Investigating the Effects of Structured and Unstructured Tasks on Arab learners of English Oral Performance

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Abstract

There is a growing recognition in Arab countries that an ability to communicate effectively in English is a valuable employment skill that goes hand-in-hand with vocational educational programmes. This study investigates the impact of task structure on Arab learners' oral performance. A mixed methods approach was used to conduct the study, in which ten students from VEDC foundation school were chosen as a sample. Narrative structured and unstructured tasks were used to test the impact of task structure on learners' oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and lexical density. The findings indicate that pre-task activity can be a useful tool in improving accuracy and fluency which contributes to the efficacy of the task based learning approach in supporting and developing the key areas of oral proficiency which have significant implications for teaching and learning.

Keywords: TESOL, oral performance, structured tasks, fluency, and accuracy.

Introduction

Within the area of TESOL, there are a variety of sub-fields that try to understand how we acquire language and what impact this may have on teaching methods. One of these fields is psycholinguistics, which is the study of the cognitive and psychological processes that underpin language acquisition. As Robinson (2011) suggests, within the field of psycholinguistics, the development of task-based learning has been of interest in recent scholarship. In part, this is because it presents opportunities for student-centered learning that builds upon a student's ability to acquire, rather than learn, language (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, I investigated this issue in the context of Arab learners of English.

Statement of the Problem

One challenge for teachers in the ESL classroom is developing tasks that encourage and motivate learners. Another is understanding how the structure of a set task may impact a student's learning. These are the two challenges that this studies explores, a study that has been set in the specific context of Arab learners of English in Abu Dhabi Vocational Education and Training Institute (ADVETI). This study is important in relation to existing work that focuses on common errors made by students in relation to oral proficiency skills, and how best to structure classroom activities to encourage success for this set of learners (Rabbahah, 2005). Furthermore, there is a growing recognition in Arab countries that an ability to communicate effectively in English is a valuable employment skill, one that goes hand-in-hand with vocational educational programmes. Therefore, being able to provide effective teaching recommendations related to oral proficiency underscores the value of this work.

Research Question

This exploratory study will attempt to answer the following question:

Will the structure of a task, or the lack of structure of a task, impact the oral proficiency of Arab students learning English in the foundation school at Abu Dhabi Vocational Educational and Training Institute (ADVETI)?

Context of the Study

For the purposes of this study, I set the cohort a narrative task, replicating a classroom environment, and presented them with two options: a structured task and an unstructured task. The purpose was thus to evaluate what impact the nature of the task would have on their linguistic abilities. By framing the study in this way, the intent was to determine which approach was best applied in the real world classroom. The scope of the work was to provide a review of theoretical constructs before outlining a methodological approach for testing the impact of structured and unstructured tasks in testing oral proficiency in Arab learners. A test instrument was developed and used for testing a group of Arab learners during February 2013, and the outcomes and conclusions from these will be presented in the final summation of the work.

Literature Review

There are four key skills of language acquisition: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking is viewed as the most important; indeed, the primary goal of the majority of second language learners is to be able to speak confidently and fluently in the target language (Ur, 2006, p.120). A definition of speaking in this context is that it is a process, usually interactive (though not exclusively), that requires production, reception, and processing of

information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). How the information is produced and how it is received depends upon the context of the utterance, who is involved in the conversation, their language abilities, and even their social understanding of the situation being discussed, a construct known as sociolinguistic competence (although as Slater and Li (2012) contend, this also requires underlying grammatical and linguistic ability in the target language).

According to Levlet (1989) there are three processing stages undergone when an utterance is made: conceptualisation of the message, formulation of the language, and articulation of the message. Skehan (1998) extends this by outlining three components of the articulation stage: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Based on these stages, instruction and assessment of speaking and listening as important components in the achievement of communicative competence have grown prominently within the field of second language teaching. Historically, second language teaching has focused on vocabulary and grammar acquisition, but without a definite and targeted focus on speaking fluently and oral proficiency (Bygate, 2002). In regards to this latter element, Omaggio (1998) defines oral proficiency as "the ability to communicate verbally in a functional and accurate way in the target language" (p. 353). Indeed, most second language speakers are aiming to converse in a transactional way with native speakers, rather than being initially able to deliver a narrative or monologue. This, according to Bygate (1996), leads to the development of interaction skills.

With all of this in mind, understanding how to encourage oral proficiency and assess development within the classroom can be difficult for teachers who need to incorporate aspects of fluency, accuracy, and the confidence of L2 speakers in being able to deliver information in an effective way (Richards, 2007).

The effect on TESOL syllabi as a result has been a move to task-based approaches to language instruction (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). One of the rationales for this is given by Nunn (2006), who notes that a task-based foundaton "leads to student-led holistic outcomes in the form of written reports, spoken presentations... that lead to decision making outcomes" (p. 70). In this context, the term "task" has led to a variety of diverse interpretations. According to Willis (1996), it is an activity where there is a goal to be achieved through use of the target language, with less focus on meaning.

In a similar vein, Lynch and Maclean (2000) suggest that task should be something that reflects real world situations in which students may find themselves. Ellis (2003), however, defines a task as something that has six essential features: it must be a workplan, have a primary focus on meaning, involve real-world language processing, engage cognitive processes, and have a definitive outcome. Finally, a task can also be conducted using any of the four language skills.

Considered from the perspective of psycholinguistics, the task is something that "guides learners to engage in certain types of information processing that are believed to be important for effective language use and/or for language acquisition" (Ellis, 2009, p. 197). This approach is grounded in the interaction hypothesis developed by Long (1981), which suggests that second-language aquisition is based on communication and interaction, rather than directed input and drilling. There are also influences from Skehan's cognitive approach (1996), a framework that highlights the distinctions between two types of learner processing (i.e., lexical and rule based), as well as Yule's communicative effectiveness model, which as Block (2003) notes is grounded in semantic and referential meaning, rather than function of language use.

Essentially, the task-based approach to learning is focused on a communicative approach to language teaching and acquisition, but as Schmidt (1995) indicates, this can be at the expense of form, as a teacher focuses only on communication. Therefore, as Radwan (2005) indicates,

there does need to be a balance among form, meaning, and communicative ability. One of the ways this can be achieved is through the design of the task and its overall nature, particularly whether the task set to students is structured or unstructured, and the cognitive demands that are placed on the student by the content and nature of the task (DeKeyser, 2011).

According to Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), structure in this context means whether there are clear timelines, scripts, or familiarity within the task requirements as given to the learner. Essentially, in a structured task, there is only one sequential outcome that can be achieved by the student, otherwise the overall information being presented would be compromised, losing meaning and thus communicative effectivenesss (Rahimpour & Mehrang, 2010). In contrast, an unstructured task means that the information presented could have problem resolutions and outcomes that do not require such strict formation and sequence, as moving elements would not lose the meaning or coherence of the utterance or narrative.

The importance of the task structure and its potential impact on oral proficiency is grounded in various theories relating to cognitive approaches in relation to language learning. Skehan (1998) suggests that fluency, accurancy, and complexity are important components of oral proficiency. Within these dimensions, Skehan suggests that there is competition for processing space within the cognitive system, and that one is achieved at the minimisation of another, based on the finite attention capabilities of the speaker. As a result, speakers of second languages will give precedence to either fluency, accuracy or, complexity of language (Stengers et al., 2011). This precedence to one system over another leads to a lack of symmetry due to the mismatch between formulaic language and individual lexical processing systems (Cutler & Weber, 2004). However, Iwashita et al. (2001) found no significant influence or variation depending on which system was focused on by the nature of the task. More recently, Ellis (2009) has indicated that the processing requirements for the planning of a task can impact the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of an utterance or narration by L2 speakers.

The rationale for this is that there are two potential systems that may be applied: the exemplar-based and rule-based systems. In the exemplar system, there are not only discrete lexemes in the speakers mental lexicon but also learnt chunks of formulaic lanaguage. In contrast, the rule-based system is more abstract and relies on the knowledge of the patterns that create spoken language (Opitz & Friederici, 2004). Thus, as Skehan et al. (2012) indicate, the nature of a task is likely to impact how a student will plan for his or her utterance, and can thus influence his or her complexity, fluency, and accuracy.

Skehan's view is disputed by Robinson (2001), who suggests that underlying human psychology makes it possible for the attention and thus cognitive abilities and processing to incorporate both systems to create effective oral abilities. Essentially, he suggests that the systems work collaboratively rather than in conflict, as suggested by Skehan. This view is somewhat supported by neuroscience data, as indicated by Opitz and Friederici (2004) who claim that the two systems work independently but that both are activated during language processing tasks.

This recognition of the two systems and their roles within language processing raises a question for second language teaching regarding whether a structured task or an unstructured task provides the most efficacious way of ensuring that the exemplar and rule based systems can work and be stimulated during a lesson to provide oral proficiency. That structured tasks require less processing of the sequencing before working on the accuracy and complexity, and thus fluency of the task, suggests that a structured task may be more effective. This suggestion appears to be both supported and disputed by previous studies that examine the role of task

structure and its impact on oral proficiency (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Iwashita et al., 2001; Mehnert, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Teng, 2007; Wu, 2005).

This conflict of outcomes may be due to the view that, from a psycholinguistic perspective, an unstructured task could potentially remove the processing load of having to sequence the information before developing the fluency, and thus may increase the complexity. One potential reason for this has been suggested by Mehnert (1998), who indicates that planning time is directly correlated to oral proficiency. In an unstructured task, there is no need for sequencing information to be processed, providing additional time for planning of the language to be used, highlighting the potential for improved complexity, fluency, and accuracy.

One of the difficulties in assessing task structure and its relationship to oral proficiency has been, as Chiang et al. (2008) note, a lack of consisency in previous studies. First, there is variataion in the tasks set, from a structured and unstructured picture story approach, to narratives, interviews and decision making tasks, that makes cross-study comparison challenging. In addition, the measures used for assessment of oral proficiency are not standardised, and this again poses a challenge to comparison studies. How these challenges are resolved for this work will be highlighted in the methodology, which has been developed based on the understanding of the various frameworks and theories reviewed in this section.

Methodology

The approach taken for gathering data was based on the study conducted by Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010). The rationale for this was that narrative tasks are those most often utilised in oral proficiency evaluation (Tavakloi & Skehan, 2005) and also provide for sequenced (structured) and unsequenced (unstructured) formats to be presented to participants. Thus, the survey instruments used in the work needed to be clear and at the right level for the learners.

Survey Instruments

Recognising the need for appropriate instruments led to the selection of the "Picnic" story seen in (Appendix A). As this narrative task has clear time line and sequence and there is specific target language that can be applied by the students, it provides a way of targeting the students' rule-based schemas.

For the unstructured task, and to assess the prominence or otherwise of the exemplar system, the "birthday party" story used by Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010) was replicated (Appendix B). This story has a less clearly defined event sequence, which makes it more open to interpretation by the participants.

Testing Procedures

In terms of delivery of test instructions, in both cases the students were given the opening line so that they had a starting format. Information about what was required was given to the students in Arabic. This was so that there was no confusion about what was required. Their English narratives were recorded for subsequent analysis. Transcripts of the students narratives can be found in (Appendix C).

Data Measurements

The narratives, which are classified as qualitative data, were then analysed using the example of Rahimpour and Mehrang, and were evaluated according to three distinct areas for the narratives, including accuracy, which was measured through a count of error-free T_units,

identified dominant clauses, and their dependent clauses. In addition, fluency (number of words per minute) and lexical density were measured, which is the total number of different lexical words over the total word count of the utterance. This evaluation provided the study with quantitative data, marking the work as a mixed-methods approach study that was exploratory in nature. The rational for this is that as Burke and Onwuegbuzie (2004) note, when undertaking language research, a mixed-methods approach offers wider analytical focus and clear results should the work need to be replicated.

The decision to evaluate accuracy, fluency, and density was made because it provided a means of both the exemplar system and rule based system of the students, leading to an overall oral proficiency grade for each test. In addition, these are standardised tests within ESL research and have been applied in previous studies. The three measures, once calculated, were then evaluated, and patterns were reviewed using a combination of both Exel and SPSS statistics. The results are provided in the following section.

Sampling

A total of 10 students participated in the study, each undertaking to provide a narrative from both a structured and unstructured task. The criteria for inclusion was that the learners are Arab learners at an intermediate level, and at least eighteen years of age. As such, a purposive sampling approach (Merriam, 2009) was taken with the participants being recruited from students known to the researcher through his own work. Furthermore, to conform to ethical requirements, no personal details were taken to ensure anonymity, and each individual was asked to complete a participant consent form, an example of which is shown in (Appendix D). This provided them with information about the study, along with how the data would be used, and ensured that they understood why their involvement was requested and what it would involve.

Analysis of the Findings

The overall scores for each area are presented, and then each area is considered individually. The figures below indicate the individual scores achieved by the group for each task as well as the mean, standard deviation, and variance calculations from SPSS

Table 1 *Structured Task Overview*

Structured	Total words	accuracy %	fluency wpm	density %	oral proficiency
Student 1	118	23	100	22	48
Student 2	152	22	112	16	50
Student 3	175	31	144	20.5	65
Student 4	150	16	129	16	54
Student 5	99	11	99	22	44
Student 6	174	14.21	125	21.6	54
Student 7	235	60	106	16.5	61
Student 8	93	20	88	26	45
Student 9	143	36	107	20.9	55
Student 10	150	50	119	16.6	62
Mean	148.9	28.32	112.9	19.81	54
Standard deviation	41.2	16.08	16.57	3.38	7

| Variance | 1704.54 | 258.68 | 274.76 | 11.45 | 52 |

Table 2 *Unstructured Task overview*

Unstructured	Total words	accuracy %	fluency wpm	density %	oral proficiency
Student 1	116	52	92	24	56
Student 2	113	29	99	22	50
Student 3	106	53	110	23.5	62
Student 4	68	7	97	23	42
Student 5	59	20	69	24	38
Student 6	117	6.2	105	20.9	44
Student 7	177	41	125	13.5	60
Student 8	42	28	62	33	41
Student 9	101	56	99	22.7	59
Student 10	125	22	105	20	49
Mean	102.4	31.42	96.3	22.66	50.1
Standard deviation	38.46	18.42	18.6	4.78	8.73
Variance	1479	339.64	346.45	22.87	76.3

As can be seen from figures 1 and 2, the mean word delivery for each narration was considerably higher in the structured task. This demonstrates that the pictures provided had a specific target language to be used, and thus allowed for greater speed, which is further confirmed by the variation in mean fluency levels, with the structured task delivering around 15% higher levels than the structured.

But when reviewing the mean scores for accuracy and complexity, the unstructured task, despite, and potentially as a result of, the lower word count, provided around a 10% better outcome for the students as a group. In the complexity analysis, the improvement was closer to 13% for the unstructured task. This suggests that the structure of a task impacts differently on variable oral proficency skills and processes, as indicated by Ellis (2009).

What is also noticeable when reviewing the whole group summaries in figures 1 and 2 is the variance levels: in all cases except the total word count, the variation in the group was much greater for the unstructured task. This can potentially be accounted for by individual variation among the students. However, as personal variables were not controlled for during the testing process, it is difficult to say this with certainty, or it's also difficult to determine whether the variance is related to task structure. To validate results, future studies in the area would need to ensure that consideration is given to individual student differences.

In terms of overall proficiency, the mean achievement was less for the unstructured task, but only by a small margin, although it is further noted that the variance in overall score was far greater for the unstructured narratives than for the structured. This suggests that while in some areas (accuracy and complexity) the unstructured tasks provide improvement, as an overall approach to achieving full oral proficiency, the structured task does appear to deliver improved outcomes.

Having reviewed the summary outcomes and ranges of achievement, each of the specific areas was then analysed and compared task for task. The first individually reviewed area of comparison was the total words provided by the students for each task. As the figure below indicates, all students provided more words overall for the structured task, suggesting that they

were able to deliver more information based on the data given that was in a format that encouraged narration.
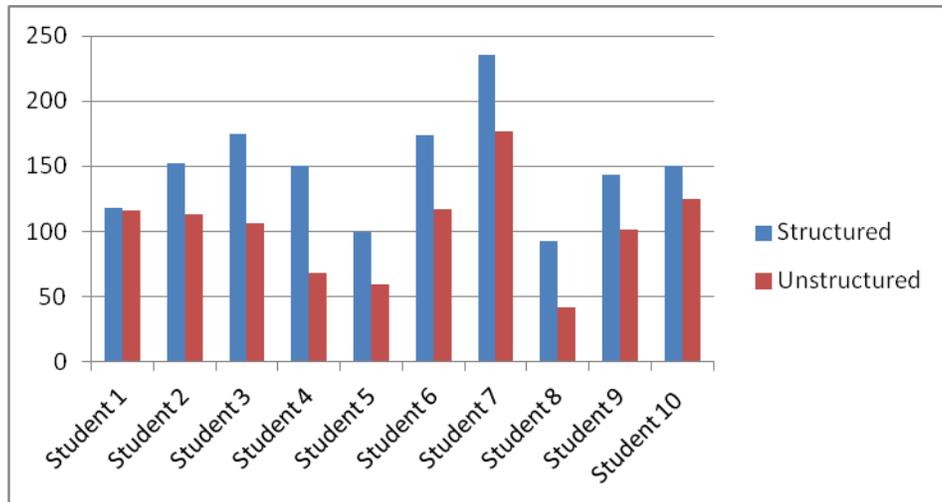

Figure 1. Total word count for each task

But when the figures for lexical density are considered, as seen in the figure below, there was a greater variety of lexicons applied during the unstructured task for 90% of the students. The one student who achieved higher lexical density in the structured task had the lowest overall word count and shortest narratives across both tasks. Therefore, the percentage figures against their total oral presentation could be skewed by this fact.
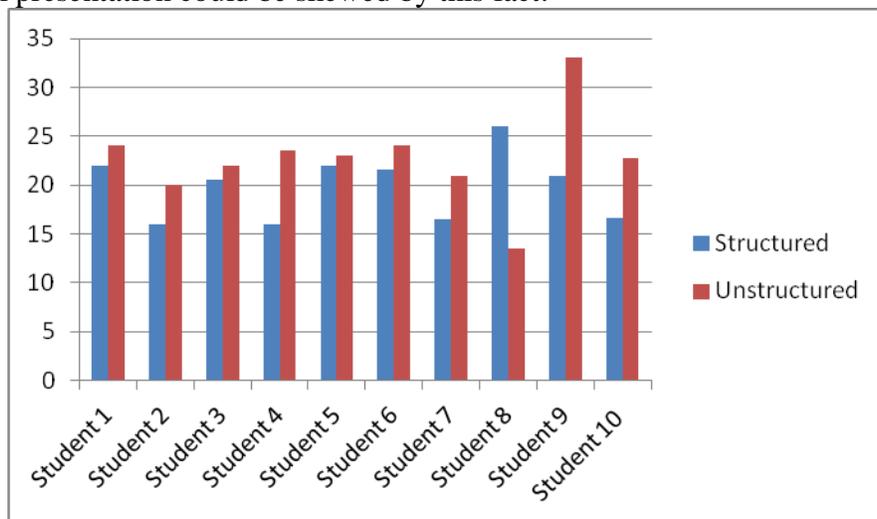
Figure 2. Lexical Density of narratives

The fact that the majority of students had increased lexical density suggests that the unstructured task was giving students greater flexibility to deliver higher levels of complexity within their narrative, as they were not constrained by the target language indicated in the structured task. This is in line with the findings of Wu (2005) and Iwashita (2001), who suggest that unstructured tasks can deliver improved lexical density as there is greater room for creative speech, which is underlined by the mean and standard deviation outcomes for both tasks as

indicated above. It does, however, contradict the findings of Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010) and Tavakoli and Foster (2008), who did not find a variation in complexity based on task structure.

Another factor to note, however, is the selection of words by the students: the lexical density test considers the use of "open class" (verbs, nouns, adjectives and adverbs) within the narrative. However, there is no evaluation of where nouns or verbs have been used as a form of circumlocution where the student is unsure of the exact word or phrase that should be used in the context (Chaloub-Deville, 2001). A number of the students substituted the word "garden" for "park," and "tools" or "equipment" for toys and games. While use of this strategy demonstrates an ability to convey a level of meaning, and can be an effective way for students to communicate their intent [see Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, (2000)], it can also be an indicator of reduced vocabulary knowledge and overall ability in the target language. Although not the focus of this study, it was necessary to highlight this area as a potential factor in the overall oral proficiency of the students. It also confirms the need for variable control during a study of this kind.

To furhter evaluate the variation in task outcomes, the accuracy was then considered for each task. As the figure below indicates, there was a much wider variation between the students, which highlights the varied nature of their abilities.
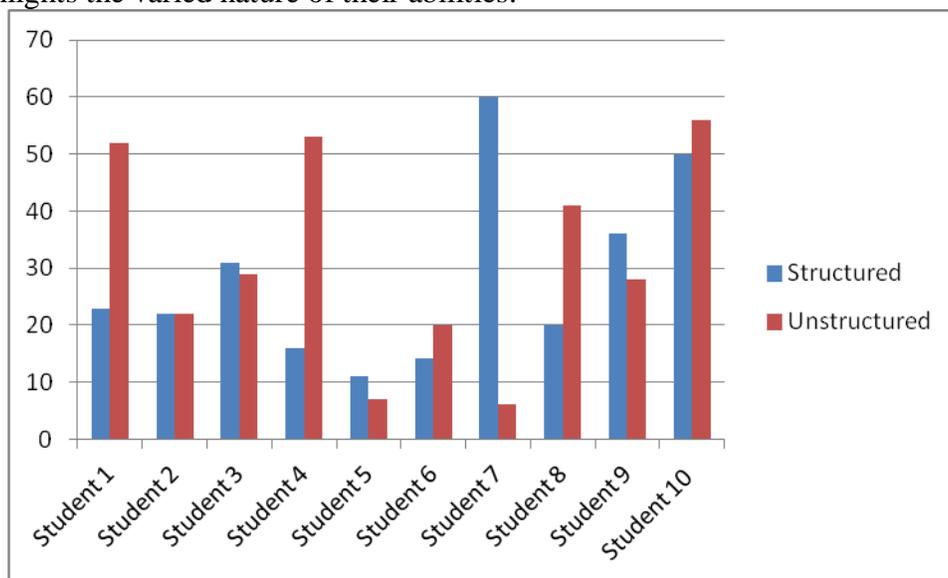

Figure 3 Accuracy of structured and unstructured

50% of students had higher accuracy in the unstructured, and 50% had higher accuracy in the structured. As a group, however, the mean scores for accuracy were in fact higher for the unstructured tasks. Given that previous studies (Tavakoli and Foster, 2008; Tavakoli, 2009) have indicated that formal task structure aided accuracy, this was a surprising result. However, it is also noted by Skehan and Foster (1999) that pre-task activity also aids accuracy. The participants in this group did not have any pre-task activity, and this may have affected the generally low levels of accuracy achieved by the participating students.

The other measure taken to create an overall oral proficiency score was fluency, calculated as words per minute for each narrative. The outcomes are shown in the figure below. Words were calculated irrespective of accuracy for this measure.
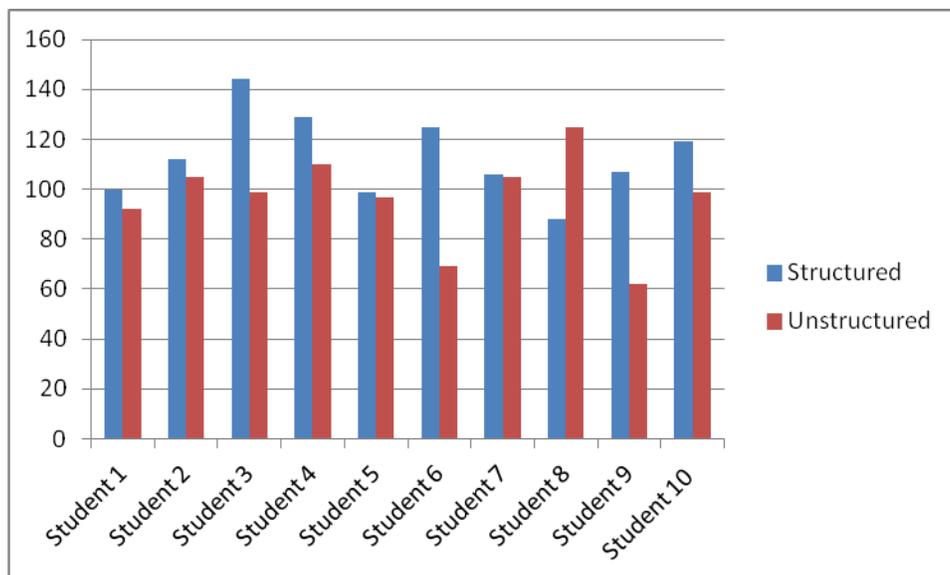
Figure 4 Fluency (words per minute)

As the figure indicates, 90% of students produced a greater number of words per minutes for the structured task. This is in line with the view that form-based tasks reduce the processing load for planning of utterances and thus lead to greater fluency rates, as Tavakoli and Foster (2008) have already demonstrated. The average fluency rate for the group for the structured task was 112 words per minute, compared to 96.3 for the unstructured.

In terms of overall oral proficiency the three outcomes were combined to give each student a percentage score that provides an indication of their ability with narrative for structured and unstructured task, as shown in the figure below. 70% of the students achieved a higher oral proficiency score in the structured task, suggesting that overall the structured task provides a more effective outcome. One of the students who achieved more in the unstructured task was again the same student who had high accuracy but very low word count and overall fluency levels, suggesting they applied a greater level of planning before speaking, which may account for their outcomes. The other student had mid-range fluency and mid-range accuracy compared to the rest of the students in the group.
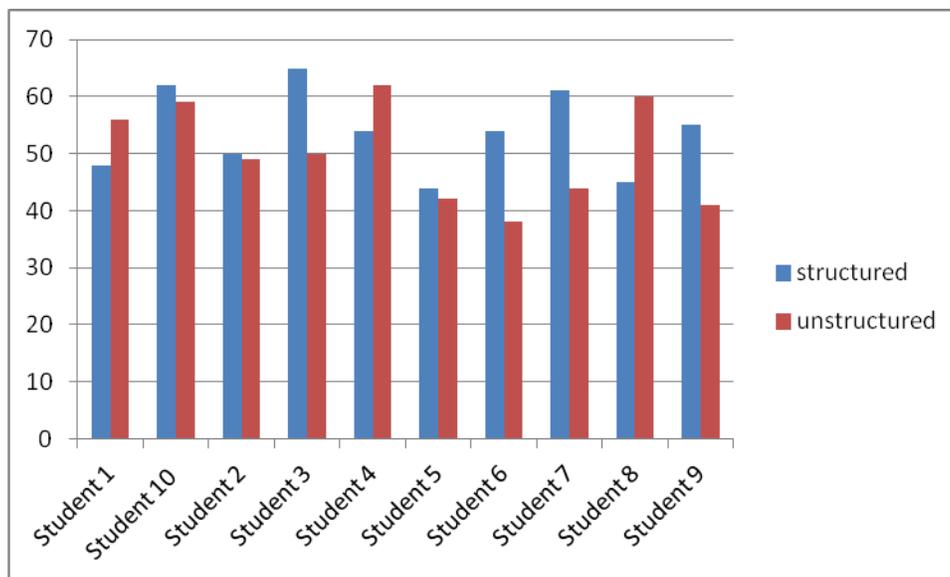
Figure 5 Overall oral proficiency score

It would appear, therefore, in reviewing the various test outcomes, and in particular the overall oral proficiency levels, that the structured task approach provides an improved achievement level. However, in some areas, there is an indication that the unstructured task is more effective, particularly in the area of lexical density, as it offers the students an opportunity to be more inventive with their language. This perspective, however, is tempered by the recognition of the students' use of circumlocation and paraphrasing in a number of the transcripts.

To illustrate this graphically, the two figures below indicate the overall spread of ability relating to number of words uttered by each student, rising from lowest to highest.
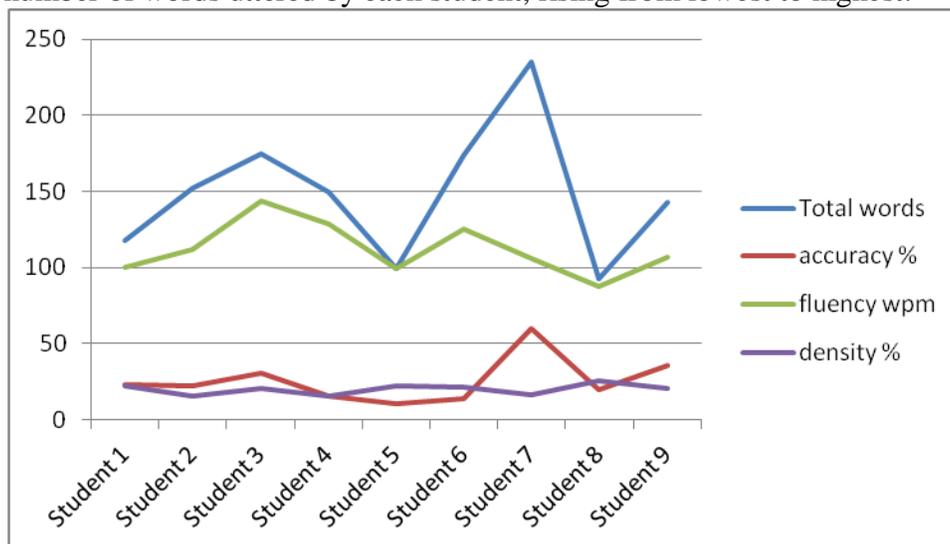

Figure 6 Structured Task Outcomes

For the structured tasks, there was a general pattern to the density ability for the students, but some variation in relation to accuracy as the word count increased. It is also notable that for the mid-range fluency students there was a dip in density and accuracy, which suggests that at this level, there was a focus on fluency rather than accuracy and lexical complexity. This

underlines the view that the two processing systems work in contradiction to one another during structured speaking tasks.

This was less clear when reviewing the overall outcomes for the unstructured task, as the figure below indicates. As the word count increased, the accuracy initially appeared to grow at a similar rate, but at the higher levels of words per minute, there was a decline in accuracy and lexical density. Therefore, while not as definitive as the outcomes noted for the structured task, it can be seen that again, the two processing systems are operating in a contradictory way.
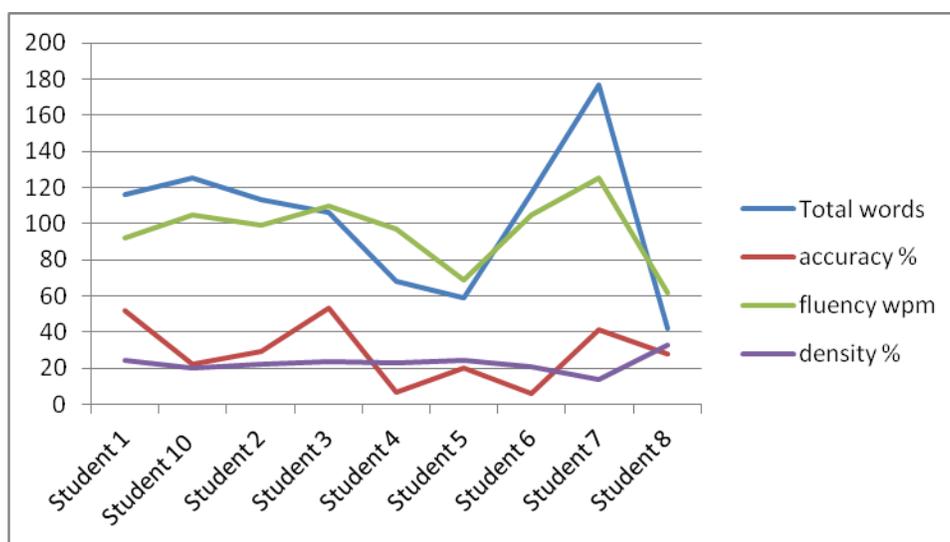

Figure 7 Unstructured task outcomes

Discussion

Initial conclusions from theoretical studies were that students engaging in oral proficiency tests would give precedence to fluency, accuracy, or complexity (Skehan, 1998; Stenger, et al. 2011), and that the cognitive processing mechanisms required in each case would hinder the ability to apply the other two. The test results suggest that this is indeed the case when comparing ability within a structured or unstructured task situation. Furthermore, evaluation of cognitive processing in neuroscience indicated that although both form-based and exemplar-based information processing were activated (Opitz & Frederici, 2004), they operated independently of one another, rather than in a complementary way. The fact that the students produced greater levels of fluency (words per minute) in the structured task but higher lexical density in the unstructured tasks appears to substantiate these conclusions.

What was not incorporated into the study outcomes was the individual student characteristics, including confidence and knowledge level. The results suggest that there was a mixed range of abilities within the group, with some students focusing on short general phrases such as "*after that they…*" which increased their overall word count but impacted the overall lexical density. Others were more fluid in their narratives, creating more complex sentences for both the structured and unstructured tasks, which provided them with a higher overall fluency score.

The overall oral proficiency scores achieved by the students, while indicating that the structured task did appear to deliver better results than the unstructured, did not account for grammar. As Iwashita (2010) notes, evaluation of grammatical accuracy is not always included in oral proficiency, as it detracts from the idea of communicative competence. If an L2 speaker

is able to convey their meaning, even with grammatical errors, then they are frequently presumed competent in the target language.

A brief look at the grammar used in both tasks across the whole cohort indicates some common errors; for example, "make him a party," which uses a verb that is not conjugated correctly and confuses prepositions and pronouns. As Aburizaiza (2013 notes, these patterns of error are common among Arab learners, who made up the cohort. This is because the transfer of knowledge from Arabic to English in terms of grammatical constructs is not always direct, and because there are no comparable translations for the student to use. While grammar was not incorporated as a measure of task nature effectiveness, when reviewing the transcripts it was important to indicate these factors, as future work in the area may need to include this element, but with an awareness of the common patterns of errors found in Arab L2 learners and speakers.

Overall, the study appears to have demonstrated that the assessment of oral proficiency is affected by task structure, but that the effect is dependent on which aspect of the proficiency is measured. An overall assessment suggests a bias towards the structured task, highlighting the reduced processing load that comes with no need for a planning stage, as indicated by Stenger et al. (2011). However, there are also indications that the unstructured tasks, which are created by the predominance of the exemplar processing system, can lead to increased lexical density, as demonstrated by figures 6 and 7, showing the overall scores for each task and trends in accuracy, density, and fluency. These findings therefore have implications for both teachers and students.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

As a teacher understanding not only the processes which the students undergo in achieving oral competence in a target language, but also the underlying cognitive systems that deliver the learning is of vital importance. This is because it can aid in creating a learning environment that stimulates these areas and encourages motivation and improved acquisition ability. The outcomes of this work, which appear to conform to both ESL and cognitive studies in relation to language processing suggest that narrative tasks need to be focused on either fluency, accuracy or complexity and that it is the nature of the task that will dictate which of these will be given precedence in the classroom and by the students. If the objective is fluency then the structured narratives appear to deliver greater opportunities as the reduced planning requirement provided by the nature of these tasks encourges confidence and thus fluency.

However, if the approach is aimed at assessing lexical complexity, the initial indications are that it is the unstructured tasks that are more effective. This appears to be because the focus is on the exemplar system of language processing, which allows for more application of a varied and creative vocabulary.

The third component, that of accuracy is more difficult to assess in the light of these outcomes. Whilst previous studies have found no variation in accuracy (Rahimpour & Mehrang, 2010) related to task structure, the students in this group were equally split in regards to which task delivered the greatest level of accuracy. This may be due to the small size of the group, or the individual learning characteristics of the learners. There is also the potential that being Arab learners the errors were common ones made by those transfering knowledge from Arabic to English. This tentative conclusion is made based on the similarity between the errors made by the group.

Therefore, from a teaching perspective, when determining whether to apply a structured or unstructured approach, it would appear that both approaches should be incorporated into the classroom but that the teacher should decide in advance which aspect of oral proficiency to focus

on.   With regard to student assessment and understanding of the difficulties they may encounter in oral proficiency testing, the study has indicated that where the processing load is lower such as in a structured narrative, the fluency is increased but the lexical density is reduced as the students attempt to remain within the confines of the specific target language that can be applied to the test, a difficulty noted by Teng (2007).

To combat this issue with a lesson, the task can be set as necessarily following the sequence but encouraging greater levels of creativity, potentially with prompts from the teacher by pointing out specific elements from individual picture boxes that the student did not incorporate into their story. In addition, there is an indication from Skehan and Foster (1999), and reinforced by Matsumora et al. (2008) that pre-task activity aids in oral proficiency tasks in relation to both accuracy and lexical density. This may be because the processing load is reduced by the pre-planning prior to delivering a narrative but this is supposition only at this stage.

This strategy can also be useful with the unstructured task, reviewing the story beforehand and identifying certain objects and words that can then, if the student wishes be incorporated into their narrative. This pre-task activity is, moreover an important part of the overall task based learning approach. As Gonzalez and Arias (2009) note, this is because the pre-task activity can frequently activate a student's internal cognitive schemas in relation to the narrative, which improves their overall performance during the task. An important facet of this in relation to the unstructured task is that each student's mental lexicon for English will be different so the prompting may result in different vocabulary items being activated based on they personally process the visual representations of the story to be told.

In terms of lesson planning there is indications that attention and processing by students does appear to be dependent on the nature of the task. Therefore, when planning lessons for oral proficiency development, the tasks that are incorporated into the lesson should alternate between these systems and the use of a combination of structured and unstructured tasks does appear to deliver the required level of alternation. The rotation of tasks that focus on either form or exemplar processing in this way should thus provide a positive contribution to balanced development of oral proficiency skills in L2 learners.

Conclusion

The area of psycholinguistics can provide valuable insights into how to support and encourage L2 learners from all areas and within this context there is evidence that task based learning ecnourages motivation and communicative competence. In a more specific context, thiswork considered whether nature of task had an impact on oral proficiency in Arab learners. The outcomes are that there is a variation that occurs, related to whether a narrative task is structured or unstructured. This appears to be related to whether the processing mechanisms of form or exemplar based are given predominance during the task, and correlates with previous studies in the area (Mastumora, et al., 2008; Stengers, et al., 2011). In addition, the study is in alignment with work undertaken by neuroscientists regarding how language is processed and produced in a narrative-based situation.

These findings therefore have implications   for teaching practice. Specifically they suggest that it is important to ensure a balanced development approach is taken in the ESL classroom that incorporates both forms of oral testing as well as how oral proficiency is assessed. In addition, there is a further indication from the literature review, but not empirically tested by this work, that pre-task activity can be a useful tool in improving accuracy and fluency. This is

due to the fact that pre-task activity can encourage activation of the student's own mental lexicon to increase complexity as well as reducing the time required for pre-planning processing which increases fluency. What is not clear however, is whether there is a variation in effect of pre-task activity on structured and unstructured tasks, which, if examined could provide further recommendations and suggestions for the development of classroom activities for oral proficiency.

It was also found that the evidence of the study contributes to the efficacy of the task based learning approach in supporting and developing the key areas of oral proficiency. What is particularly pertinent is the variation found in the different elements, underlining the different processing mechanisms that operate cognitively to produce target language.

Finally, the work has provided some additional information about common oral proficiency mistakes made by Arab students in relation to the use of circumlocution, and incorrect application of prepositions and pronouns when conducting oral tasks, which would benefit from further investigation in the future to evaluate whether this is influenced by task structure.

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