



THE ROLE OF TASK COMPLEXITY IN DEVELOPING EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING FLUENCY

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>Task complexity is an important factor in task-based language teaching (TBLT), as it can influence the cognitive processes involved in second language production and the quality of learners' oral performance. This article examines the relationship between task complexity and speaking fluency among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Drawing on research into task-based language learning, cognitive demands, and the complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) framework, the study explores how different task demands may affect speech rate, pausing, hesitation, and the continuity of spoken production. Particular attention is given to the relationship between task complexity and the allocation of learners' attentional resources during oral communication. Previous research suggests that cognitively demanding tasks may encourage more elaborate language production while simultaneously placing additional pressure on fluency. The article therefore emphasizes the importance of sequencing speaking tasks according to learners' proficiency levels and gradually increasing cognitive demands. The discussion offers pedagogical implications for designing task-based speaking activities that support the development of fluent and meaningful communication.</p>	<p>Task complexity, speaking fluency, task-based language teaching, EFL learners, oral production, cognitive demands, fluency development.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Speaking fluency is a fundamental component of communicative competence in English language learning. It enables learners to express ideas, exchange information, participate in discussions, and communicate meaning with relative ease. However, developing fluent speech remains a considerable challenge for many learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in educational contexts where opportunities for authentic communication are limited.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has attracted considerable attention as an approach that places meaningful language use at the centre of classroom instruction. Within this approach, learners engage in activities that require them to achieve communicative outcomes rather than simply reproduce predetermined grammatical structures. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of task-based

instruction depends not only on the use of communicative activities but also on how those activities are designed, sequenced, and implemented.

One particularly important factor is task complexity. Speaking tasks differ in the number of elements learners must consider, the amount of reasoning required, the availability of contextual support, and the cognitive effort needed to organize information. These differences may influence learners' ability to retrieve vocabulary, construct grammatical structures, maintain speech continuity, and respond appropriately to their interlocutors.

Previous research has demonstrated that task complexity does not necessarily produce uniform improvements across all dimensions of second language performance. For example, Jackson et al. (2013), in their synthesis and meta-analysis of research on the Cognition Hypothesis, reported small positive effects on accuracy but small negative effects on fluency in the studies included in their meta-analysis. Such findings indicate that the relationship between cognitive demands and speaking performance requires careful consideration.

Against this background, the present article examines the role of task complexity in developing EFL learners' speaking fluency. It focuses on the theoretical relationship between task demands and oral production, the principal indicators of fluency, and the pedagogical value of sequencing speaking activities from less demanding to more cognitively challenging tasks.

Literature Review

Task complexity in task-based language teaching

Task complexity refers to the cognitive demands associated with completing a particular learning task. In second language acquisition research, it is commonly distinguished from task conditions and task difficulty. Task complexity concerns the cognitive requirements inherent in a task, whereas task conditions relate to the circumstances under which it is performed, and task difficulty reflects the individual learner's experience of those demands.

Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis proposes that appropriately designed increases in cognitive demands can encourage deeper processing and influence the linguistic characteristics of learners' performance. His framework also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing task complexity from other factors that affect learning and communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, task complexity may be manipulated through several design features. A simple picture-description task, for instance, may require learners to identify familiar objects and describe their positions. A more complex version might require them to compare several pictures, identify inconsistencies, explain possible causes, and justify a conclusion.

Although both activities involve speaking, the second requires learners to coordinate a wider range of cognitive and linguistic operations. Consequently, task design becomes an important consideration in organizing speaking practice.

Speaking fluency as a multidimensional construct

Speaking fluency is not limited to the speed at which a learner speaks. It also involves the continuity, timing, and smoothness of speech production. Research commonly distinguishes temporal aspects of fluency from breakdown and repair phenomena.

Temporal fluency may be examined through speech rate and articulation rate. Breakdown fluency concerns pauses, including their frequency, duration, and distribution. Repair fluency includes repetitions, reformulations, and self-corrections.

These dimensions are related but not identical. A learner may speak relatively quickly while producing frequent pauses, or speak more slowly while maintaining coherent and continuous speech. Therefore, evaluating fluency through a single indicator may provide an incomplete account of oral performance. Bui and Skehan (2018) situate fluency within the broader complexity, accuracy, and fluency framework, which provides a useful basis for examining how task characteristics influence second language production. This framework is particularly relevant to TBLT because learners must manage competing demands while completing communicative activities.

Cognitive demands and the development of fluency

The relationship between task complexity and fluency can be explained partly through the allocation of attentional resources. When learners perform a demanding speaking task, they may need to devote additional attention to planning content, selecting vocabulary, organizing arguments, and monitoring grammatical accuracy. These processes can temporarily reduce the resources available for maintaining continuous speech.

Skehan and Foster (1997) investigated how task type and processing conditions influenced second language performance, including fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Their work illustrates why task characteristics and the conditions under which tasks are performed should be considered when interpreting oral production.

More recent research has also highlighted the possibility that complex tasks may increase hesitation and repair phenomena. Mora et al. (2024), for example, reported that greater task complexity was associated with lower speaking fluency on several measures in their study of second language speech. Such findings should not be interpreted as evidence that complex tasks are inherently undesirable. Rather, they suggest that cognitive demands need to be aligned with learners' proficiency, available preparation time, and instructional objectives.

The central pedagogical issue is therefore not whether all speaking tasks should be simplified, but how task demands can be managed to support gradual development.

Methodological Framework

This article adopts a theory-informed analytical approach based on established research into task complexity, second language oral production, and speaking fluency. It synthesizes relevant theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to identify pedagogical principles for organizing task-based speaking instruction.

The following research questions guide the analysis:

How can task complexity influence the temporal, breakdown, and repair dimensions of EFL learners' speaking fluency?

1. What role can the sequencing of speaking tasks play in managing learners' cognitive demands?
2. How can teachers design task-based activities that promote fluent oral communication without neglecting accuracy and linguistic complexity?

For empirical investigation, task complexity can be operationalized by comparing speaking activities with different cognitive requirements while controlling, as far as possible, for topic familiarity, task duration, preparation time, and learner proficiency.

Speaking fluency may be assessed through speech rate, articulation rate, pause frequency and duration, and the frequency of repetitions and self-corrections. Audio recordings, consistent transcription procedures, and clearly defined measurement criteria would support reliable analysis.

A future experimental study could involve learners completing both less complex and more complex speaking tasks, followed by comparisons of their performance. If a teaching intervention is implemented, pre-test and post-test assessments, a suitable comparison group, and appropriate statistical analyses would strengthen the evidence for any observed changes.

Results and Discussion

The reviewed theoretical perspectives and empirical studies suggest that task complexity should be understood as a factor that can influence different dimensions of oral performance in different ways. In particular, increased cognitive demands may encourage learners to produce more elaborate responses while simultaneously making continuous speech more difficult to maintain.

This relationship has important implications for interpreting speaking fluency. A temporary increase in hesitation during a demanding task does not necessarily indicate that a learner's overall speaking ability has deteriorated. It may reflect the additional processing required to formulate more complex ideas. Similarly, a high speech rate alone does not demonstrate successful communication if the learner's message is unclear or insufficiently developed.

The findings reported in previous research also support the need to distinguish immediate task performance from long-term language development. Performance during a single complex task may differ from performance after repeated practice or instruction. Consequently, claims about fluency development should ideally be supported by longitudinal or pre-test and post-test evidence rather than by observations from one speaking activity.

Gradual sequencing of speaking tasks

One practical implication is that speaking activities should be organized progressively. Learners may initially work with familiar topics, visual prompts, and clearly defined communicative goals. Once they can complete these tasks with greater continuity, teachers can introduce activities requiring comparison, explanation, reasoning, problem-solving, and justification.

For example, a sequence may begin with describing a familiar place, progress to comparing two places, and culminate in recommending one location based on several criteria. Each stage preserves the communicative purpose while gradually increasing the demands placed on the learner.

Such sequencing can provide opportunities to develop automaticity and confidence before learners encounter more demanding speaking conditions. Nevertheless, the optimal progression should depend on learner proficiency, prior knowledge, and the specific objectives of the lesson.

The role of planning and task repetition

Task complexity should not be considered independently of planning and repetition. Pre-task planning can help learners organize content, anticipate vocabulary needs, and establish a clearer structure for their responses. Task repetition may also allow learners to become more familiar with the communicative requirements of an activity.

Skehan and Foster's (1997) research and subsequent work on task implementation demonstrate the importance of considering the conditions under which speaking tasks are completed. From a teaching perspective, learners may benefit from completing an activity, receiving feedback, and repeating it with a slightly modified communicative goal.

However, planning and repetition should not eliminate all communicative challenge. The aim is to provide sufficient support for learners to process meaning and produce language while gradually improving their ability to communicate under less controlled conditions.

Balancing fluency, accuracy, and complexity

An additional implication concerns the balance among fluency, accuracy, and complexity. These dimensions may compete for learners' limited attentional resources during real-time speech production. Excessive emphasis on grammatical correctness may result in frequent pauses, whereas an exclusive focus on speed may encourage incomplete or inaccurate language.

Teachers should therefore establish task-specific priorities while monitoring overall communicative effectiveness. During an initial fluency activity, learners might be encouraged to maintain the flow of communication without being interrupted for every error. Subsequent feedback can address recurring grammatical or lexical problems and encourage more precise expression.

This approach treats fluency as one component of communicative development rather than as an isolated objective. It also enables teachers to select task demands that are challenging enough to stimulate development without unnecessarily overwhelming learners.

Pedagogical Implications

The analysis suggests several principles for the design of task-based speaking instruction. First, teachers should assess learners' existing proficiency and familiarity with the task before increasing its cognitive demands. Second, speaking activities should be sequenced progressively, with appropriate opportunities for planning and reflection. Third, fluency assessment should incorporate several indicators rather than relying exclusively on speaking speed. Fourth, task repetition can be used strategically to support more efficient language production. Finally, feedback should address fluency, accuracy, and complexity in a balanced manner, taking into account the communicative purpose of each activity. These principles can be applied to pair work, information-gap activities, collaborative problem-solving, picture-based narratives, decision-making tasks, and short presentations. Their effectiveness, however, should be evaluated in the relevant educational context rather than assumed to be identical across learner groups.

Conclusion

Task complexity is an important consideration in the design of task-based speaking instruction because it influences the cognitive demands placed on EFL learners during oral communication. The literature examined in this article indicates that increased task demands may affect fluency, accuracy, and complexity differently. In particular, more demanding tasks can place additional pressure on the temporal continuity of speech, even when they encourage more elaborate language production.

The pedagogical implication is that task complexity should be managed through appropriate sequencing, preparation, repetition, and assessment. Gradually increasing cognitive demands may

provide learners with opportunities to develop their ability to express ideas coherently while maintaining an appropriate balance between fluency and linguistic accuracy.

Nevertheless, the present article is analytical rather than a report of a completed classroom experiment. Its implications should therefore be tested through empirical research involving clearly defined task conditions, reliable fluency measures, and appropriate statistical procedures. Future experimental studies could investigate how different levels of task complexity affect speech rate, pausing, and repair phenomena among EFL learners at different proficiency levels.

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