

Effects of Generic Features of Task, Gender, and Proficiency Level on EFL Learners' Written Task Performance in Terms of Accuracy

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Abstract

The present study aims at investigating the effects of three factors namely generic features of task, proficiency level of L2 learners, and gender of language learners (male and female) on their language production in terms of the linguistic domain of accuracy. The aim of conducting this study was to find out the possible effects that generic features of task (descriptive and narrative), L2 learners' proficiency level (intermediate and advanced) and their gender (male and female) can have on their task performance in terms of accuracy of their written production. For the purpose of the study, eighty intermediate and advanced male and female learners of English were selected. They were given two writing tasks with different generic features namely a narrative and a descriptive task. The written performances of the learners were quantified and measured and then they were analyzed by the appropriate statistical means of analysis. It was found that there were significant differences between the performances of advanced and intermediate male and female learners in terms of written task accuracy. It was also found that the advanced learners' written task performance was significantly influenced by generic features of the tasks, L2 learners' proficiency level and their gender. Thus, deductions were made that gender of the L2 learners' as well as the generic features of task has significant effects on their written task production in terms of accuracy.

Keywords: need analysis, proficiency level, gender, oral and written performance

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, there has been a plethora of attempt to find out the role of the "task" in second and foreign language teaching and learning (Bygate, 2001; Gilbert,

2005; Ortega, 1999; Robinson, 2005; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008). As early as 1970s, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach became popular among second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and second language teachers (Skehan, 2003). Communicative language teaching has both strong and weak versions. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a realization of communicative language teaching. It is indeed the strong version of CLT, as tasks provide the foundation for an entire language program (Ellis, 2003). Foster and Skehan (1999) state that there are some pre-task, while-task, and post task activities that can be utilized to help language learner pay a balanced attention to both form and meaning at the same time and improve the quality of learner language. There are many factors affecting learners' oral and written performance such as task condition, task type, task structure, genre of task, etc. Planning is one of the task condition factors that affects second language production and has been of both theoretical importance to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and of practical importance to language teachers (Ellis, 2005).

Although there have been many studies on the effects of different task characteristics on L2 learners' oral and written performance, a few studies have been carried out to investigate the effects of generic features of tasks on language learners' task production. The present study set out to investigate the effects of generic features of task, gender, and proficiency level of L2 learners on their written task performance in terms of accuracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the main areas of research in task-based language learning and teaching is the relationship between task variables and language production, with a growing body of research focusing on language production in terms of different aspects of L2 performance. Many SLA researchers (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003, 2012; Skehan & Foster, 1999) acknowledge that various factors mediate the learning processes. Skehan (1996) presents three aspects of language production: fluency, accuracy, and complexity, which have been used to examine the effects of various task variables. These variables can be classified under two main categories: task design variables and task implementation factors. Tasks have different features or characteristics which can affect learners' linguistic production. Skehan (2003) points out that task characteristic can have an impact on task performance in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity. Moreover, language learners' proficiency level is an influential factor which can influence language learners' language learning and task performance.

The learners in learning second/foreign language might encounter some difficulties and these difficulties in learning the language might be reflected in the form of variations in the learners' oral or written performance. These variations in the performance of second or foreign language could be attributed to several factors. These factors can be divided into two general categories namely individual factors and non-individual factors. Individual factors are those that are concerned with the learners themselves such as affective filters, aptitude, attitude, stress, etc. Non-individual factors are those

which are concerned with the context of language learning. One of the non-individual factors involves task and the features of the tasks which learners are asked to perform. Tasks and their different features can have distinctive effects on L2 learners' oral and written performance in terms of three linguistic domains of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Task features are task structure, task condition, planning time, task complexity, and the generic features of the task. The varieties caused by task features in L2 learners' performance are called task-induced varieties (Rahimpour, 2008).

METHOD

The participants of the study, which were eighty male and female learners of English as a foreign language, were randomly divided into two groups of forty based on their gender. Then, these two groups of male and female were also divided into two groups of twenty based on their English language proficiency level. Therefore, in this study, the participants were divided into four groups including male/advanced, male/intermediate, female/advanced, and female intermediate.

In order to collect the written data for the purpose of this study, the participants of the study were asked to perform the two tasks. First, the participants of all groups were asked to perform the narrative task. Each learner was called from the class individually and was given the picture and the necessary explanations on how to do the task. Having provided them with the required explanations, the participants were asked to perform the narrative task and narrate the story of the picture prompts. Their written performance on the narrative task was recorded by the researcher. After performing the narrative task, the participants of the study were asked to perform the second task i.e. the participants were provided with the pictorial descriptive task and the necessary elaborations on how they should perform this task by the researcher. After preparing and familiarizing the learners with the descriptive task, they were asked to perform the given task and describe what they saw in the picture. Like the narrative task, their written performance was recorded by the researcher. The written performances of the participants were analyzed in accordance with the purpose of the study and the measure of accuracy introduced in chapter three of the study.

After quantifying and analyzing the written production of the participants in the study, the raw scores of accuracy of the participants' written task performance were fed into SPSS (Version 19) for further analysis. T-test and ANOVA were employed as the statistical means of analysis.

RESULTS

As the data shown in the table 1, male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.41) than intermediate male learners (0.33) when they performed descriptive task. That is, the advanced male learners performed better than intermediate male learners in terms of written task accuracy. According to the table, the results of the data analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature

of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced male learners outperformed the intermediate male learners in terms of the accuracy of their written descriptive task performance.

Table 1. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate male learners performing descriptive task

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.41	0.04
Intermediate	20	0.33	0.07

As the data presented in table 2 shows, male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.48) than intermediate male learners (0.38) when they performed narrative task. That is, the advanced male learners performed better than intermediate male learners in terms of written task accuracy of narrative task performance. According to the data in table 4.4, the results of the data analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced male learners outperformed the intermediate male learners in terms of the accuracy of their written narrative task performance.

Table 2. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the and intermediate male learners performing advanced narrative task

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.48	0.04
Intermediate	20	0.38	0.06

As the data presented in table 3, male learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language in narrative task (0.48) than in descriptive task (0.38). That is, the advanced male learners performed better in narrative task than descriptive task terms of written task accuracy.

Table 3. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

Generic features	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Narrative	20	0.48	0.04
Descriptive	20	0.41	0.04

According to the data in table 4, the results of the data analysis revealed that there was a meaningful difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced male learners produced higher amount of accuracy in narrative task than descriptive task.

Table 4. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
0.01	0.91	4.74	38	0.00	0.07	0.01	0.04	0.1
		4.74	37.98	0.00	0.07	0.01	0.04	0.1

As the data presented in table 5, female learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.39) than intermediate female learners (0.33) when they performed descriptive task. That is, the advanced female learners performed better than intermediate female learners in terms of written task accuracy.

Table 5. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate female learners performing descriptive task

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.39	0.05
Intermediate	20	0.33	0.02

According to the table 6, the results of the data analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced female learners outperformed the intermediate female learners in terms of the accuracy of their written descriptive task performance.

Table 6. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate female learners performing descriptive task

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
4.87	0.03	4.04	38	0.00	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.08
		4.04	29.17	0.00	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.08

As the data presented in table 7, female learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language (0.45) than intermediate male learners (0.36) when they performed narrative task. That is, the advanced female learners performed better than intermediate male learners in terms of written task accuracy of narrative task performance.

Table 7. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate female learners performing narrative task

Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Advanced	20	0.45	0.07
Intermediate	20	0.36	0.03

According to the data in table 8, the results of the data analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced female learners outperformed the intermediate female learners in terms of the accuracy of their written narrative task performance.

Table 8. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced and intermediate female learners performing narrative task

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test Equality of means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
15.3	0.00	4.8	38	0.00	0.08	0.01	0.05	0.12
		4.8	27.36	0.00	0.08	0.01	0.05	0.12

As the data presented in table 9, female learners of advanced proficiency level produced more accurate language in narrative task (0.45) than in descriptive task (0.39). That is, the advanced female learners performed better in narrative task than descriptive task terms of written task accuracy.

Table 9. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced female learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

Generic features	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Narrative	20	0.45	0.07
Descriptive	20	0.39	0.05

According to the data in table 10, the results of the data analysis revealed that there was a slight difference between the performances of the learners in terms of written task accuracy and the generic feature of the task and the learners' proficiency level. That is, the advanced female learners produced slightly higher amount of accuracy in narrative task than descriptive task.

Table 10. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced female learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test Equality of Means						
F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
4.11	0.05	2.8	38	0.008	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.1
		2.8	35.03	0.008	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.1

According to the data provided in table11, the performances of the advanced male and female learners while performing narrative and descriptive tasks were significantly different. Besides, Tukey Post Hoc test was employed for further comparison of the means accuracy of the advanced female and male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks. The results are provided in table 12.

Table 11. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the advanced female and male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.09	3	0.03	9.71	0.00
Within Groups	0.25	76	0.003		
Total	0.34	79			

As the data presented in table 12, the results of applying Tukey post hoc test revealed significant differences between the performances of advanced male and female learners in narrative and descriptive tasks in terms of the accuracy of their written task performance. Based on the table's data, advanced male participants of the study had the highest amount of accuracy in narrative task while advanced female learners had lowest accuracy in descriptive task. Thus, it can be concluded that learners' proficiency level and generic features of the task along with the gender of the participants had significant effects on advanced learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy. But as the data presented in table 12, the results of applying Tukey post hoc test revealed that there were slight differences between the performances of intermediate male and female learners in narrative and descriptive tasks in terms of the accuracy of their written task performance. According to the table, intermediate female participants of the study had the highest amount of accuracy in narrative task while intermediate female learners of had lowest accuracy in descriptive task. Thus, it can be concluded that learners' proficiency level and generic features of the task along with the gender of the participants did not have significant effects on intermediate learners' written task performance in terms of accuracy.

Table 12. Tukey Post Hoc test for the comparison of the accuracy of the intermediate female and male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

(I) Method	(J) Method	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male intermediate narrative	Male intermediate descriptive	0.05*	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.08
	Female intermediate narrative	0.01	0.01	0.32	-0.01	0.05
	Female intermediate descriptive	0.04*	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.07
Male intermediate descriptive	Male intermediate narrative	-0.05*	0.01	0.00	-0.08	-0.06
	Female intermediate narrative	-0.03	0.01	0.05	-0.06	0.00
	Female intermediate descriptive	-0.00	0.01	0.64	-0.04	0.02
Female intermediate narrative	Male intermediate narrative	-0.01	0.01	0.32	-0.05	0.01
	Male intermediate descriptive	0.03	0.01	0.05	-0.00	0.06
	Female intermediate descriptive	0.02	0.01	0.14	-0.00	0.06
Female intermediate descriptive	Male intermediate narrative	-0.04*	0.01	0.01	-0.07	-0.00
	Male intermediate descriptive	0.00	0.01	0.64	-0.02	0.04
	Female intermediate narrative	-0.02	0.01	0.14	-0.06	0.00

As the data presented in table 13, there were not significant differences between the performances of intermediate male and female learners in descriptive and narrative tasks in terms of accuracy of written task. Besides, Tukey Post Hoc test was employed for further comparison of the means accuracy of the intermediate female and male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks. The results are provided in table 12.

Table13. The comparison of the means of written task accuracy of the intermediate female and male learners performing descriptive and narrative tasks

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.03	3	0.01	3.67	0.01
Within Groups	0.23	76	0.00		
Total	0.26	79			

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately there have been a few studies on the effect of generic features of tasks on language learners' task production. This study demonstrates the need to produce researches to dedicate to investigation of the effects of generic features of task, gender and proficiency level which is an influential factor that can influence language learners' learning and task performance.

Also it confirms the importance of task-based language teaching (TBLT) which is a realization of communicative language teaching that recently has become popular among SLA researchers and teachers. This study clearly demonstrates that a quality of education includes the employments of tasks with different generic features to make their learners familiar with them and make them practice and produce language in different forms for getting high proficiency level. Thus educational researchers and teachers can no longer avoid using the results of this study to design tasks with different features in terms of their genre to make learners produce target language forms.

Moreover the findings of this thesis can be useful for language teachers. They can adapt their teaching practice in the classrooms with different genders and different proficiency levels. They can employ tasks with different generic features to make their learners familiar and make them practice and produce language in different forms that tasks with different generic features require. Task designers can use the ideas of this study to design tasks with different features in terms of their genre to make learners produce target language forms. Besides, task-based researchers can use these results as new findings in the field of task-based language teaching.

But the first limitation of thesis was that the number of the participants of the study was relatively low which can affect the generalizability of its findings. The second limitation was that some other factors like learners' attitude, aptitude, etc might have influenced the learners' performance and the findings of the study.

This study can be replicated with different number of participants. Also, it can be replicated with learners of different proficiency levels. Moreover, the study can be done with task of different generic features.

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