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Impact of Opinion-Exchange and Information Gap Tasks on EFL Learners' Willingness to Communicate

Mahsa Soleimani[1] & Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi[2*]

[1,2]English Department, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

The present study sought to investigate the effect of two types of tasks; namely, 'information-gap' and 'opinion-exchange', on EFL learners' Willingness to Communicate (WTC). To this end, the needed data was collected from 90 female EFL learners in Koushesh Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran, and the participants were divided into one control and two experimental groups (A and B). The latter received treatments in one of the two experimental situations and were measured for their level of L2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Group A received 'information gap' for a period of 16 sessions, and group B received 'opinion-exchange' tasks. The control group received no task of specific type. At the end of the treatment, the participants filled a questionnaire on their WTC. The results indicated that members of both the experimental groups outperformed those of the control group. Furthermore, it was revealed that opinion-exchange tasks had better effects on the enhancement of the participants' WTC. The findings of this study may be very beneficial for the teachers of the English language who wish to improve their EFL learners' speaking ability. In fact, creating environments for learners to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom through tasks would enhance learners' willingness to communicate.

[2]Corresponding Author's Email:
 h_vahid@yahoo.com

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the recent language teaching methodsthat aims to improve learners' speaking ability by engaging them in different tasks (Richards & Rogers, 2001). A task-based approach attempts to put the learners in the natural context needed for language use. As learners endeavor to perform a task, they will have opportunities to interact and to use their L2. Such an interaction is thoughtto make language acquisition easier for learners to work, to understand, and to expressthemselves. By doing so, they check to see if they have understood the message correctly and, sometimes, they have to ask for clarification. Through interaction with others, language learners listen to the language that may be beyond their present ability, but may be integrated into their knowledge of L2 for use in the future. (Ellis, 2009), ''the central purpose we are concerned with is language learning, and task presents this in the form of a negotiation between knowledge that the learner holdsand new knowledge''. Task-based language learning (TBLL) does not include specification of a sequence for language teaching but consists of a sequence ofcommunicative tasks to be done in the L2 (Nunan, 2005). It gives learners a sample of the target language which is organized based on the purposes which people uselanguage (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 94).

The literature on TBLT has witnessed several classifications of tasks based on factors such as time, mental or linguistic resources needed, or their being real-life or pedagogical (Ellis, 2008). An interesting line of inquiry has been to investigate the potential of different tasks to foster learners' speaking ability (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Murad, 2009).

Task-based teaching is a generally approach to teaching process. The teaching method is seen as a set of communicative tasks that are directly related to curricular aims. Nunan (1991) views the task as a part of meaning-focused work, which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the targetlanguage.

There are a number of different explanations in the literature about what a task really is. However, many researchers today make an important difference between target tasks, which students need to do outside the classroom, and pedagogical tasks, which form the base of the classroom activity during the teaching.

As far as target tasks are concerned, Song and Zhang (2008) list a number of them for example: buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter and making a hotel reservation. He sums up a description of task in this way: by task, it is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in –between. Tasks are things that students typically do outside of the classroom. The last rationale for language instruction is to enable learners to complete these activities successfully in the real world using the target language.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) and Second LanguageAcquisition (SLA)

As more attention is paid to meaningful communication, more attention would be paid to Willingness to Communicate (WTC, hereafter). This is why investigation of WTC has always been the focus of those researchers overwhelmed with meaningful communication. This is due to the notion that communication has been replaced with other aims of language learning in modern world of L2 learning and teaching and, in this way, 'communication' stands for 'meaningful communication'. Therefore, when communication is deemed as the primary objective of language learning, WTC gets more and more significant for EFL learners.

Despite the vital role of WTC in rendering meaningful communication that is boosted in EFL contexts, only little attention has been paid to it. In this vein, Akbarzadeh and Narafshan (2016) put that WTC is a variable that has been frequentlyforegrounded in literature. They continue that for learning to talk in the L2, learners need to be willing to communicate in the L2. Therefore, developing learners` L2 WTC should be the fundamental goal of language instruction. Moreover, MacCIntyre et al. (2001) define WTC as a readiness to enter the discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons. Considering WTC as a situational construct, researchers have examined how it is influenced by situational variables such as contextual variables and social support. As a conclusion to this, in a student-friendly environment student would be more willing to talk in class than a teacher-centered class. In a stress-free supporting environment, learners can build a better rapport not only with each other but also with the teacher, which will in turn boost the learning process to a considerable extent. Then willingness to communicate is very important in Second Language Acquisition. Second language acquisition, or SLA, has twomeanings. In a general sense, it is a term to define learning a second language. Specially, it is the name of the

theory of the procedure by which we acquire - or pick up - a second language. This is mainly a subconscious process, which occurs while wefocus on communication. It can be related with second language learning, which describes how formal language teaching helps us learn language through more conscious processes.

Literature Review

Many L2 teachers consider students' silence in the TESOL profession as a negative attribute. Evidence has shown that L2 teachers find it as a problem to get students to answer willingly in classrooms. It appears that learners whodo not participate in L2 interaction are usually regarded as being passive and unmotivated.

In the TESOL profession, which was dominated by communicative language teaching (CLT) methodology since the1970, researchers' common goal was to motivate learners to become communicators that are more effective. As Breen (2001) observes, "one of CLT's innovations was to advocate spontaneous learner communication through talk about topics and issues that were immediatelymeaningful to them" (p. 113). It is undeniable that students' participation is very important in language learning. Interaction research, for instance, provides abundant evidence for the simplifying role that participation plays in language acquisition. Therefore, researchers such as Macintyre, Dornyei, Clement, and Noels (1998) argue for the importance of promoting learners' WTC in L2 education.

English, which is defined as an international language, is used by more than one and ahalf billion people (Strevens, 1992) as a first, second, or foreign language for communication purposes. Therefore, the purpose of teaching English has moved from the mastery of structure to the ability to use the language for communicative purposes. Jahanshahi (2013) investigated whether college students who were learning English as a foreign language in the Iranian context were willing to communicate when they had an opportunity. The study utilized a quantitative data collection and analysis procedures. The appropriate method was quasi experimental design and data were analyzed through t-test. The total participants in this study were 80 English students (either translation or teaching) in South Tehran branch of Islamic Azad University. The Willingness to

Communicate questionnaire was distributed among theparticipants before and after the treatment (Group Work). The results showed that Group activities had a important effect on students' willingness to communicate and revealed that learners were willing to communicate in English. Participants preferred using group work; in such relax and calm atmosphere and enjoyable way to solve problems and go to classes they were more willing to communicate. Creating environments for learners to communicate in English inside and outside the classroom and via internet and synchronous chat would enhance learners willing to communicate.

Foroutanfar (2015) explored and compared the effectiveness of focus-on-form (FonF) task instruction (i.e., input vs. collaborative output tasks) on Iranian English asa foreign language (EFL) learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). To achieve the objective, 50 Iranian pre intermediate EFL students took part in this study. The FonF tasks were presented in the form of input FonF tasks (i.e., textual enhancement, processing instruction, and discourse tasks) and collaborative output FonF tasks (i.e., dictoglass, jigsaw, and text reconstruction tasks) to 2 classes of 50 pre-intermediate Iranian EFL students. Participants answered the pre-test-post-test questions of the WTCquestionnaire. The analysis of the paired samples t test in the input and collaborative output FonF tasks group showed that these types of FonF tasks did not improve the participants' WTC significantly. However, the participants in the collaborative output FonFtasks group outperformed those in the input FonF tasks groups. The results of thestudy imply that monitoring students' WTC in second/foreign language (L2) and improving it should be considered as one of the goals of L2 teachers and syllabus designers through implementation of collaborative FonF tasks.

Razmjoo (2015) investigated the effect of competitive and cooperative teaching on Iranian EFL learners' WTC. The participants included 120 Iranian femaleintermediate students studying at Ayandegan high school, in Shiraz. A 27-item likert type WTC questionnaire developed by MacIntyre et al (2001) was administered as a pre-test, then the learners were divided into two groups randomly, one group experienced the competitive teaching and the other group experienced the cooperativeteaching. The treatment took 20 sessions. The Fundamentals A from Top Notch Serieswas used as the material taught to learners. At the end of the experiment, the same WTC questionnaire was once again administered as the post-test. A paired sample t- Test was run on the mean scores of both groups to find the effect of teachingapproaches on learners' WTC. The results

showed that the cooperative teaching had a significant effect on learners' WTC. This means that different methods of teaching areinfluential on WTC of Iranian EFL learners.

One of the pedagogical implications of the research on the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) might be to propose practical ways of making language learnersmore willing to communicate in the classroom. Abdollahzadeh (2014) investigated the impact of teaching communication strategies (CSs) on Iranian EFL learners' WTC.To this end, 8 intact classes were included as the experimental and control groups. The control group underwent regular language instruction, while the experimental group received the treatment (i.e., communication strategy training). The self-report measurement of WTC (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrad, 2001) was done before(pre-test) and after the treatment (post-test). The results of the independent-samples t- test showed that the degree of WTC of the treatment group was significantly higher compared with that of the control group. It was concluded that teaching CSs helps learners become more willing to communicate in the classroom.

Fatemipour and Mohammadi (2014) investigated different information-gap activities, and their effect on learners' willingness to communicate. More specifically,this study examined the effect of jigsaw, missing-information, and finding the differences activities on the learners' willingness to communicate. Using non- probability sampling, KET (Key English Test) was administered as test of homogeneity to select the research subjects. A total of 60 participants above the ageof 13 who were at the elementary level participated in this study. The subjects were assigned to three experimental groups. A questionnaire was also administered tomeasure the learners' willingness to communicate with the WTC scale, as a pre-test at the first session of the term. The treatment included the application of the three information-gap activities, in the three experimental groups, and at the end, the same questionnaire was applied as the post-test. The obtained results showed that therewere significant differences regarding the effects of information-gap activities on

Previous studies have revealed that there is a positive relationship between task-based language teaching and interaction between students. Although the term willingness to communicate may not seem a brand- new concept to be studied; however, the context in which it was implemented seems different in TBLT since willingness to communicative is enriched contextually. Task-based was

thought to improve the atmosphere for learners to practice social contexts of the communication. Consequently, this study intended to determine to what extent two different tasks (opinion exchange task and information gap task) based on task-based languageteaching would influence EFL learners' speaking ability and willingness to communicate. Moreover, it sought to investigate whether these would be able to improve (any or both of) these two variables or not. (Maftoon & Sarem, 2013).

Several researchers have tried to examine ways in which learners' willingness to communicate could be fostered so that they can use their language for communication (Zarrinabadi, 2014). These studies have found several psychological and linguistic variables that influence learners' willingness to communicate (Ellis, 2009). An interesting line of inquiry has been to investigate the effect of teacher activities on promoting learners' willingness to communicate. Past research has shown that tasks are useful ways to enhance the students' speaking ability. Thepresent study aimed at applying information-gap and opinion-exchange tasks forIranian EFL learners to explore their effectiveness in improving their willingness to communicate skills.

The objective of this study was examining the effect of information-gap and opinion- exchange tasks on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate. This studyactually aimed to find out whether different task types have the capacity to improve learners' willingness to communicate in the Iranian EFL context. Thus, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Does information-gap task have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate?

RQ2: Does opinion-exchange task have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate?

RQ3: Is there a significant difference between the effects of information-gap and opinion-exchange tasks on WTC?

Methodology

Design of the Study

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used to collect and analyze the data of the study, and to explore the impact of opinion-exchange and information-gap tasks on learners' L2

WTC.

Participants

A sample of 90 female language learners of 13 to 18 years of age, learning English as a Foreign Language in Koushesh Language Institute of Isfahan, were selected based on OPT as the participants of this study. They were homogenized in terms of language proficiency.

Instruments

Oxford Placement Test

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used to measure the participants' language proficiency. In fact, OPT was used to make sure about the participants' homogeneity prior to the application of the treatment.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as qualitative tools for data collection.

Willingness to Communicate Questionnaire

A self-report questionnaire was used for the aim of data collection at the quantitative phase of the study. The questionnaire was developed by MacIntyre et al. (2001). It comprises 26 items related to willingness to communicate inside the classroom. It has items assessing willingness to communicate in four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and comprehension. It is a Likert-type questionnaire ranging from 1 to 5, in which 1 is 'almost never willing' and 5 is 'almost always willing'.

Procedure

Data Collection Procedure

Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was first implemented for the selection of the homogeneous participants. The selected participants were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups.

Moreover, they were homogenized in terms of their willingness to communicate using their scores on a questionnaire developed by (MacIntyre et al., 2001).

In the next step, L2 learners' received treatments in one of the two experimental situations and were measured for their level of L2 WTC. Here, group A received information gap for a period of 16 sessions, while group B received opinion- exchange tasks. The control group received no task of specific type. At the end of the treatment, the participants filled a questionnaire on their WTC.

The experimental results, therefore, guided the development of a second, qualitative phase. The researcher developed and refined the qualitative research questions and implemented the qualitative phase in which semi-structured interview data were gathered and analyzed to assist the explanation and interpretation of the quantitative results. In the interviews, the participants were asked to talk their feelingstoward speaking in the classroom and the reasons for their feelings. Meanwhile,whenever the students referred to activities in the classroom, some probing questions were used.

Data Analysis Procedure

As mentioned above, there were three groups in the study and one dependent variable (WTC). Thus, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was usedto analyze the results of the quantitative phase. Then, Tukey post hoc test was used to examine the areas of difference between the groups. For the qualitative data, the qualitative content analysis by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to identify the major themes and reasons behind any possible effect of the two types of tasks on learners' willingness to communicate.

Results

The analysis of the data entailed the following tabulated results:

Table 1

T-test for the Comparison of Homogeneity

Levene's Test for Equalityof Variances		t-test for Equality of Mans				
		F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference

								Lower	Upper
VAR00001	Equal variances assumed	.014	.906	-.552	38	.584		-2.10101	1.20101
	Equal variancesnot assumed			-.552	37.984	.584		-2.10103	1.20103

According to the above table, there is no significant difference between the performances of the participants in the OPT (Sig. = 0.584 > 0.05). So, the participantswere all at the same level of proficiency prior to the treatment.

In order to investigate the effect of using information gap task oncommunicative willingness, two sets of one-way ANOVA were run. The first one was between the participants' scores of the three groups on pre-test and the second one between immediate post-tests of three groups. The descriptive statistics of pre-test are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Performance on Pre-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
Prettest of information gapgroup	30	1.3333	.72375	.18687	.9325	1.7341	.00	2.00
Prettest of opinion exchange tasks group	30	1.4000	.73679	.19024	.9920	1.8080	.00	3.00
Prettest of Control group	30	1.1333	.74322	.19190	.7217	1.5449	.00	2.00

| Total | 90 1.2889 | .72683 | .10835 | 1.0705 | 1.5073 | .00 3.00 |

According to Table 2, means of the three groups were almost the same. After collecting the data, ANOVA was performed using SPSS to see whether the differences between the three groups were significant or not. The results are presentedin Table 3 below.

Table 3

One-way ANOVA for Comparing the Performance of Groups

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*
Between Groups	.578	2	.289	.535	.589
Within Groups	22.667	42	.540		
Total	23.244	44			

According to Table 3, the mean differences between the three groups were notsignificant (Sig= 0.589). This shows that the participants in the three groups were at the same level of knowledge. Figure 1 below shows the graphical comparison of the two groups on the pre-test.

Figure 1

Graphical Representation of the Groups' Performance on the Pre-test
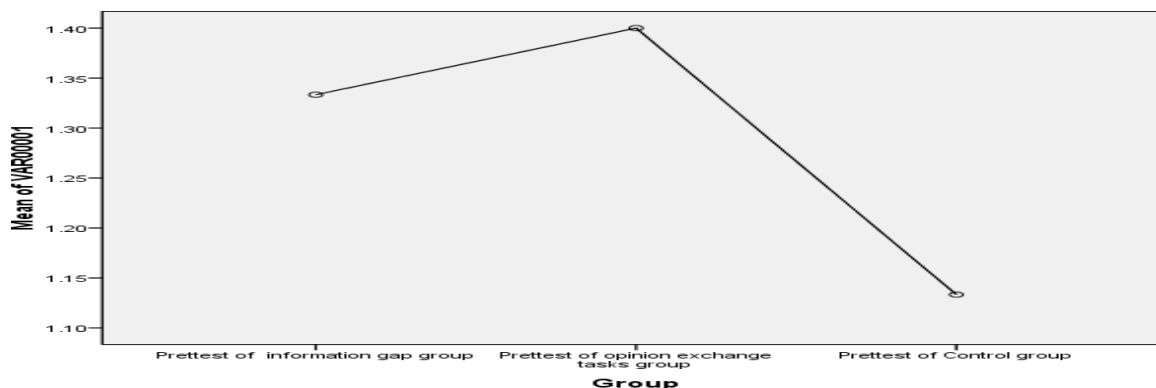
To illuminate where the significant differences exist among the groups, post hoc test (with an

alpha level of .05) was conducted. The results are shown in Table4.

Table 4

Post Hoc and Multiple Comparison of Three Groups

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Prettest of information gap group	Prettest of opinion exchange tasks group	-.06667	.26825	.967	-.7184	.5850
	Prettest of Control group	.20000	.26825	.738	-.4517	.8517
Prettest of opinion exchangetasks group	Prettest of information gap group	.06667	.26825	.967	-.5850	.7184
	Prettest of Control group	.26667	.26825	.585	-.3850	.9184
Prettest of Control group	Prettest of information gap group	-.20000	.26825	.738	-.8517	.4517
	Prettest of opinion exchange tasks group	-.26667	.26825	.585	-.9184	.3850

As the above table shows, there is no significant difference among the groups. The same statistical procedures were used for the post-test results. The results of statisticalanalysis of the post-test for the experimental and the control group are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for the Participants' Performance on the Post-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Posttest of information gap group	30	2.4667	.74322	.19190	2.0551	2.8783	1.00	4.00
Posttest of opinion exchange tasks group	30	3.8000	.41404	.10690	3.5707	4.0293	3.00	4.00
Posttest of Control group	30	1.6000	.73679	.19024	1.1920	2.0080	.00	3.00
Total	90	2.6222	1.11373	.16603	2.2876	2.9568	.00	4.00

The mean score of the first experimental group rose from 1.33 on the pre-test to 2.46 on the post-test, which shows improvement. The mean score of the second experimental group, increased from 1.40 on the pre-test to 3.80 on the post-test, which indicates an improvement more than what is observed in the first experimental group. The control group's mean score was also improved a bit. In order to find out whether there are statistically significant differences on the learners' performance in three groups, the post-test scores were submitted to a one-way ANOVA analysis with between-group factor. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

One-way ANOVA for Comparing the Performance of Groups (Post-Test)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	36.844	2	18.422	43.632	.000
Within Groups	17.733	42	.422		
Total	54.578	44			

As table 6 shows, the results (Sig=000) illustrated that the difference betweenthe performance of three groups is statistically significant. In other words, information adopinion gap activities had a supportive role in communicative learning. Toilluminate where the significant differences f a l l among the groups, post hoc test(with an alpha level of .05) was conducted. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Post Hoc and Multiple Comparison of Three Groups

| (I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Post-test of information gapgroup	Post-test of opinion exchange tasks group	-1.33333*	.23727	.000	-1.9098	-.7569
	Post-test of Control group	.86667*	.23727	.002	.2902	1.4431
Post-test of opinion exchange tasks group	Post-test of information gap group	-1.33333*	.23727	.000	.7569	1.9098
	Post-test of	2.20000*	.23727	.000	1.6236	2.7764

	Control group					
Post-test of Control group	Post-test of information gap group	-.86667[*]	.23727	.002	-1.4431	-.2902
	Post-test of opinion exchange tasks group	-2.20000[*]	.23727	.000	-2.7764	-1.6236

The results revealed that information-gap and opinion-exchange outperformed the control group. It can be concluded that information-gap and opinion exchange activities had a significant and meaningful effect on participants' learning, but opinion-exchange task was more effective. Figure 2 shows the graphical comparison of the two groups on the post-test.

Figure 2

The Graphical Representation of the Groups' Performance on the Post-test
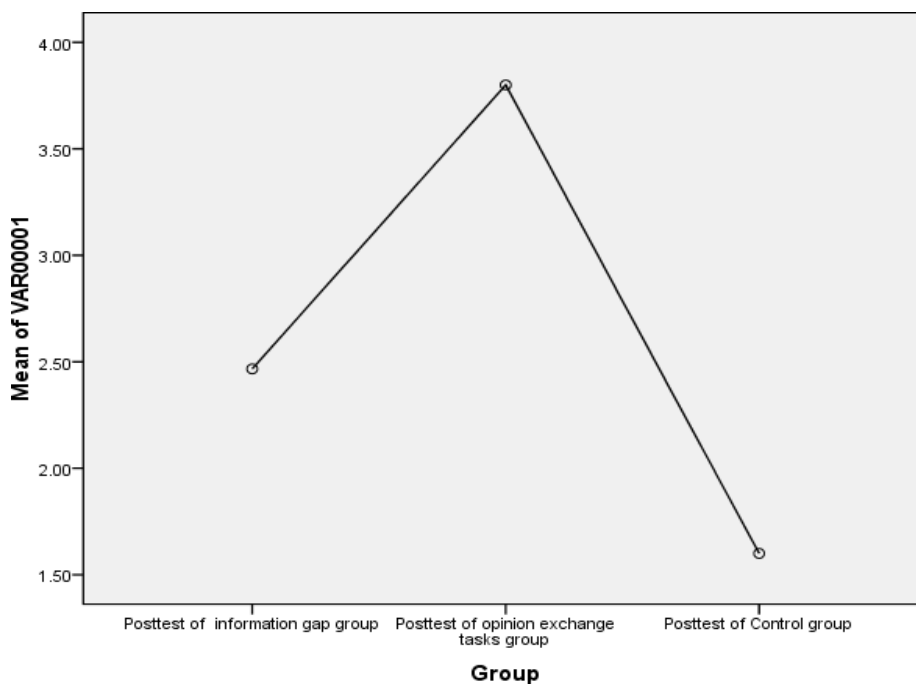
Discussion

In this section, the obtained results mentioned above are discussed in order to find answers to the research questions.

Addressing the First Research Question

The results revealed that the participants' WTC was enhanced, e.i. information-gap tasks were useful in improving the learners' WTC in EFL context. This is in line with a number of studies which have come to the conclusion that information-gap tasks have positive effect on enhancing teaching and learning practices. Fallahi et al. (2015), for instance, found that information-gap tasks were very effective on EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. The finding is also in line with that of Fatemipour and Mohammadi (2014)who specifically investigated the impact of using information-gap activities on improving EFL elementary learners' willingness to communicate. They reached a significant effect of these tasks on enhancing EFL learners' WTC, too. This finding of the present study also lends support to those of Kang and Pica (2006) who claimed that information gap tasks were a crucial component, and Fulmer (2010) who observed that significant differences exist between those who use tasks for enhancing theirwillingness to communicate in daily life and those who do not.

Addressing the Second Research Question

Regarding the second research question, 'Do opinion-exchange tasks have any significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' WTC?', the obtained results proved to the positive and thus support the findings of previously-conducted studies. For example, Fallahi et al. (2015) revealed that the opinion-exchange task was very effective on reading ability for a few reasons. Marzban and Hashemi (2013) too concluded that opinion-exchange task boosts Iranian intermediate EFL learners speaking ability. They reported that students who used opinion-exchange tasks were more motivated and interested in speaking than the others.

Addressing the Third Research Question

The results revealed that opinion-exchange task was more effective than information-gap task. This can be due to the belief that this type of task requires the learners' desire to speak their minds about a topic.So, the learners find the need to say something and this is where this need demands them to be more willing to communicate. The same finding was obtained in Fallahi et al.'s (2015) study which was carried out in an Iranian context to see if the impact of information-gap and opinion- exchange tasks have any effects on reading comprehension improvement of

Iranian EFL learner. These researchers found that opinion-exchange task was more effective than the information-gap task for a few reasons: They claimed that they observed real personal involvement, with an accompanying increase in confidence and fluency. Further, students talked about their opinions and preferences while at the same time wanted to convince their partners that their idea was the best idea.

Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effects of two tasks proposed by TBLT scholars on Iranian EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). According to the results, it was observed that the tasks under the study had positive impacts on the learners' willingness to communicate, and that through information-gap tasks, the participants demonstrated more willingness to communicate than members of the control group. Regarding the second type of task, i.e. opinion-exchange task, the participants showed far more willingness to communicate in the sense that they were too enthusiastic to speak their minds. Moreover, their attempt to advance in proposing their opinions was noteworthy. It was, in fact, revealed that they indicated far more willingness for communication than the participants of the other experimental group (information-gap group).

The findings of this study can be taken into account by Iranian EFL teachers in taking tasks to their classrooms. They can be a help in making links between TBLT to promote EFL learners' willingness to communicate. Also, opinion-exchange tasks can be used by EFL teachers in classrooms with higher levels of proficiency, since these students are more proficient and have no problem speaking in English. In addition, the findings can be used by textbook designers and syllabus practitioners in incorporating tasks which better render communication. In so doing, they can use information-gap and opinion-exchange tasks since this study, along with previous studies, proved that they can result in fair amount of willingness to communicate. Moreover, teachers can use the present findings in their classrooms to have a more dynamic environment which submit better results.

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