. Background of the Study

In recent years there has been a considerable research interest in tasks, both as a construct and as a research instrument (Kuiken and Vedder, 2007). In task-based research four major approaches can be distinguished (Robinson 2007a): (i) a psychological, interactional approach, influenced strongly by the work of Long (1985); (ii) a sociocultural approach, represented by the work of researchers like Lantolf (2000) and Swain (1998); (iii) a structure-focused approach, where tasks are designed to elicit the use of a particular structure feature (Van Patten, 1996) (iv) a

cognitive, information-theoretic approach (Skehan 1998, 2001; Robinson 2001a, 2001b, 2003b, 2005a, 2007a) (Cited in Kuiken and Vedder 2007).

Tasks have over the past 20 years become well established as a unit of design in a communicative curriculum. They are designed to engage learners in realistic communication on the grounds that engagement in communicating meaning is likely to lead to implicit learning (Crabbe, 2007). Research on task design attempts to find variables in task design that will lead to recognized second language acquisition processes such as negotiation or noticing (Bygate et al., 2001; Ellis, 2003). Tasks-more specifically their components, characteristics, different types, and implementation conditions have been the focus of much recent research (Albert and Komors, 2004).

The great advantage of tasks is that they allow for learner engagement in realizing the communicative potential of the encoded semantic resource (Widdowson, 2003) and the most important role for a language task is to confront learners with certain language problems in completing the task (Long, 1985).

Nunan (2003) pointed out that task-based language teaching is an approach to the design of language courses in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks. It draws on and reflects the experiential and humanistic traditions as well as reflects the changing conceptions of language itself.

Among three aspects of task-based pedagogy, to Robinson (2001a), task complexity is the task dependent and proactively manipulable cognitive demand of tasks. Different criteria for task complexity, Robinson 2001a believes, provide a basis for decisions about sequencing tasks in a task-based syllabus as well as a framework for studying the effects of increasing L2 task complexity on production, comprehension and learning.

Despite the increasing number of different models for determining task complexity (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brindley, 1987; Brown & Yule, 1983; Candlin, 1987; Candlin and Nunan, 1987; Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Rahimpour, 1997, 1999), Robinson's model (2001b, 2007a), seems to the present researcher that, meets the requirements of what Robinson (2001b) calls ' theoretically motivated, empirically substantiable, and pedagogically feasible sequencing criteria to syllabus design'. Robinson (2001a) also believes that this framework is more operatioalizable framework for studying task complexity and for the design of language learning materials and task-based syllabuses that draws on some previous SLA research as well as on some current work in applied cognitive psychology (Robinson, 2001a). He, further, relates this framework to issues in the study of memory, attention, and processes implicated in focus on form during task performance. It should be noted that there is not consensus over any established criteria for sequencing and grading tasks. In the same way, Robinson (2007c: 276) has also exercised a word of caution:

> The lack of a single taxonomic system of empirically
> researchable and a pedagogically implemented task
> characteristic in SLA is problematic.

According to Robinson's model (2001b, 2007a) which seems to me more comprehensive, tasks with many similar elements, in There-and-Then condition, and with higher reasoning demands are more cognitively complex compared to tasks with few easily distinguished elements, in Here-and-Now condition, and with no or less reasoning demands. His *resource-dispersing* facet of task complexity, also, predicts that giving learners no planning time, doing two tasks simultaneously, and having no

or little prior knowledge about the task in question contribute to the cognitive complexity of tasks. Many studies have, empirically, lent support to these predictions of The Cognition Hypothesis (Lee, 2007; Michel et al., 2007; Niwa, 2000; Rahimpour, 1997, 1999; Gilabert, 2005, 2007; Robinson, 1995a, 2001b, 2003b, 2005a, 2007a; Robinson and Lim, 1993).

1.2. **Significance of The Study**

The ordering of different tasks has prime importance in task-based instruction, as authors working within this framework argue that language learning and teaching should be sequenced by means of tasks; therefore, tasks form the basis of the curriculum (Albert and Kormos, 2004). No doubt, information about the cognitive complexity of tasks will be of prime importance to syllabus designers and language teachers adhering to TBLT (Gilabert, 2005, 2007; Rahimpour, 1997, 1999, 2008; Robinson, 2001b, 2007a). Seen from the same angle, Robinson (2001a) relates task complexity, cognitive defined, to options in syllabus design and to other issues in the implementation and assessment of task-based instruction.

The Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001a, 2001b, 2005a) claims that tasks should be designed and sequenced for the learners on the basis of increase in their cognitive complexity. And these designs and sequencing decisions should be the basis of the task-based syllabus (Long 2007; Long and Crookes 1992; Robinson 2007a; Van den Branden 2006). Moreover, Skehan and Foster (2001) believe that issues of cognitive

complexity have important implications for our understanding of how attention is deployed during task completion.

One of the reasons behind this research is the need to bring together the explanations of L2 production, views of pushed output, noticing and learner uptake together and integrate them into an account of how task complexity affects performance.

The present study, moreover, seeks to cast light on what Robinson (2007) called for; that " … no study to date has examined the effects of task complexity on uptake". Moreover, given the acquisitional potential of 'uptake' that may be facilitative of language acquisition (Ellis et al., 2001b, Loewen, 2004); it seems promising to investigate learner uptake during performing complex tasks vs. simpler ones. Attaching acquisitional value to learner uptake means that more learner uptake may be concomitant to more opportunities for 'noticing' (Loewen, 2004) and more language acquisition opportunities (Robinson, 2007c).

As rightly pointed out by Robinson and Gilabert (2007), "the focus, to date, has been on research into the effects of task complexity on speech production, but other issue, i.e. of the effects of task complexity on interaction and uptake of input made salient during task performance, is also worthy of extensive research".

1.3. The Rationale for the Study

No doubt, information about the cognitive complexity of tasks will be of prime importance to syllabus designers and language teachers adhering to TBLT (Gilabert, 2005, 2007; Rahimpour, 1997, 1999, 2008; Robinson, 2001b, 2007a; Van den Branden 2006). The Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001a, 2001b,

2005a), also, claims that tasks should be designed and sequenced for the learners on the basis of increases in their cognitive complexity, and these design and sequencing decisions should be the basis of the task-based syllabus (Long 2007; Long and Crookes ,1992; Robinson, 2007a; Van den Branden, 2006).

The present study, moreover, seeks to fill the gap in the literature felt by Robinson (2007c) that " no study to date has examined the effects of task complexity on uptake". Moreover, given the acquisitional potential of 'uptake' that may be facilitative of language acquisition (Ellis et al., 2001b, Loewen, 2004); it seems promising to investigate learner uptake during performing complex tasks vs. simpler ones. Attaching acquisitional value to learner uptake means that more learner uptake may be concomitant to more opportunities for 'noticing' (Loewen, 2004) and more language acquisition opportunities (Robinson, 2007c).

Furthermore, as rightly pointed out by Robinson and Gilabert (2007), "the focus, to date, has been on research into the effects of task complexity on speech production, but other issue, i.e. of the effects of task complexity on interaction and uptake of input made salient during task performance, is also worthy of extensive research".

Moreover, the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001b, 2003b) predicts that more interaction and retention of task relevant input made salient during task performance will take place as a consequence of complex task performance, versus performance on simpler counterparts. Robinson (2005a:25) goes on to argue that to examine:

> this importance prediction more thoroughly, future
>
> studies need to look at effects of task complexity
>
> on uptake of information made salient by recasting
>
> , flooding, textual input enhancement, productive
>
> rule description, and other techniques for FonF

described by Doughty and Williams (1998). If this claim is found to be supported it w ill have important implications for FonF studies that attempt to assess the relative effectiveness of one technique, versus another, since it will suggest that task complexity should be operationalized as an important moderator variable that needs to be controlled for it if the true extent of relative effectiveness of various FonF techniques is to be clearly established (Robinson, 2005: 25).

Notwithstanding, the effects of task complexity on learners' production in terms of uptake will be indicative of the fact that task complexity, rightly, affects language production and language development through ' pushing output', 'noticing', and in Robinson's (2001a, 2001b) form-function mappings. However, exploring these issues central to language acquisition will have pedagogical implications for syllabus designers who seek for valid units of analyses for classroom activities and language teachers, as well.

1.4. Key Terms and Concepts

As the title of the present study suggests, this study investigates the effect of Task Complexity on Learner's Uptake. As stated in chapter two, **Task Complexity** is the result of attentional, memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task to the language learner (Robinson, 2001b).

Uptake refers to a student's utterance that immediately follows the teacher's feedback to draw attention to some aspect of the student's initial utterance (Lyster and Ranta, 1997) and also the delayed moves were regarded as uptake. **Successful Uptake** was defined as uptake in which learners clearly demonstrated an ability to incorporate the information provided (e.g., by paraphrasing it) or to use the item correctly in their utterances (Ellis et al., 2001a).

Unsuccessful Uptake was defined as uptake consisting of just an acknowledgement or simple repetition of something the teacher has said or of the incorrect use of the item (Ellis et al, 2001a)**.**

1.5. The organization of the study

In chapter one, *Introduction,* the background and the significance of the study are discussed.

CHAPTER TWO, **Review of the Related Literature:**

Chapter two provides the rationale for task-based teaching and studying task complexity and elaborates on the different criteria and models for estimating task complexity. After that, it discusses the works has been done within the scope of The Cognition Hypothesis. Then, explains the notion of "uptake" and research surrounding the construct and finally, it links learner uptake to acquisition opportunities.

CHATER THREE: Methodology

This chapter gives a brief definition of the key terms and constructs used in the study and clarifies the different variables of the study. Afterwards, explanations will be

made of the procedures used for the purpose of data collection. Finally, the materials and comments on the participants of the study will be clarified.

CHAPER FOUR, Data Analyses:

This chapter employs necessary tables and figures to put forward the findings and discusses the tables and figures to make them and the study easy to understand.

CHAPTER FIVE, Conclusions and Discussions:

This chapter presents a summary of the chapters and discusses the conclusions of the study. Then, acknowledges the limitations of the study. After that, it elaborates on the pedagogical implications of the study. Finally, suggestions will be made about further lines of research for further research.

Chapter Two

Review of the

Related Literature

CHAPTER TWO:

Review of the Related Literature

2.0. Introduction