

The Effect of Literature-response Activities on the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency of Iranian EFL Learners' L2 Oral Productions

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the effects of literature-response activities on oral production of Iranian EFL learners, focusing on complexity, accuracy and fluency. The participants of this study were 40 female EFL learners in a language center in Iran. They were divided into two groups ($n=20$), one experimental and other control group. Some pieces of short literature reading texts with interesting content and with appropriate readability were given to the experimental group in order to motivate them to think and talk about their similar experiences. On the other hand, non-literary was studied by students. ANCOVA tests revealed that literature-based activities improved the complexity, accuracy and fluency of Iranian EFL learners' oral performance. The findings of this study had several pedagogical implications which might be beneficial for teachers, EFL learners, materials developers, and curriculum designers.

Keywords: literature-based activities, complexity, accuracy, fluency, L2 oral production

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication has been considered as an important skill and mastering this skill is regarded as an ideal achievement. Speaking in a second language (L2) is a complex process. To convey meaning a learner must decide simultaneously what to say and how to say it. According to Levelt (1989) to communicate orally learners have some challenges with some cognitive processes while conveying messages according to situation and purpose, choosing correct rules and appropriate words, evaluating mechanical articulation as phonetic and intonation, and monitoring for accuracy or self-correcting if necessary.

Focusing on above mentioned issues, to gauge oral performance operationally, Skehan (1998) distinguished three significant components: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). At first blush, “complex language is more elaborated, accurate language is error-free, and fluent speech is normally paced” (Ellis, 2003, p. 340). However, when looking deeper into each element, these subsystems are intricate and multidimensional and specialists of L2 acquisition (SLA) vary on how these components should be characterized and operationalized (Housen & Kuiken, 2009).

Oral communication is also of importance because it has two vital functions. One is transactional function, in which the primary focus is on the exchange of information. The other one is interactional function, of which the primary purpose is to establish and maintain social relations (Brown & Yule, 1983). In transactional function the primary focus is on the message, whereas interactional function primarily focuses on the social needs of the participants. To improve speaking ability, interaction has an essential role. However, this function is highly sensitive to motivation, self-concept, anxiety and attitudes of the learners.

If we want to take a step back to scrutinize the role of literature in in an ESL context, we have to reach the literature response theory by Elliott (1990). In his article, he emphasized the importance of developing student-response and literary competence. He accentuated that literature will only be motivationally operative if learners can genuinely engage with its thoughts and emotions and realize its aesthetic values.

Accordingly the main point of the Reader Response Approach is to urge learners to response to the text and express their thoughts, notions and emotions. Consequently, learners should appreciate that the main concern is not “what they understand” but “how they feel” (Amer, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, improving the speaking skill is one of the most challenging tasks for teachers in EFL contexts. Mastering speaking skill in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity has been considered as an ideal achievement for teachers and learners. However, in Iranian EFL environment there are EFL learners whose achievements in oral communication is not so significant.

The one effective way may be the use of literature response activities (Zundel, 2003). Meantime, it has been claimed that empathy in children may be limited as lack of exposure to stories (Pinsent, 1996). According to Alderson (2000), texts that convey meaningful and interesting messages for readers that interest them, that identify with their education background, intellectual level and so on, may spur a deeper perusing than the conventional, generally anodyne or even endless text. In fact “speakers tell stories to maintain social relationship, to entertain each other and to share and exchange daily experience. Speakers might also pepper the story with evaluative, emotive or colorful expressions that indicate their own attitudes as well as those they anticipate from their listeners” (Burn, 2001 cited in Martinez 2006, pp.247, 248).

Consequently, there is great motivation to accept that literature response activities as appropriate instruments for raising learners' emotional intelligence.

The literature response activity which is emotionally related to the experience of students has recently attracted the attention of the researchers in foreign language teaching (e.g., Abdolrezapour & Tavakoli, 2011; Shao, Yu, & Ji, 2012). Moreover, it has been proven that there is significant relationship between CAF measures and emotional intelligence (Abdolrezapour, 2013; Kohi, et al, 2014; Shirriyan & Nejadansari, 2014) and alternatively, it seems that these activities can enhance learning achievement. However, as far as language learning in the EFL context is concerned, how literature response activities improve learners speaking ability in the oral interactional context needs more empirical investigation. This study intended to fill this gap.

THE PRESENT STUDY

One of the greatest challenges facing language teachers is that of creating new and more productive ways to help students develop communication skills (Lewis, 1997). In Iranian EFL context there are many learners whose achievement in oral communication is not so significant. This means that even after several years of study, their oral interaction lack of the expected complexity, accuracy and fluency. To develop oral communication, interaction plays an essential role. However, this function is highly sensitive to motivation, self-concept, anxiety and attitudes of the learners. One solution may be the use of literature response activities as a source for topics of oral discussions in the English class. However, to date, investigating the role of literature response activities on L2 oral production has received scant attention.

Therefore, the current study was designed to see if exposing EFL learners to literature-based activities had any effect on Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability in the terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy. Following the above mentioned lines of research, the present study tried to address the following research questions:

- RQ1. Does exposure to literature-based activities have any effect on the *complexity* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions?
- RQ2. Does exposure to literature-based activities have any effect on the *accuracy* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions?
- RQ3. Does exposure to literature-based activities have any effect on the *fluency* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions?

Based on the above questions, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1. Exposure to literature-based activities does not have any effect on the *complexity* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions.
- H2. Exposure to literature-based activities does not have any effect on the *accuracy* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions.

- H3. Exposure to literature-based activities does not have any effect on the *fluency* of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions.

METHOD

Participants

A total number of thirty intermediate female EFL learners who enrolled in a language center in Isfahan, Iran took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 16 to 23. They were supposed to be intermediate level according to the institute level structure. However, to make sure about their proficiency level, intermediate-level learners were selected for the study based on a version of an Oxford Placement Test (OPT). All Learners were native speakers of Persian and they had taken English courses for four to five years. One class was randomly assigned as the experimental group with 15 students and the other as the control group with 15 students.

Instrument

Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

In order to determine students proficiency level, OPT (2001) was administrated. The test contained 60 multiple choice items, and it was used to enable the researcher to select intermediate level participants. This test consisted of grammar (20 items), vocabulary (20 items), and reading comprehension (20 items).

The speaking ability test (interview)

To assess the subjects' speaking ability before and after the experiment, the researcher devised and administered two similar speaking tests in terms of genre and difficulty level. Each of the speaking tests consisted of two parts. The first section was an oral quiz extracted from the book *Interchange 3* (Richards, 2005) which was considered for intermediate level learners. This quiz consisted of ten questions of high frequency in every conversation such as family, free time, hobbies, field of study, etc. The second section was an oral descriptive task. The speaking task focused on the examinees' abilities to communicate their emotions and ideas, situate themselves in someone else's position, and influence other people's emotions and thinking. Participants were required to complete each section of the oral test in 2 minutes. The topics of the speaking tests were based on the common background knowledge of all students. Their oral performance was recorded for re-listening and also transcribing.

Reading texts

To stimulate students' speaking motivation, some pieces of highly emotional short stories were given to students in the experimental group. They must also participate in oral discussion tasks in which the contents were tuned with the literary texts. Then, they were encouraged to talk about their emotions. The readings allocated to the

experimental group were selected from the books such as *Steps to Understanding* (Hill, 1980), *Anecdotes in American English* (Hill, 1980), *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families* (Covey, 2004), *Bottom Line Underwriters* (Hargrove, 1997). The readability of each text was calculated separately. For all of the extracted texts the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease score was higher than 90 (0 to 100, higher is best).

In addition, the texts for the control group were adopted only from *The Selected Reading* (Gundersen, 2011). To select reading texts for the control group, attempt was made to select reading passages that included no emotional words or content.

Measures of L2 oral performance

As Skehan (1996) has pointed out, the general goals for language teaching are to develop fluency, complexity, and accuracy in learners' production. These three aspects have also been used to measure the quality of language production in various studies (e.g., Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Zabihi, Rezazadeh, & NejadAnsari, 2013; Zabihi, Rezazadeh, Vahid Dastjerdi, 2013). For the present research, those measures which were more popular and similar to related studies were used to analyze the transcribed data.

Complexity: Following Wigglesworth and Elder (2010), proportion of dependent clauses per AS-unit was used in order to measure the complexity of L2 productions. AS-unit is defined as "a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause, or sub-clause unit, together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with it" (Foster, Tonkyn, Wigglesworth, 2000, p. 365). AS-unit is a syntactic measure which according to Foster and Skehan (1996) is a reliable measure, correlating well with other measures of complexity.

Accuracy: Accuracy refers to "how well the target language is produced according to its rule system" (Skehan, 1996, p.23). There is greater agreement among researchers with measures of accuracy (Tavakoli & Rezazadeh, 2014). In this study, one general measure of accuracy was used: the proportion of error-free clauses of all clauses (Skehan & Foster, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In the current study, error was defined as deviance from standard norms with respect to syntax, morphology, and/or lexicon.

Fluency: Following Skehan and Foster (1999) fluency was measured by calculating the number of words per minute. In this study words and phrases that were repeated, reformulated, or replaced were excluded. Therefore, the number of meaningful syllables within each descriptive task, divided by the number of seconds used to complete the task was multiplied by 60.

Procedure

The intermediate level participants, chosen based on OPT results, were randomly assigned to two control (n=15) and experimental (n=15) groups. In order to accomplish the aims of this study and to scrutinize the oral ability of the participants in the pretest,

the participants of both groups were interviewed. As was mentioned before, the interview consisted of two sections. Participants were required to complete each section in 2 minutes.

Students in the experimental group were given some short literary reading texts with the ends left open before each class. The goal of Such arrangements was to stimulate their interest and build their expectations for the lesson. Then, they were asked to speak about their own similar experiences for 4 minutes. To provide motivation, the treatment was supported by emotional and motivational short stories which followed by related subject for discussion, as how to be happy, how to be socially successful, speak about your favorite characteristics or a favorite person, and how to deal with impossible people.

In contrast, students in the control group were given short passages devoid of emotional words and content and taught under the ordinary procedure of English oral class, for instance, vocabulary and grammar learning, manipulating fixed patterns, summarization, etc. They also had discussions based on the content of their readings. All of the readings assigned to both groups were not more than a few pages.

All participants in this study were required to attend a 10-hour English course per week. For the experimental group, 2 hours were devoted to emotional designed materials. They had altogether 24 specially designed English-speaking lessons (16 hours) while their counterparts in the control group had the equal amount of ordinary English class with the same instructor. At the end of eighth week, i.e. after the treatment, a similar speaking ability test was administered to both groups as the posttest.

Data Analysis

After collecting the required data, a number of statistical tests were performed to check the research hypotheses. SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) Version 19.0 was used to perform all the statistical analyses in this study. This study had a pretest-posttest control group or nonequivalent control group design. Therefore, to examine the hypotheses, a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) were carried out on CAF scores to see if exposure to literature-based activities had any effect on the complexity, fluency, and accuracy of learners' L2 oral productions.

Moreover, to determine inter-rater reliability, ten oral recordings were randomly selected from the data. A PhD student and the researcher coded the data according to the above mentioned measures. Inter-rater reliability was determined by looking at percentage agreement between the raters. Pearson product moment correlation coefficients for the scores of the two coders ranged from .92 to .81.

RESULTS

As indicated earlier, this study was designed to see if exposing EFL learners to literature-based activities had any effect on their speaking ability in the terms of

fluency, complexity, and accuracy. The results of ANCOVAs are reported separately comparing the results on the measures for fluency, complexity and accuracy for the experimental and control groups.

Results for the complexity of L2 oral productions

The first research question addressed the effect of exposure to literature-based activities on the complexity of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions. In response to this question, hypothesis two was formulated which is examined in this section.

In order to investigate this hypothesis ANCOVA was conducted. The scores on the pretest were treated as a covariate to control for pre-existing differences between the groups. ANCOVA asks this question: If the complexity pretest scores are hold constant, will there be a significant difference between the complexity posttest scores for the two experimental and control groups?

Prior to running ANCOVA, preliminary assumption testing was conducted to check for normality, linearity, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes, and reliable measurement of the covariate, with no serious violations noted. In addition, the minimum alpha for confirmation of the research hypothesis was set at .05. Below, the adjusted motivation posttests are presented in Table 1 and the result of the ANCOVA is summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. **Descriptive statistics for complexity scores (adjusted posttests)**

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control Group	1.568 ^a	.114	1.334	1.802
Experimental Group	2.141 ^a	.114	1.907	2.375

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Complexity Pretest = 1.5370.

Table 2. **One-way ANCOVA of learners' complexity scores**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	5.798 ^a	2	2.899	14.853	.000	.524
Intercept	.351	1	.351	1.797	.191	.062
Complexity_Pretest	3.654	1	3.654	18.722	.000	.409
Group	2.456	1	2.456	12.581	.001	.318
Error	5.270	27	.195			
Total	114.262	30				
Corrected Total	11.069	29				

a. R Squared = .524 (Adjusted R Squared = .489)

As reported in Table 1, the experimental group outperformed the control group as far as adjusted complexity scores were concerned. Moreover, the results of the ANCOVA,

shown in Table 2, indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the control and experimental groups regarding the complexity posttest scores, $F = 12.58$, $p < .05$, partial eta squared = .318. Therefore, Analysis of the results revealed that the complexity of the learners' L2 oral productions were significantly higher when they had exposure to literature-based activities. Consequently, the first null hypothesis is rejected.

Results for the accuracy of L2 oral productions

The second research question tried to investigate if exposure to literature-based activities had any effect on the accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions. Subsequently, the second null hypothesis was made in reply to this question. One-way ANCOVA was run to examine the difference between the experimental and control groups with regard to accuracy scores. The scores on the pretest were treated as a covariate to control for pre-existing differences between the groups. Adjusted posttests are presented in Table 3 and ANCOVA results are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for accuracy scores (adjusted posttests)

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control Group	49.197 ^a	1.325	46.478	51.917
Experimental Group	63.869 ^a	1.325	61.150	66.589

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Accuracy Pretest = 48.3000.

Table 4. One-way ANCOVA of accuracy scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3652.192 ^a	2	1826.096	69.711	.000	.838
Intercept	81.007	1	81.007	3.092	.090	.103
Accuracy_Pretest	1667.658	1	1667.658	63.662	.000	.702
Group	1596.232	1	1596.232	60.936	.000	.693
Error	707.275	27	26.195			
Total	100240.000	30				
Corrected Total	4359.467	29				

a. R Squared = .838 (Adjusted R Squared = .826)

As reported in Table 3, the adjusted posttest mean scores for the experimental group was higher than the control group. In addition, the results of the ANCOVA, illustrated in Table 4, showed that this difference between the two experimental and control groups is statistically significant, $F = 60.93$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared = .693. Therefore, the results indicated that accuracy scores gained by EFL learners in the experimental group are significantly higher than those in the control group. Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that as far as accuracy scores are concerned, the students in the

experimental group outperformed those in the control group. Consequently, the second hypothesis is rejected.

Results for the fluency of L2 oral productions

The third research question addressed the effect of exposure to literature-based activities on the fluency of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions. Subsequently, the third null hypothesis was made in reply to this question. In order to investigate this research question, an ANCOVA was carried out since there was a two-group pretest/posttest design. As in previous sections, prior to running ANCOVA, preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions. Table 5 reported the descriptive data of fluency adjusted posttest scores with regard to each of the control and experimental groups. Additionally, ANCOVA results are demonstrated in Table 6.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for adjusted fluency pretests and posttests

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Control Group	71.851 ^a	3.968	63.709	79.994
Experimental Group	88.675 ^a	3.968	80.533	96.818

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Fluency Pretest = 71.8463.

Table 6. One-way ANCOVA of fluency scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	9958.411 ^a	2	4979.205	21.155	.000	.610
Intercept	770.155	1	770.155	3.272	.082	.108
Fluency_Pretest	7120.559	1	7120.559	30.252	.000	.528
Group	2107.497	1	2107.497	8.954	.006	.249
Error	6355.032	27	235.372			
Total	209579.523	30				
Corrected Total	16313.443	29				

a. R Squared = .610 (Adjusted R Squared = .582)

Table 5 shows that the adjusted mean of posttest scores are greater in the experimental group than in the control group, suggesting that exposure to literature-based activities resulted in more fluent L2 oral production. But the significance of these differences needs to be checked in the Table 6. The results of the ANCOVA, illustrated in Table 6 revealed that, after adjusting for pretest scores, there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding the fluency scores, $F = 8.95$, $p < .05$. Therefore, based on these findings, deductions can be made that exposure to literature-based activities lead to more fluent L2 oral production. Thus, the third null hypothesis is rejected.

DISCUSSION

In what follows, the findings obtained regarding each hypothesis will be discussed in turn. The first null hypothesis addressed the effect of literature-based activities on the complexity of Iranian EFL learners' oral production. Results of the present study provided evidence that the complexity of the learners' L2 oral productions were significantly higher when they had exposure to literature-based activities. This finding confirms Denny and Hunt's (1992) claim who argues that emotionally charged materials produces more vivid and long lasting memories than those to which no feelings are attached.

It seems that we are in position to make claim that Literature-based activities offer a vivid memorable authentic context in which learners can increase their grammatical and lexical knowledge. Moreover, findings with regard to complexity indirectly confirms result of studies, Morrow (1984, 1985, 1986), and Zimiles and Kuhns (1976). In these studies, researchers explored effect of some literacy activities on children' oral performance. They asked the learners to recall sections of a text or a story by utilizing some literacy activities. Each investigation discovered a significant improvement in oral language complexity.

The second null hypothesis stated that exposure to literature-based activities does not have any effect on the accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' L2 oral productions. Findings with respect to accuracy suggested that literature-based activities benefited accurate oral performance and learners in the experimental group remarkably produced more accurate sentences. This finding confirms the results reported by Dujmovic (2006), who pointed out that literature offers a natural and interesting medium for language acquisition by predictable and repetitive patterns that reinforce vocabulary and structures. However, to discuss precisely, the result of this study can be explained regarding the interaction of three variables for promoting accuracy. Literature response activities as source of interesting authentic materials may guarantee simultaneously three factors for language acquisition in general and oral interaction as particular (i.e., comprehensible input, output and crating low risk condition for interaction). Therefore, considering literature-based activities as a source of input, the findings with regard to accuracy is in line with Cadorath and Harris (1998), Ellis (1985), Gajdusek, (1988), Krashen (1985), and Swain (1985).

Arthur (1968) recognized that syntactic information and vocabulary enrichment can be expanded rapidly through literary texts. In other words, literature involves a profound range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose (Van, 2009). In addition, Gajdusek (1988) points out "comprehension never occurs in a vacuum, and the reader's prior knowledge, experience, and even emotional state are an important part of the process by which meaning is created" (p.231). This point is also recapitulated by Cadorath and Harris (1998) who state that the "text itself has no meaning; it only provides direction for the reader to construct meaning from the reader's own experience" (p. 188).

One key characteristic of literature activities is creating a context for interaction. Literature response activities can lower the effective filters within a meaningful interactive communication context in which keep a seat of effective learning. Allwright (1984) concerns interaction as the “fundamental fact of classroom pedagogy” because “everything happening in the classroom happens through a process of live person-to-person interaction” (p. 156). Literature response activities as bedrock for interaction provide a context for comprehensible input and accurate output, which simultaneously guarantees sources of input for other interlocutors.

The third research question addressed the effect of exposure to literature-based activities on the fluency of Iranian EFL learners’ L2 oral productions. Results showed that exposure to literature-based activities led to more fluent L2 oral production which led to the rejection of the fourth null hypothesis. This finding seem to provide support for Sarceni’s (2003) idea that oral work based on literary texts can help to improve students’ speaking skills. Likewise, the results for fluency corroborate those found by Krashen (1985) who stated “when the students’ anxiety level is lowered and their self-confidence is increased, it is very probable that they would become more fluent” (p. 5).

One reasonable explanation for the contribution of literature-based activities to learners’ better performance on the speaking ability post-test could be referred to the affective and cognitive accounts of the oral process. As mentioned before speaking performance highly depends on top-down processing (Richards, 2007). In this process background knowledge is essential for understanding the meaning of the message. In this regard, a previous knowledge about the topic of discourse, a situational and contextual knowledge, or even the emotional state of learner is an important part of the process by which meaning is created (Gajdusek, 1988).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to provide insight into the effect of literature-based activities on the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of learners’ L2 oral performance. The conclusion drawn from the findings of this study is that exposing EFL students to literature-based activities can help them perform significantly better in their L2 oral performance in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency.

Several important pedagogical implications can be raised from the findings of this study. Firstly, this study was primarily undertaken to cast light on the issue of literature-based activities to determine whether it should have a role in L2 speaking. If foreign language teachers methodically introduce and reinforce these activities, the learners will significantly improve their performance on L2 oral tasks. In addition, material developers and curriculum designers are required to pay special attention to new materials and techniques that could help learners improve their speaking, and lead them to more effective learning.

A number of limitations come to light in interpreting the results of the present study. First, research on using literature-based activities to improve learners' L2 oral performance is just at the beginning, and some limitations need to be concerned when interpreting the findings of present study. Though the data are collected for the analysis seems to be persuasive in validating the results, care needs to be taken since this study involved a small number of participants (N=30).

Second, it seems to be no unanimous agreement on the measure of complexity, accuracy and fluency. This study used one measure for each one of the aspects of performance. Hence, the question remains whether other measures might change the result. Third, all the participants in this study were female adult learners (aged 16-23). The present findings, therefore, may not be generalized to learning contexts involving male language learners.

The current study also leaves some room for other potential issues for investigation. The following recommendations for future research are based upon the results of this study. First, this study used literature-based activities to develop learners' L2 oral performance; still future research can explore the impacts of other materials such as: movie clips, TV shows, drama, etc.

Second, identical topics were used for oral discussions in this study, i.e. literary texts were used as the source of discussions. The topics used in the current study raised learners' personal emotions in relation to imagined situations. Therefore, more research needs to be conducted that assigns topics comparable to those used in this and previous studies in order to further verify the findings with regard to L2 oral production. Finally, to improve learners' L2 oral performance, this study used an 8-week instruction program. Longitudinal studies can be done to determine the effect of literature-based activities over longer periods of time.

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