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Improving the Fluency of the Iranian EFL Learners' Oral Performance through Task Variation

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Abstract

Researchers have extensively studied factors that impact the development of fluency in L2 oral production while there is scant evidence regarding task variation-related effects. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the effects of task variation involving group dialogue, dialogue unscrambling, and dialogue completion on Iranian EFL learners' oral speech fluency. To this end, 80 EFL learners were assigned to three experimental groups (EXG1, EXG2, and EXG3) and one control group shown as CONG. The EXG1 was treated by three tasks, i. e., dialogue completion, dialogue unscrambling, and group dialogue, the EXG2 through two tasks involving dialogue completion and dialogue unscrambling, the EXG3 by dialogue unscrambling task, and the CONG was instructed by teacher conventional method. The groups were pretested and posttested through the speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET). The participants' interview transcriptions were then coded for scoring and statistical analysis of fluency to show the effects of treatment for each group. The four groups received their required instructions for ten sessions. The findings revealed that task variation made significant differences in the learners' oral fluency achievement. The analyses made through running ANOVA and Post Hoc yielded to the conclusion that EXG1, instructed through a combination of the three tasks, outperformed the other groups regarding fluency achievement. The findings of this study have pedagogical implications for teachers, EFL learners, and syllabus designers.

Keywords: EFL learners, fluency, L2 oral performance, task variation

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1. Introduction

Speaking is an important part of teaching of any foreign language, and as a critical skill in learning a language by most of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It is referred to as a modified communicative activity that requires English spoken language to achieve a particular goal or objective in the English language medium. Learners' achievement in learning a language is measured in terms of their accomplishment in oral communication (Bohn, 2015; Crowther, Trofimovich, Isaacs, & Saito, 2015). Given Masuram and Sripada's (2020) viewpoints, learners' ability to speak a language requires not only their knowledge of producing specific points of language including grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also their understanding and awareness of when, why, in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence). Albino (2017) argues that a good speaker synthesizes these skills and knowledge to get success in certain speech situations or acts. Therefore, speaking is more complex than it appears to be and involves more than just pronouncing single words. Speaking is thought of as a skill to reveal thoughts and opinions to others orally both directly and indirectly. Richard and Rodgers (2014) argue that communicating with others through the spoken language using learner's already existing linguistic and communicative resources is viewed the basis for language acquisition in task based language teaching.

Over the last two decades, the term Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has played a vital role in teaching English and continued to draw attention of language teachers and researchers (Ellis, 2003). It relies upon the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching and task is an activity that involves individuals in using language for the purpose of achieving a particular goal or outcome in a particular situation. Garcia-Ponce (2017) points to tasks as instructional materials which shape learners' quantitative and qualitative aspects of language performance inspired by the emergence of two dominant communicative approaches of language including communicative language teaching and task-based instruction. He also claims that the nature, design, and methodological requirements of these established models are influential in learners' demands of cognitive processing to perform the tasks and achieve their purpose, and determine the learners' language performance quantitatively and qualitatively. Roohani, Forootanfar, and Hashemian (2017) indicate that tasks have differential impacts on language learners' general tendency to communicate effectively in L2 and performing various tasks can affect L2 learners' tendency to speak.

Rosmawati (2014) noted that studies on the effects of tasks on learners' language performance with a focus on the feature of fluency was motivated by Ellis (2003) by assuming that the rationale for task-based courses and syllabuses proposed by researchers and educationalists is explained by a variety of arguments: first and the most important argument is based on the theoretical view that instruction must be compatible with the cognitive processes involved in L2 acquisition; second, the importance of learner engagement is stressed in that tasks involve learners cognitively and motivate them for learning because, cognitively speaking, according to Ellis (2003, 2017), Feneey (2006), and Van den Branden (2016), communicative tasks engage learners in information-processing activities resulting in effective language use and language acquisition.

1.2 Statement of Problem and Purpose of the Study

Despite the significance of fluent speech development, it is a challenge for many language teachers in EFL contexts to engage learners in speaking activities to foster their fluency in speech. Therefore, a majority of EFL learners have low generic skills in English language fluency or do not gain mastery in oral proficiency, in particular, in fluency aspect of speaking, resulting in their weakness at producing fluent speech (Dahmardeh, 2011; Noora, 2008). They contribute this failure mostly to the nature and capacity of the teaching practices, discrepancy between skills and teaching methods favored by non-English majors and teachers' intuitions, EFL learners' tendency towards a more traditional classroom work and teaching method. EFL educational contexts, as Dolati and Seliman (2011) and Karami, Jafarigohar, Tajeddin, and Rouhi (2017) stated, do not necessarily cater for the learners' communicative needs. Therefore, students who study English in such a background fail to engage fluently in conversations in real-world situations and a majority of them finds it difficult to improve oral fluency skill in the target language in school or university context.

According to Masuram and Sripada (2020), the primary objective of learning a foreign language is gaining the ability to communicate both in written and spoken modes. Enhancing learners' ability to speak in a target language requires teaching and training with strategies and methodologies which the students should learn at college level. They found pedagogical factors responsible for learners' poor speaking skills and contributed EFL learners' deficiency in speaking to the training programs which fall short of effectively need-based training to enhance their speaking skills. They also claimed that teaching and learning of English has emphasized more on reading and writing skills, rather than listening

and speaking skills. Therefore, they emphasized improving EFL leaners' oral fluency in the target language through task-based language teaching.

Recognizing tasks as the main sources of language input for EFL learners in oral speech classrooms, this study was another step in a continuous line of inquiry aiming at investigating task varieties that have hardly ever been examined before for their effects on variation in second language (L2) oral speech fluency. The significance of this study is paramount as it may contribute to the designing and employment of task variations in the improvement of L2 oral fluency performance and offer explanations as to how the application of these tasks, i. e., dialogue unscrambling, group dialogue, and dialogue completion, may affect learners' oral speech fluency. Therefore, the findings may increase understanding on the nature of learners' oral proficiency in a non-native English-speaking country, particularly Iran. The main research purpose was therefore to examine the effect of task variation on Iranian EFL learners' oral speech fluency.

Drawing on the variables based on which the study was designed and carried out, the following research question was posed to serve the purpose of the study:

Q: Does task variation have any significant impact on the fluency of Iranian EFL learners' oral performance?

According to the aforementioned research question, the following null hypothesis was offered.

H0: There are no differences in the oral speech fluency scores of Iranian EFL learners instructed by various tasks.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1. Fluency as One Dimension of Speaking

Fluency as one of the essential features of speaking skill, in a broad sense, is considered as a synonym of overall proficiency in a language. This sense of the term is common among learners who wish to become fluent in a language (Michel, 2017). Fluency, according to Leonard (2015), refers to quantifiable aspects of speech including speech rate, pauses, repair, and mean length of run. Oral speech rate is usually calculated by counting the number of words (Browne & Fulcher, 2017; Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004b; Hilton, 2008), semantic units including words and partial words (Mota, 2003), or syllables (Kormos & Denes, 2004) produced within a second or minute. Pauses embrace both silence and non-lexica fillers in speech. Repair in oral speech, as Iwashita, Brown, McNamara, and O'Hagan (2008) state, involves features including repetitions, replacements, reformulations, and false starts which occur in speech. Mean length of run is concerned with the average number of words or syllables between pauses (De Jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2015; Prefontaine, 2010). Accounts on studies (Huhta, Kallio, Ohranen, & Ullakonoja, 2019), the learners' ability to manipulate speak relies upon both linguistic features involving pause and other factors, namely, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and non-linguistic features referring to the perceived quality of interaction between the learner and an interviewer.

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) highlighted two main approaches for assessing fluency in oral performance: obtaining ratings by providing general descriptors of different levels of accuracy and fluency; calculating various discourse based measures. Due to the practical way of measuring learners' language and high face validity, language testers employ the first approach, which is based on how language learners are able to communicate. In contrast, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers tend to use the second approach in order to obtain precise measures of the different aspects (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018).). Studies on fluency within the field of SLA has focused on two general criteria. Some studies focused on the measurement of quantifiable aspects whereas some other studies reflected on elements that affect evaluation of learners' fluency by the listeners. Lintunen, Mutta, and Peltonen (2020) proposed that fluency can be measured based on two main features: temporal measures which consider speed of delivery and hesitation markers that relate to dyfluency like repetitions and false starts.

Fluency, in light of Leonard's (2015) classification, falls into three zones of perceived, utterance, and cognitive ones. Perceived fluency, referring to the impression that a listener has of a speaker's fluency (Lintunen, Mutta, & Peltonen, 2020), is a manner of subjective reaction to individuals' speech in that different listeners may have different reactions to or impression on the same speech (Huhta, Kallio, Ohranen, & Ullakonoja, 2019). Utterance fluency entails quantifiable features of one's oral speech comprising rate, pauses, repair, and mean length of run which occur in individuals' speech (Kormos & Denes, 2004; Préfontaine, 2010). Segalowitz (2010) points to cognitive fluency as a participant's ability to efficiently plan and assemble an utterance, which embraces components such as its content,

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vocabulary, and grammatical form. De Jong, Groenhout, Schoonen, and Hulstijn (2015) explain that this feature cannot be directly measured in that it is an abstract phenomenon and a mental processing.

2.2 Task Varieties: Their Focus and Trends

Long (2014) offered a classification of varieties of tasks based upon their effect on individuals' language development and how they incite learners' engagement and participation in language learning environments. One-way versus two-way, open versus closed, convergent versus divergent, resource-directing versus resource-depleting, planned versus unplanned, familiar, and mixed proficiency tasks fall into this classification.

The one-way tasks involve individual share of providing information on a task in order to perform it (Fujii & Mackay, 2009), differentiated from the two-way tasks requiring collective participation or group engagement to serve the purpose of the task requirements (Gass, Mackay, & Ross-Feldman, 2005). The open tasks, requiring interlocutors to supply a variety of choices for a task and create further opportunities for extended turns at talk (Skehan, 1998), are distinguished from the closed types of tasks, which need learners or interlocutors in a communication context to give a finite number of choices as correct solutions. Long (2014) highlighted the resource-directing tasks to refer to their capacity for creating and enhancing further attentional demands in participants through the integration of similar procedures and language components (Robinson & Gilbert, 2007). Resource-depleting tasks, in contrast, aim at extending procedural demands fulfilled by breaking participants' focus on or attention to finite, more straightforward, and distinguished steps rising from the task requirements (Révész, 2011).

Convergent task trend is explained by its capacity of providing chances to learners in a speaking context in order to come to a compromise or consensus to a solution for a problem to complete a task. It is distinguished from the divergent type of tasks in that the latter incites greater opportunities for negotiation among interlocutors in a communicative context by asking them, to name some, to debate or argue for and against some subjects (Abdollahzadeh, 2010). The planned tasks allow learners to have some time to think and organize their mind and language to perform the task they are given to complete or fulfill while the unplanned tasks do not usually allow for time provision before beginning to perform task. The familiar class of pedagogic tasks are, according to Shintani (2012), characterized by having learners achieve further negotiation and better comprehension owing to their familiarity with the content of the task. These tasks are also said to help individuals gain improved fluency and higher accuracy in language. Mixed proficiency tasks, referring to Kim and McDonough's (2008) report, encourage negotiation among interlocutors in communication contexts and enable them to cope with more language problems.

2.3 Dialogue Unscrambling Task

Dialogue unscrambling task is some sort of conversation practice through which students are exposed to some related chunks of a conversation in scrambled form via which they need to get involved in individual or collective groups to order the chunks to make a cohesive representation of conversation (Chapelle, Chung, Hegelheimer, & Pendar, 2010). This type of task is thought of as being a sample of both one-way and two-way task (Mackey, 2012). The results of studies by Chun (2006), Lanteigne (2017), Mukundan and Khojasteh (2011), Yeh and Yang (2011), and Bravo Aburto, Alemán Ampie, and Munguia Molina (2019) have counted on unscrambling tasks in EFL classes as tools to foster learners' ability to focus on the words, sentences, and the structure of the dialogue simultaneously and produce more meaningful interaction between learners as accomplished in pairs or groups. In addition, they noted that students are motivated to finish the task successfully due to its game-element feature and following some more challenging tasks such as role-play. These exercises are said to be easy to prepare on the part of the teacher but challenging to fulfill on the part of learners (Lanteigne, 2017). According to Ellis (2003), Mackey (2012), Nezakat-Alhossaini, Youhanaee, and Moinzadeh (2014), and Zalbidea (2021), this task may sometimes encourage interaction that takes place among learners in a class to complete a task or achieve a goal. It is also assumed that it creates a share of responsibility between two individuals or among learners to complete a task.

2.4 Group Dialogue Task

Group dialogue task refers to collective activities which are designed to have students focus on or get involved in interactive activities. According to Bilbrough (2007) and Chapelle, Chung, Hegelheimer, and Pendar (2010), these interactive comprehension and production activities are carefully designed for maximum appeal to students and facilitate various role-plays and other interactive activities. This task is more referred to as a reciprocal task requiring interaction among participants and share of responsibility among learners to get involved in a learning activity in order to complete the task. As stated by Ellis (2017) and Toghroli and Afraz (2021), this task creates more opportunities for

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extended turns at talk, facilitates negotiation of meaning, promotes comprehension, resulting in more complex, and sometimes, more accurate language. The results of a number of studies conducted by Jamshidnejad (2010), Lee and Park (2008), Oradee (2012), Sotoudehnama and Hashamdar (2016), Soureshjani and Ghanbri (2012), and Thornbury (2005) on group discussions revealed that this oral task intervention is effective on oral proficiency improvement and learners tend to have positive attitudes toward it; in addition, it arouses the learners to use and activate their background information and experiences appropriately. Looking at this oral task more meticulously, it can be concluded that it has some features such as different types of learners' interaction, competition to take the floor, turns, and spontaneous talks (Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019).

2.5 Dialogue Completion Task

Dialogue completion task is referred to as a productive skill in which some parts of a conversation are left blank out of which students are required to fill in the blanks to complete the conversation. This sort of completion exercise can be guided by either individual or collective practice (Aikaterini & Makrina, 2022; Donald, 2010). Yuzkiv, Ivanenko, Marchenko, Kosharna, and Medvid (2020) recognize the importance of exposing learners to dialogue and dialogue completion exercises in EFL contexts where students experience samples of real-life speech and encounter the way speech is used in real-life contexts fulfilled in pairs or through an individual manner. Van der Veen, van Kruistum, and Michaels (2015) highlight the effective use of dialogue completion in speaking classes by stating that students get involved in roleplaying contexts, find rooms for practicing and learning new vocabulary and sentence structure, and scaffolding learning is initiated and encouraged by dialogue representation which results in improved conversation ability.

2.6 Empirical Research on Oral Performance with a Focus on Fluency

Teng (2007) carried out an experiment to see how three varieties of task, i.e., answering questions, presentation, and picture description would influence learners' fluency performance. The statistical analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data showed that there were significant differences in the test-takers' performance scores on the variable of fluency. Likewise, it was revealed that the subjects scored significantly higher for answering questions than for the other two task varieties.

Witton-Davies (2013) explored the impact of two varieties of task administration on EFL learners' variability in fluency, which involved monologue versus dialogic tasks in speaking. To measure L2 oral fluency performance, the learners were exposed to an individual picture story (as one task) and a discussion task carried out in pairs. Given the findings of the experiment, it was concluded that dialogue discussion performed in pairs led to higher speech rates than the monologue picture stories. The result of the study, based on the longitudinal study, indicated the subjects who received dialogue discussion task showed notable improvement in speech rates than those of the monologue storytelling task.

Askari and Langroudi (2014) investigated the effectiveness of employing Ur's model (2009) comparatively versus the teacher routine method on EFL learners' fluency in oral speech. Given the results obtained from the oral performance of the candidates under the two types of tasks, there was evidence in favor of Ur's model in enhancing EFL learners' fluency skill in speaking in that it was reported that students could find a chance to comprehend further information, associate it with other ideas and involve new ideas into their background knowledge. The findings of their study, which provided an empirical evidence for Ur's model, involved mechanical and communicative practice which, in turn, encouraged fluency enhancement.

Safari Vesal, Safari Vesal, and Tavakoli (2015) examined how the three task varieties of introduction, long monologue (descriptive task), and discussion would affect Iranian EFL learners' fluency as far as the findings in fluency were concerned. It was reported that the descriptive variety of task played the most influential role in enhancing fluency skill of others. It was indicated the candidates instructed through descriptive task experienced the highest performance of all on fluency. The indications of this enhancement were the decrease in the number of repetitions in their productions and more comprehensibility of speech.

Albino (2017) delved into the probable improvement in oral fluency through the medium of task-based instruction involving task variety in the case of EFL learners. The EFL learners in this investigation were assessed by being engaged in tasks that promoted meaning making and focus on linguistic forms through the use of recasts and prompting. Positive results were found and reported on the impact of exposure to task variety on the learners' fluency improvement. It was also stressed that the speech fluency enhancement was achieved by maximizing the speed of

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speech production, improving grammatical accuracy, elaborating on their utterances, and developing interactional language.

Masuram and Sripada (2020) reported significant changes in students' oral fluency by exposing them to task-based interventions which were completed through engaging learners in communication tasks in order to complete a task and achieve a goal. The communicative tasks completion activities allowed the learners to interact with others in classrooms and participate in conversation in meaningful situations.

Nget, Pansri, and Poohongthong (2020) delved into the effectiveness of engaging EFL students in communicative tasks on their speaking skills through an experimental research. The quantitative and qualitative data collected through administering speaking tests revealed that the task-based instructional materials significantly improved learners' speaking skills in general and two sub-skills of accuracy and fluency.

Chen (2021) conducted a similar experiment through the medium of oral production tasks, in which learners were assigned to create seven five-minute video productions in English using their mobile phone camera on topics specified by the teacher. The findings suggested that the exercises were successful in enhancing students' English-speaking skills, and they showed good ability in producing fluent oral speech and grammatical accuracy.

Darrashiri and Mazdayasna (2021) conducted a study to explore the impact of task-based language teaching on the enhancement of EFL learners' productive skills through engaging them in oral presentations throughout the treatment sessions. The qualitative and quantitative findings of the experiment shed light on the positive effects of TBLT on the improvement of the participants' productive skills with a focus on their fluent speech and accurate grammar. By exposing the learners to oral presentations throughout the semester, positive evidences of language accuracy and oral fluency were obtained.

Kong, Lai, Deng, and Wang's (2022) collected summaries of the prior studies evidenced the positive impacts and advantages of task-based instructional programs on learners' oral speed and fluency. They argued that the enhancement of students' speaking abilities in some environments, where English is viewed as a foreign language and learners have low levels of using English in their daily life, exposing learners to communicative tasks works well and benefits to their oral fluency achievement. These findings, furthermore, assumed that interactions between tasks probably helped learners achieve some levels of fluency output in speaking (Rohani, 2011).

Conclusive results were also obtained and revealed on employing and practicing the TBLT method in teaching English in terms of its impact on improving EFL learners' oral fluency and oral proficiency. Gindo and kawo (2019), Nugrahaeni (2022), and Siyi and Patamadilok (2021) showed the effective results of communicative tasks and task-based instructional programs in helping learners improve their speaking fluency, foster students' interaction, and also learn independently. There are evidences of individual tasks and pair tasks examined in these studies, the most notable of which are listing, ordering and sorting, comparison and contrast, problem-solving, project and creative tasks, and sharing of personal experiences.

In spite of the foregoing studies, inconsistent results were reported by Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010), who scrutinized the potential impact of two varieties of task on the fluency performance among learners whose language was other than English. They concluded contrary results on the effects of task varieties on speech fluency enhancement. It was shown that the learners' speaking fluency remained unaffected after the treatment as it was in the case of other two constructs of speaking including accuracy and complexity. Their findings in this regard are found to be in line with the results achieved by Tavakoli and Foster (2008), who reported that task variety did not yield to any improvement in the fluency aspect of the language production. To account for their findings, Tavakoli and Foster (2008) explained that monologic-based tasks make greater demands on attentional resources than interactive tasks.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted through an experimental method, meeting the requirements of pretest, posttest, randomization of the participants, treatment for the experimental groups, and placebo for the control group. The independent variable of the study is task variation and the dependent variable includes fluency in oral speech. Task variation involves three different varieties of tasks, i.e., dialogue completion, group dialogue, and dialogue unscrambling. EXG1, EXG2, and EXG3 were determined as the experimental groups and the CONG was considered as the control group. EXG1 was treated through a variation of three tasks (dialogue completion, dialogue unscrambling, and group dialogue, EXG2 by means of a variety of two tasks (dialogue completion plus dialogue

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unscrambling tasks, i.e., a variation between two types of tasks), EXG3 received treatment by a single task (dialogue unscrambling), and the CONG was instructed by the teacher routine method. Both the experimental and control groups sat for a pretest before treatment and a posttest after treatment.

3.1 Participants

The participants included 80 EFL learners at intermediate level majoring in English Language Translation at the Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon branch. Of the participants, 45 were female and 35 were male. Their age range was from 19 to 28. They were all Persian-speaking students. Their level of English language proficiency was determined according to their scores on Oxford Placement Test (OPT). In order to obtain a homogenized group, OPT was administered to 101 EFL learners, out of whom eighty were selected based on their scores of the test, that is, the students whose scores were 40 to 47 on OPT were selected as the target participants of the study. This criterion for determining learners' level of proficiency is documented by OPT score table which stipulates that students with the score range from 40 to 47 out 60 are considered as intermediate level of proficiency. The sampling assignment was completed through stratified random manner, through which the participants, including male and female, were assigned to four groups, each of whom comprised 20 ones.

3.2 Instruments

The first instrument used in this study was Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the purpose of which was to assess students' language proficiency. This test contained 60 multiple-choice items for vocabulary, grammar, and language use ones. The second data-gathering instrument employed was the speaking section of Preliminary English Test (PET), administered as the pretest and posttest (Hashemi & Thomas, 2010). It included four parts of oral questions. It took about 12 minutes for each candidate to answer the oral questions of the speaking section of the test. There were two raters (i.e. the researcher herself and an expert, a Ph.D. in TEFL as a university lecturer), but each participant interacted with one of them. The candidates responded to oral speaking questions. To estimate the reliability of PET (as the instrument for the pretest and posttest in this study) in an EFL context like Iran, it was administered to fifteen Iranian EFL students other than the target group participants, having the same characteristics as the target group participants in this study. Its reliability was measured through Cronbach alpha which represented a high index (0.81).

3.3 Materials for Teaching

The teaching material selected for the four groups involved in this research work comprised 20 samples of conversation passages extracted from Interchange 2 as an English conversation and speaking source written for speaking and listening skills. To serve the requirement of each group in terms of teaching material, the participants of different groups were exposed to two conversation passages during any single session of oral speech instruction. The conversation sample texts as teaching material were all of nearly equal length.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

First, to assign a homogenized group, OPT was administered to 101 EFL students majoring in English, through which 80 were selected as intermediate target participants. Then they were assigned to four 20-person groups involving EXG1, EXG2, EXG3, as experimental groups, and CONG as the control group. The groups were given the speaking part of PET as pretest. The participants' oral performance was recorded, transcribed, and then measured based on the component of fluency according to the measuring scale for fluency: fluency was measured according to the model given by Bygate (2010) through counting the number of repetitions, false starts, reformulations, and replacements per t-unit. As the mentioned factors are the sign of dyfluency rather than fluency, so in the calculation the less the obtained results, the better the fluency would be.

Next, all groups went through ten sessions of speaking instruction involving one session every week and each session lasted for one hour and thirty minutes. The participants in EXG1 were treated by a variation of three different tasks consisting of dialogue completion, dialogue unscrambling, and group dialogue. Each session of oral practice as treatment lasted one hour and thirty minutes by assigning it into three 30-minute time span and each of the three tasks was instructed within a thirty-minute time span. The first thirty minutes of the treatment session was spent on dialogue completion, the second section of the session within the same time period on dialogue unscrambling task practice, and the final thirty minutes was devoted to group dialogue task, during which the subjects were given chance to practice dialogue orally using the language resources available to them accompanied by teacher's monitoring and supporting role.

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EXG2 was treated through a variation of two tasks involving dialogue completion and dialogue unscrambling. To this end, each session of oral practice was equally divided into two 45-minute halves, either of which was devoted to one task practice. The participants were given two dialogue samples to do unscrambling activity with them in order to complete them as meaningful samples of conversation. As another task practice, they were given the same samples of dialogue patterns and asked to complete some incomplete parts of the dialogues. The teacher as researcher allowed them to complete the tasks both in pairs and in isolation.

The participants in EXG3 received their speaking instruction through one single task of dialogue unscrambling. They were offered two samples of conversation, through which they were asked to do the unscrambling activity with the scrambled dialogue patterns during each session of treatment. The participants were allowed to work individually or interactively to complete the task they were supposed to fulfill. The participants in the CONG were instructed through the same material and within the same time period but a method different from the other groups. This method involved teacher conventional or routine procedure for instructing oral speech which entailed practices such as reading aloud the conversation texts and follow-up questions activity.

After the completion of the treatment sessions for the experimental groups and placebo for the control group, the same oral proficiency test (PET, speaking section) was given as posttest. Each participant' interview both through the pretest and posttest took 10 to 12 minutes, and interviews were recorded to avoid the probable loss of data. Like the pretest, the participants' transcriptions were coded for scoring and statistical analysis of fluency by using Bygate's (2010) model which involved counting the number of repetitions, false starts, reformulations, and replacements per t-unit.

3.5 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 16. The null hypothesis in this study was analyzed through running One-way ANOVA. The alpha level for significance testing was set at .05.

4. Results

This study was designed to examine the effects of task variation on EFL learners' oral speech fluency. The results of the oral proficiency test (PET) and ANOVA statistical analyses were reported separately on the measures for fluency for the experimental and control groups. It needs to be mentioned that before conducting the relevant statistical analyses, the normality in the distribution of the participants' scores on OPT was taken into consideration. The results are represented through Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the participants' scores on OPT

N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Variance	Std. Error of Mean
80	96.48	22.00	168.00	142.00	2779.13	5.45

The mean score of the participants was 96.48 and those students whose scores on the OPT were 40 to 47 on OPT were selected as the target participants to serve the purpose of the study.

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Table 2. Result of the normality test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Vocab. Equal Variances Assumed	0.08	0.76	2.84	76	0.00	1.84
Equal Variances not assumed			2.84	75.24	0.00	1.84

According to Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in Table 2, it is shown that the variance of participants on OPT is normal (F = 0.08, p= 0.76).

4.1 Investigating the Research Question

In order to show whether there existed any differences in the oral speech fluency scores of the participants in the four groups (EXG1, EXG2, EXG3, and CONG), a one-way ANOVA was run among the groups' pretest scores on oral fluency. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on fluency pretest

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
EXG1	20	3.56	0.54	0.12	3.31	3.82	2.83	4.85
EXG2	20	3.43	0.50	0.11	3.20	3.67	2.50	4.33
EXG3	20	3.44	0.56	0.12	3.17	3.70	2.50	4.85
CONG	20	3.29	0.45	0.10	3.08	3.51	2.50	4.42
Total	80	3.43	0.51	0.05	3.32	3.55	2.50	4.85

As demonstrated in Table 3, the fluency mean scores of the four groups during their pre-test do not show significant differences. In order to elaborate on this, the inferential results are represented in Table 4.

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Table 4. ANOVA test of pretest in fluency

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	0.72	3	0.24	0.89	0.44
Within Groups	20.46	76	0.26		
Total	21.18	79			

According to Table 4, it is revealed that there are not any significant differences among the groups' performance on oral speech fluency (F =0.89, P = 0.44 > 0.05). In order to show the effect of treatment on the groups' achievement in oral speech fluency, another ANOVA was run on the participants' posttest scores, the descriptive results of which are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics on posttest in fluency

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
EXG1	20	2.02	.22	0.05	1.91	2.12	1.45	2.80
EXG2	20	2.42	.46	0.10	2.20	2.64	2.00	3.40
EXG3	20	2.82	.52	0.11	2.58	3.07	2.00	3.85
CONG	20	2.92	.42	0.09	2.72	3.12	2.25	3.85
Total	80	2.55	.55	0.06	2.42	2.67	1.45	3.85

As presented in Table 5, the mean scores of the EXG1, EXG2, EXG3, and CONG in the posttest are all different from each other and lower than those of the pretest scores. Therefore, in the calculation procedure of oral speech fluency, the less the obtained results, the better the fluency would be (Bygate, 2010). To show whether the groups are significantly different in their achievement in oral fluency after the treatment, the inferential results are given in Table 6.

Table 6. ANOVA test of posttest in fluency

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	10.20	3	3.40	10.70	0.00
Within Groups	13.82	76	0.18		
Total	24.03	79			

As shown in Table 6, the results elicited from running a one-way ANOVA point to significant differences in the oral speech fluency scores among the groups after the treatment provided by task variation. (F = 10.70 > 1.00, P = .00 < 0.05. Accordingly, the null hypothesis, which says instructing the EFL learners through task variation does not yield to any significant differences in the fluency scores, is rejected. It is concluded that task variation is effective on

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learners' achievement in oral speech fluency. In order to locate the differences in the four groups' oral speech fluency performance, a post hoc analysis was conducted, the inferential results of which are illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7. Post Hoc test result on fluency

(I) Taskvariation	(J) Taskvariation	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
EXG1	EXG2	-0.40*	0.13	0.03	-0.78	-0.01
	EXG3	-0.80*	0.13	0.00	-1.19	-0.41
	CONG	-0.90*	0.13	0.00	-1.28	-0.51
EXG2	EXG1	0.40*	0.13	0.03	0.01	0.78
	EXG3	-0.40*	0.13	0.03	-0.78	-0.01
	CONG	-0.49*	0.13	0.00	-0.88	-0.11
EXG3	EXG1	0.80*	0.13	0.00	0.41	1.19
	EXG2	0.40*	0.13	0.03	0.01	0.78
	CONG	-0.09	0.13	0.91	-0.48	0.29
CONG	EXG1	0.90*	0.13	0.00	0.51	1.28
	EXG2	0.49*	0.13	0.00	0.11	0.88
	EXG3	0.09	0.13	0.91	-0.29	0.48

As presented in Table 7, the level of significance between EXG1 and EXG2, EXG1 and EXG3, EXG1 and CONG is lower than 0.05, indicating that the groups in pairs are significantly different after the treatment. Likewise, the level of significance between EXG2 and EXG3, EXG2 and CONG indicates significant differences between the groups after the treatment completion. However, it is revealed that there is no significant level of difference between EXG3 and CONG, showing the two groups are not different after the treatment. Referring to the post-hoc statistical analyses of the groups and their mean scores, EXG1 treated by a variation of three different tasks outperformed the other three groups in oral speech fluency achievement.

5. Discussion

The present study was designed to shed light on our understanding of the impact of task variation on the fluency skill of the intermediate EFL learners' oral speech. To investigate the impact of task variation, 80 intermediate students were assigned to three experimental groups including EXG1, EXG2, EXG3, and one control group shown as CONG, each of which comprised 20 participants. According to the findings, the changes in fluency measures were statistically significant among the four groups. It was indicated that there were significant differences in the oral fluency performance of the groups instructed by various tasks. The results elicited from the ANOVA statistical analyses showed that task variation was effective on the learners' speech fluency and yielded to their enhancement in oral fluency. Relying on these findings, the null hypothesis formulated based upon the supposition that instructing learners through task variation did not lead to significant differences in their performance on speech fluency was rejected. Likewise, the results of post hoc analyses yielded to the conclusion that there were significant levels of difference among the groups' enhancement in fluency after the treatment fulfillment. It was shown that the EXG1, treated through

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a variety of three tasks, i.e., dialogue completion, dialogue unscrambling, and group dialogue, achieved higher improvement in oral fluency than the other three groups.

In this regard, the findings of the present study are, in a way, in line with the results of the studies by Askari and Langroudi (2014), Safari Vesal, Safari Vesal, and Tavakoli (2015), Teng (2007), and Witton-Davis (2013), through which they explored and reported the impact of varieties of task administration on EFL learners' variability in fluency, involving monologue versus dialogic tasks in oral speech. They reported that exposing learners to task varieties had a positive impact on their enhancement of oral speech fluency and made notable changes in their achievement in the fluency dimension of speaking.

The findings of the current study are consistent with the results of the studies by Masuram and Sripada (2020), Nget, Pansri, and Poohongthong (2020), Chen (2021), and Darrashiri and Mazdayasna (2021), who indicated positive evidences of the impacts of task-based teaching interventions on improving EFL learners' speaking skills and enhancing oral fluency. They reported that the communicative task completion interventions throughout treatment sessions resulted in significant changes in oral fluency and conclusive outcome in terms of oral speech fluency were obtained. The results of the research study agree with Kong, Lai, Deng, and Wang (2022), Nugrahaeni (2022), and Siyi and Patamadilok (2021), in that they have shown consistent results of the effectiveness of engaging learners in communicative type of tasks and task-based instructional programs on improving speaking fluency and fostering students' interaction.

The oral practice instruction showed that the variation in the use of tasks, to which the subjects were exposed, were more fruitful and conclusive than the individual or single task in that the former encouraged their tendency to active participation, more responsibility for doing the tasks, learner-centered environment as a merit over mere teacher-oriented context, and interaction with other classmates. The tasks also encouraged them to interact with each other with more complex responses than with their teacher, through which they tried to alleviate their pitfalls of oral speech and enhance oral skills. Gathumbi and Masembe (2005) and Achmad and Yusuf (2014) value the characteristics of the tasks that foster learner-centered context, as being effective for inner-classroom interaction, improving low oral skills, and enriching motivation.

Relying on the findings of the study, it is argued that EFL learners' enhancement in oral fluency can be accounted for by referring to Ellis's (2003, 2017) argument, claiming that task varieties are found to possess cognitively involving and motivating facets in that, from a cognitive point of view, communicative tasks engage learners in certain types of information-processing which bring about effective language use and orally fluent language production. This idea is in line with the claim made by Feneey (2006), extending special importance to the role played by task varieties, in particular, communicative-focused tasks to make positive changes in the oral aspects of language production. To add favor to the supporting role played by task varieties, Ellis (2017, p. 130) pinpoints that tasks channel the learners' focus of attention towards a balanced development in the oral speech fluency along with the enhancement in complexity and accuracy.

These findings can be explained by referring to Villegas and Lukas (2002) and Michel (2017), who show that the implementation of inner-classroom variation on the use of tasks in oral instruction creates opportunities for learners to interact with their partners rather than with their teacher and seek corrective feedback from their classmates rather than the correction made and given by teachers. Learners, likewise, experience correct inference, appropriate response from spoken discourse, improve fluency and confidence in speaking in a variety of contexts, and learn to make use of a variety of sentence structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, as Hsu (2019) and Johnson (2017) indicated, learners are inclined to learner-centered classroom or contexts where they feel comfortable to work interactively, seek assistance from their peers, and practice more complex responses with their interlocutors, all of which are tools for alleviating the problem of low oral skills. The findings of this study are also explained by Tarone' (1985, 1988, 1990) viewpoints, arguing that as second and foreign language learners perform different tasks, their production of some grammatical, morphological, and phonological forms differs in a particular manner. This study recommends that the use of task variation in EFL contexts, where learners have limited opportunities to the target language outside the classrooms, is a merit, helping them enhance their fluency in oral speech.

The results of the study are not, in a way, found to be consistent with the findings of Kim and McDonough (2008). Embarking on the theory of Cognition Hypothesis, they reported that more task varieties may lead to more accurate but less fluent speech. Robinson (2009) contributed the negative impact of task on speech fluency to stressful conditions and also learners' individual factors such as intelligence. The findings of this study, furthermore, are not in

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line with the results Rahimpour and Mehrang (2010) and Tavakoli and Foster (2008) revealed in that they indicated no positive impact of task types on learners' fluency in speech.

6. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to examine the effects of the implementation of task variation on enhancing fluency skill of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' oral speech. The findings revealed that task variation in oral speech class was effective on oral fluency enhancement. It was concluded that a variation of the use of three tasks in the case of EXG1 resulted in more improvement in the fluency skill than the other groups of the study. The findings of the study can be of use for EFL learners, English educators, as well syllabus designers. The outcome of the research work is useful for language learners in EFL contexts where they may find less or limited chance outside educational settings to interact with others. When learners are exposed to a variety of tasks rather than a single task practice in their instructional contexts, they are supplied with chances to experience practical settings for speaking English and encourage active learner involvement in the oral skill instruction. Language educators can benefit the findings of this study, too. Since language learning requires practice, it is imperative that teachers get students to participate in tasks in class. These results help teachers realize what options they have at their disposal and how each of the tasks can better enhance learners' oral performance and what aspects of oral performance will be improved. Syllabus designers can as well gain insight from the results of the present study in that they gain recognition of the appeal for incorporating orally instructional tasks in EFL learning contexts and engaging learners in authentic oral communication materials to help them cater for the their communicative needs and gain skills in fluent speech.

This study incorporated the intermediate level of proficiency to examine the effectiveness of task variation on oral speech fluency component. The future studies of similar nature are supposed to aim at higher level of proficiency by incorporating the advanced levels of proficiency. This research work was an attempt to investigate the impact of three varieties of tasks on oral fluency. It is suggested that the future researchers examine further varieties of tasks as well the effectiveness of closed versus open tasks on fluency component of oral speech. The future studies of this nature are needed to examine the effectiveness of applying task-based instruction program over a longer period of time and on certain speaking genres, namely, descriptive, narrative, expository, and so forth.

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