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Task repetition and extra-curricular speaking opportunities: Measuring gains in complexity, accuracy, and fluency

This paper reports a study which highlights the effectiveness of task repetition in promoting changes in learners' interlanguage. Thirty-two randomly chosen third-grade junior high school students of both genders were divided into two groups and presented with an interview task. One group repeated the task four times while the second group did the same task twice over a four-week period. Statistical analysis of transcripts indicated that repetition enabled the learners to show improvement in measures of complexity, and to some extent, accuracy. Similarly, a holistic re-reading of the transcripts corroborated the quantitative result and showed gains in fluency, thereby supporting the argument that repetition can facilitate changes in learners' language. The findings suggest that task repetition can promote language learning and overall language proficiency.

本論では、「繰り返し学習」で学習者の中間言語が促進されることを検証する。中学3年生男女32名を無作為に2つのグループに分け、インタビュー形式のタスクを実施した。4週間にわたり、同じタスクを1つのグループには4回、もう一方には2回行った。その結果、「繰り返し学習」で複雑な表現力の向上には統計的な有意差がみられ、正確さは向上する傾向がみられた。同様に、インタビュー内容全体を見返すと量的結果が裏付けられ、流暢さの向上がみられた。調査結果は、「繰り返し学習」は言語習得や全体的な言語能力を促進することを示唆している。

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This study was conceived as a result of the limited speaking opportunities in Japanese junior high schools, where foreign language (L2) classrooms tend to focus on form-focused activities with little or no emphasise on oral communication. There is need, therefore, for language teachers to devise ways of extending learners' engagement with oral tasks and any other features of the L2 classroom capable of promoting learning. For example, embedding learned linguistic forms in meaning-oriented tasks may allow accuracy and fluency to occur within the same activity. However, in order to help learners go from reading from text—often mislabelled as speaking—to using their L2 knowledge in actuality, oral tasks need not be confined to timetabled lessons because, as I argued in a previous study (Effiong, 2009), oral interviews conducted outside class time can offer beginner learners the opportunity for L2 oral skill development. In this paper, I demonstrate that engaging learners repeatedly with the same oral task can facilitate L2 learning, especially when it is not tied to school assessment. Firstly, I examine the notions of task and task repetition in the development of learners' L2 oral proficiency, and then go on to define complexity, accuracy, and fluency, which provide the framework of the study. I then present an experimental project aimed at improving L2 speaking skill and highlight the effect of task repetition on language development. Finally, I discuss the implications of using such an activity to facilitate oral proficiency, especially in contexts with limited out-of-class exposure to the target language.

Task and the role of task repetition

Ellis (2003) suggests that through tasks, learners can be engaged in cognitive processes arising from communication outside the language classroom. Extracurricular speaking tasks free learners of classroom constraints such as peer pressure, laughter elicited by erroneous utterances, and teacher expectations, all of which often inhibit production. Importantly, possible gains from these extracurricular tasks would be evident in changes in the learner's interlanguage (IL). IL is the grammatical system that a learner creates and the language they produce in the course of learning another language (Nunan, 1999; Thornbury, 2006). Task repetition, on the other hand, is an approach that integrates the processing capacities of learners. It reduces learners' information processing load, helps to integrate the competing demands of complexity, accuracy, and fluency, and offers opportunities for greater precision in language use (Bygate, 1999; Klapper, 2003; McLaughlin, 1987; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1996). In addition, when exposed to new versions of the task, learners can deal with the task variation more effectively (Helgesen, 2003). Oral tasks are therefore beneficial because, according to Eisenchlas (2009), forced production stimulates IL development by making learners impose syntactic structure on their utterances. To this end, task repetition can be used to develop different areas of learners' IL because iteration enables learners to reformulate linguistic elements, thus becoming more capable of producing more complex forms.

Complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF)

CAF are a multidimensional, dynamic, and interrelated set of constantly changing subsystems which serve as performance descriptors for oral assessment of language learners (Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Norris & Ortega, 2009). L2 complexity comprises cognitive complexity and linguistic complexity. Housen and Kuiken (2009) refer to cognitive complexity as the relative difficulty with which language features are processed in L2 performance and acquisition. Fluency, on the other hand, has been variously defined as the quality of smoothness of execution of performance, and the ability to speak at a normal rate without hesitation or interruption (Bygate, 1999; Chambers, 1997; Nunan, 1999; Skehan, 2009). Of the three constructs, accuracy appears to be the most robust and least controversial. It is the quality of being congruent with norms (Bygate, 1999; Housen & Kuiken, 2009), and is operationalised as the percentage of appropriate target-like lexicalisation in learner performance.

Taking account of the literature reviewed, this study is informed by the notion that tasks bring about purposeful and functional language use (Ellis, 2009; Robinson, 2001), and task repetition helps learners to integrate fluency, accuracy, and complexity (Bygate, 1999). Although learners' attentional resources to attend to the three aspects simultaneously may be limited, joint operation of separate task characteristics and task conditions can simultaneously enhance accuracy and complexity (Ellis, 2000; Skehan, 2009). Given that different dimensions of CAF compete with one another for limited attentional resources, this study will examine in detail aspects of learners' performance such as the language used to achieve the task outcome. In a previous study (Effiong, 2009), I used closed questions and a single interview that were incapable of stretching the learners' IL because participants produced limited or single word responses. Consequently, this study adopts open questions and repeated interviews, both of which have the potential to elicit complex, accurate, and fluent responses.

Research Questions

1. Does task repetition promote complexity, accuracy, and fluency gains (in task performance) among beginner learners?
2. What are some examples of changes that task repetition causes in learners' language?

Method

This study was conducted in a junior high school in Takatsuki, Osaka where the author worked as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in 2008. It used an interview followed by a monologic picture description. Thirty-two third-grade students aged fourteen and fifteen from three classes were put into two groups. Initially eighty students volunteered and were evenly divided into two groups, but some participants in one group declined to repeat the task four times. Consequently, volunteers in the other group were reduced to correspond with the number of willing participants in the first group. The higher task frequency (HTF) group had nine girls and seven boys while the lower frequency (LTF) group consisted of ten girls and six boys. The study was conducted outside classroom hours because it was not feasible to do so in class

time. Each interview covering the dialogic and monologic phases of the task lasted an average of eight minutes and was recorded with a voice recorder, then transcribed and coded to measure CAF. The HTF group did the same task once a week for four weeks while the LTF group did the same task in Weeks 1 and 4 but carried on with their normal school activities in Weeks 2 and 3. All participants were asked the same questions and shown the same picture on each occasion.

Instruments

Task

1. What did you do on Sunday from morning to evening?
2. Tell me everything about your last school trip.
3. Describe your favourite movie.
4. What do you see in this picture? (Students are shown a picture of a household scene)

Measures

1. Complexity
   Percentage of utterances including verbs: This is the number of turns, with verbs divided by the total number of turns and multiplied by hundred (see Yuan & Ellis, 2003).
   Percentage of utterances consisting of complete sentences: This is the number of turns having complete sentences divided by the total number of turns and multiplied by hundred (See Kawauchi, 2005, cited in Ellis, 2009).

2. Accuracy
   Percentage of error-free turns (ignoring dysfluencies): This is the number of turns without errors divided by the total number of turns and multiplied by hundred (See Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

3. Fluency
   Total number of words
   Total number of pruned words: This is the total number of words produced less dysfluent words. Dysfluent words are repetitions, false starts, L1 utterances and incomprehensible words (See Derwing, Munro, Thomson, & Rossiter, 2009).
   Ratio of total words produced to dysfluent words: This is the total number of words produced by the participant divided by the total number of dysfluent words.

Analyses

Data analysis was guided by the two research questions (RQ), hereinafter referred to as RQ1 and RQ2. The RQs were examined through quantitative analysis and a qualitative rereading of the transcripts for evidence of language development. The precision of the estimates of outcome statistics was set at $p < 0.05$. Repeated measures ANOVA were used to test for within-subject effects, which indicate time effect on all measures reported. One-way ANOVA was performed to show between-group effects, highlighting the HTF group relative to the LTF group. Throughout, the assumption of sphericity or equality of variance and normality remained the same. The effect size used was partial eta squared (η^2) in accordance with Kinnear and Gray (2010).

Results and discussion

Quantitative results

The descriptive statistics show that the mean scores for measures of complexity were higher in Week 4 for all students (Table 1), with participants producing increasingly complex but less accurate utterances during the task phase.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for complexity and accuracy ($N = 32$)

Period	Group	% of sentences with verb		% of complete sentences		% of error-free sentences	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Week 1	HTF	44.31	13.27	44.63	19.23	81.19	17.04
	LTF	31.81	13.40	28.06	13.86	92.00	4.79
Week 4	HTF	74.94	15.75	68.50	18.23	75.31	16.66
	LTF	58.69	20.79	53.56	23.98	83.88	16.81

However, the reverse was the case with measures of fluency (Table 2), with the results indicating the participants in both groups were less fluent in the final week of the task.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for measures of fluency (*N*=32)

Period	Group	Total number of words		Total number of pruned words		Ratio of total words to dysfluent words	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Week 1	HTF	68.00	29.39	62.50	29.02	24.77	30.34
	LTF	57.94	23.17	53.81	20.43	29.88	25.06
Week 4	HTF	41.81	15.07	38.37	13.06	21.44	15.65
	LTF	37.94	14.86	33.87	12.66	12.85	9.16

Table 3 indicates significant time effect ($p<.01$) on all measures of complexity and fluency except for ratio of total to dysfluent words is $p=.043$. This means that the time intervening between tasks influences complexity positively and fluency negatively. The estimated effect size for repeated measures is large for both measures of complexity and two measures of fluency; total words and total pruned words produced. However, it is medium for percentage of error-free sentences (accuracy) and ratio of total words to dysfluent words.

Table 3. Repeated measures ANOVA of within-subjects effects (Wk 1 vs Wk 4): Sphericity and normality assumed (*N*=32)

Measure	Parameter	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	η^2
Complexity	% verbs	1	13225.00	4.64	.000	.683
	% complete sentence	1	751.56	31.62	.000	.513
Accuracy	% error free	1	784.00	4.04	.051	.121
Fluency	total words	1	85331.14	32.03	.000	.516
	total pruned words	1	7766.0	31.15	.000	.509
	ratio of total to dysfluent words	1	1656.89	4.49	.043	.130

The HTF group was significantly different in Week 4 from the LTF group with respect to sentences with verbs ($p=.018$) (Table 4). The large effect sizes indicate that the more repetitions there are, the greater the effect on performance in the measures under consideration. Overall, repetition helps the HTF group to produce more complex and accurate sentences and therefore answers RQ1. This supports results obtained by Bygate (2001).

Table 4. One-way ANOVA showing between-groups effects in week 4. Sphericity and normality assumed, (*N*=32)

Measure	Parameter	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	η^2
Complexity	% of sentences with verbs	1	2112.500	6.211	.018	.172
	% of complete sentences	1	1785.031	3.935	.057	.116

RQ2 was best answered by carefully examining selected features of the discourse produced by the participants with the aim of establishing a link between performance and L2 knowledge.

Excerpt 1

Participant Sha (female) (Picture task)

Week 1

Sha: *This is . . . is . . .* oshogatsu *(L2 translation provided). New Year's food. Mother and father. Mother is cooking* osechi. *He helps mother. And she . . . they . . . she . . . they read . . . Chair is four, people is five. One people (recast provided). One person is not sit down.*

Week 2

Sha: Kotatsu *on the* mikan. *Ah! What is . . .* mikan *. . . ?*

Okon: *What is* mikan *in English?*

Sha: *Orange, oranges on the* kotatsu. *Bag is on the chair. Father, father helps…father washes cup . . . cup . . . glass? Girls . . . girls . . . girls . . . they read a book, book (recast provided). Ah! Reading a book. Mmm . . . she make little* osechi, *she make* osechi. *It's sunny today.*

Week 3

Sha: *The bag is on the chair. Mother make* osechi. *Father helps mother. Father helps mother. Father washes cup. They are reading a book.*

It's sunny today. There are four chairs. There are four chairs.

Week 4

Sha: *Em . . . she is reading a book. Father washes cup. Mother cooks* osechi. *He watches her. He watches her.*

In Excerpt 1, increased complexity is noticeable in Sha's use of new language (*Week 2: father washes/little "osechi"*) which corroborates the quantitative data. Note her utterances in Week 1—*he helps mother, mother is cooking "osechi"*; Week 2—*father helps/father washes cup*; Week 3—*father helps mother*; yet, in Weeks 2 and 3—*she make "osechi"* and *mother make "osechi"* respectively. In Week 4, when she replaced *make* with the more common form *cook*, accuracy was restored (*mother cooks "osechi"*). It is probable that the L1 form *kotatsu* (no L2 equivalent) influences her L2 processing ability. For example, she transferred L1 word order (subject-object-verb) to describe *kotatsu on the mikan,* but soon after recalling the L2 equivalent of *mikan* (orange), appropriate L2 word order (subject-verb-object) was restored. The excerpt also reveals such complex forms as *helps* and *washes* that are relatively advanced and cognitively more challenging for learners at this proficiency level. This confirms the highly significant difference ($p<.000$) between the two task groups reported in the quantitative data for the two measures of complexity.

Although quantitative evidence indicates a decrease in fluency such as in the total number of words (Week 1, 68.00 words; Week 4, 41.81 words), the qualitative data suggest otherwise. This is exemplified in simpler and smoother sentences noticed in Week 3. The more routinized and lexicalised extracts from Weeks 3 and 4 are indicative of improved L2 proficiency. Increased accuracy noted in the excerpt also corroborates the quantitative evidence reported ($p<.051$). These succinct utterances highlight a better control of linguistic knowledge, thus confirming changes that task repetition can cause in learners' language. This answers RQ2. From the excerpts, it would seem reasonable to assume that learners process and store different forms differently. Therefore, the incorporation of new linguistic forms and restructuring of their IL may suggest that learning is taking place.

Excerpt 2

Participant Rya (female) (Picture task)

Week 1

Rya: *This is* kotatsu. *It is very hot.*

Okon: *Yes, it keeps you warm in the winter.*

Rya: *I have a cat, my cat likes* kotatsu.

Okon: *Clever cat, because it is warm. What's your cat's name?*

Rya: *Eto . . . his name is Mi.*

Week 3

Rya: *Sister is reading. I like to read books.*

Okon: *Great.*

Rya: *I want to read.*

Okon: *May be I should give you an English newspaper to read (laughter). Anything else?*

Rya: *This is* shekeda *(points to the item).*

Okon: *We call it kitchen unit or kitchen cabinet.*

Rya: *Our kitchen cabinet is sixteen years old.*

Okon: *Older than you (laughter).*

Rya: *My parents* kekkon*… (laughter).*

Okon: *Married.*

Rya: *Married sixteen years ago, no . . . (laughter) twenty-five years ago.*

According to Ellis (2012), learners impose their own interpretation on tasks because the work plan cannot sufficiently predict the resulting activity. Excerpt 2 shows that Rya seized the opportunity to engage in social communication instead of implementing the task in accordance with the design. She incorporates corrective feedback seamlessly into her utterances and code-switches to facilitate discourse. Rather than focus on task completion, she chose to use the task items to introduce topics outside the task structure. Her interest in talking about her pet, family, and herself underscores the need to offer learners social contexts for natural communication. Learning is unpredictable and tasks may offer the potential for learners to use the language to achieve functional goals as seen in Excerpt 2. Task repetition breeds task familiarity, which is capable of bringing complexity and accuracy together without ignoring fluency as demonstrated in Excerpt 1. The scripts show that repetition has an effect on both performance and reordering of the learner's language. As the participants proceed from Week 1 to Week 4,

their utterances become more complex, more accurate, and, from the qualitative evidence, more fluent. Improved performance indicates that these learners have developed greater resources necessary to accomplish the task.

Pedagogic implications

Beginner learners need consistent speaking opportunities to obtain similar benefits to those reported in this study. The findings therefore support the argument for frequent incorporation of oral tasks into routine classroom activities, and from a practical teaching standpoint, this should not be a rarity especially in communication-poor EFL contexts. The confidence derived from non-assessed extracurricular fluency practice can enhance peer collaboration in the classroom. In addition, the improved post-task interpersonal relationship with the researcher emboldened the participants, making them more willing and capable of seeking out and utilising L2 speaking opportunities.

It is evident in this study that some learning took place, and, by Week 3, a certain level of competence has been attained by the participants to fulfil the task. Although repetition maybe interpreted as repeating the exact linguistic elements, in this case it provided an opportunity for learners to rearrange them and use new forms to produce superior language. Consequently, it is iteration rather than repetition that accounts for the gains made and overall language development. The qualitative evidence suggests that three iterations per task cycle would probably allow for changes in the learners' language. Despite the absence of preplanning time in the subsequent weeks, gains were made in general aspects of production. Language teachers should therefore aim at providing frequent opportunities to engage learners in speaking tasks that are capable of having a positive washback on learning.

It is desirable to have the empirical evidence that quantitative data provides, but in order to ascertain the pattern of L2 learning and development, we need non-quantitative evidence, such as that provided in this study. Oral tasks, when not linked to school assessment, have the potential to lower affective barriers and promote authentic communication. By providing real world tasks that seem natural, focus on meaning and are capable of arousing their interest, learners could develop their L2 fluency and progressively complexify their utterances without ignoring accuracy. Besides curricular constraints, the Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) have extra administrative responsibilities which further compound the difficulty of embedding this into routine classroom instruction, hence the need to involve the ALTs. ALTs could be assigned designated office hours to allow learners to experiment with L2 in a less threatening environment. Notwithstanding the low proficiency level of junior high school students, it is essential that these learners be given opportunities to continue to communicate at different stages of their language development. It is by so doing that they will be challenged to develop pragmatic competence.

Conclusion

In this study, the quantitative analysis shows gains in complexity and accuracy but not in fluency, perhaps because of the way fluency is operationalised. However, if fluency is speaking with little or no hesitation, the qualitative evidence shows gains made later in the task cycle. In sum, task repetition is capable of promoting CAF concurrently. Some of the limitations of this study are the small sample size and the fact that the tasks were implemented in a rather asynchronous (i.e., not aligned with the syllabus) manner. Notwithstanding, classroom instruction would benefit immensely from an increased use of oral interviews, especially in junior high schools in Japan, since most task-based instruction and research are carried out in the universities. Careful examination of the transcript as demonstrated here may broaden our understanding of the interplay between complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Future studies should explore ways of making further concurrent gains in complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Oral tasks could be designed to activate the beginner learner's language and the task conditions and materials manipulated to determine if fluency, along with measures of complexity and accuracy can be transferred to a new task.

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