

## **TASK-BASED READING ASSESSMENT VS. TRADITIONAL READING TEST**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present study set out to investigate whether EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment perform better than those EFL learners who take the traditional reading test. To achieve the aforementioned purpose, a total of 30 participants were chosen and randomly divided into two groups. In the control group, they completed a traditional test, whereas in the experimental group, they performed a task-based assessment test, i.e. the FCE reading paper (2008). The results of the study indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups. In other words, the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, which might be justified in terms of authenticity and motivation created via employment of tasks. Concerning pedagogical implications, the study has gone some way towards increasing the knowledge of teachers in pedagogical settings. More attention should be paid to task-based assessment, specifically with regard to reading comprehension.

**Keywords:** *Task-based Assessment, Reading, Motivation, Authenticity, Traditional Reading*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, there has been an increased interest in task-based instruction and assessment. Task-based instruction has become popular in L2 teaching, since it provides the students with an opportunity to use language as a means of communication rather than focusing on language usage. In other words, task-based instruction, in addition to grammatical skills, enhances the students' abilities to achieve their communicative goals in real life situations. Furthermore, (Skehan, 1998) holds that task-based instruction's focus on meaning will expand and develop the underlying interlanguage system and naturalistic acquisitional mechanisms.

According to (Norris *et al.*, (as cited in Brown, 2004)), tasks have been defined as real world activities "that people do in everyday life and which require language for their accomplishment" (p. 33). (Willis, 1996) suggests that tasks are activities in which the language learner uses the language for a communicative purpose to achieve an intended outcome.

Moreover (Nunan, 2004) holds that "task is an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment" (p. 1). So, it seems that tasks are of prime importance in second language acquisition research.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) define task as an activity that involves individuals in the process of using language to achieve a specific goal or objective in a particular situation. Therefore, given that tasks are real-life activities; assessment tasks should be authentic and engage students in activities related to what they are expected to perform in real-life situations. Besides, in task-based assessment, all of the inferences and interpretations we want to make are concerned with language use ability rather than language usage. (Brindley (as cited in Bachman, 2002)) suggest that definition of task-based language assessment should include not only knowledge, but also the ability to use language.

Over the past few decades, a considerable amount of literature has been published on task-based instruction and learning. In an early case study (Newton, 1995) examined the vocabulary gains of an adult learner of English as a second language via performance of four communication tasks. Comparisons of pre- and post-tests of vocabulary indicated that explicit negotiation of word meaning was less deterministic of post-test improvements than use of words in the process of completing the task.

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In an early attempt, (Joe, 1998) examined the effects of text-based tasks and background knowledge on incidental vocabulary acquisition of forty eight adult ESL learners who were randomly assigned to one of three treatments (a) reading and retelling a text with explicit generative training and without access to the text during recall, (b) reading and retelling a text without explicit generative training but with access to the text during recall, and (c) neither reading nor retelling a text. The findings indicated that the process of reading and retelling a text promotes incidental vocabulary learning and that generative processing enhances vocabulary learning with greater levels of generative processing leading to greater vocabulary gains for unknown words.

Sarani and Farzaneh (2012) investigated the teaching of vocabulary in ESP courses using a task-based language teaching approach. Two homogenous groups of students who were participating in ESP courses were chosen as a control and an experimental group. The results showed that in teaching technical vocabularies the task-based approach was more influential.

Moreover, (Thanh and Huan, 2012) used an experimental study to examine the impact of task-based language learning on the motivation of non-English majors to acquire vocabulary at a community college in Vietnam. The results revealed the participants' motivation to learn vocabulary and the improvement of their vocabulary achievement after the experiment.

However, very few studies have been conducted concerning task-based performance. In Keyvanfar and Modarresi (2009) attempted to find out whether using task-based reading activities affects the development of text comprehension Iranian young EFL learners studying at the beginner level. The students were assigned to two groups. While the experimental group received instruction using four tasks, the control group was instructed via classical reading activities. The results manifested the better performance of the experimental group.

In a similar study, (Jabbarpour, 2011) tried to find out whether sequencing tasks on the basis of task difficulty (determined by the scope of the outcome) from easiest (close ended tasks) to the most difficult (open-ended tasks) improves testees' performance on those tasks. To achieve this purpose, two homogeneous groups of subjects were selected. While in the control group the task items were sequenced from easiest to the most difficult, in the experimental group the reverse was the case. The findings revealed that sequencing the tasks from easy to difficult does not significantly improve testees' performance.

In another attempt to explore the impact of form versus meaning-focused tasks added to an ER program on the development of lexical collocations among Iranian Intermediate EFL learners, (Khonamri and Roostae, 2013) found that both form-focused tasks and meaning-focused task groups progressed in the interval between the pre- and post-test, but, there was not a significant difference between the effects of form-focused and meaning-focused task. In a similar vein, (Barati and Kashkouli, 2013) studied the impact of task-based assessment on the type of test-taking strategies employed by three proficiency groups of Iranian adult EFL learners, when completing a task-based reading paper. The findings indicated that a pattern could be drawn of the type of strategies used by the three proficiency groups. Nonetheless, such a pattern shifted at times depending on the ability of the test takers and/or the tasks under study.

Likewise, (Defaei and Motallebzadeh, 2013) studied the role of task-based listening activities in augmenting EFL learners' listening self-efficacy. The initial sample consisted of a total of 70 male and female Iranian EFL learners in Kish Air English Institute, Mashhad, Iran, which was reduced to 50 after taking the proficiency test. To measure the participants' level of listening self-efficacy at the pre- and post-tests, a listening self-efficacy questionnaire (20 items) was applied. So, the participants were randomly divided into two groups, i.e. experimental and control. While, the experimental group received task-based listening activities, the control group received the traditional practices (a question-and-answer approach). The results of the study showed that the participant's levels of listening self-efficacy in the experimental group were significantly higher than those in the control group.

Task-based assessment can be considered as an approach to assess directly the abilities of test takers to perform specific target language tasks in specific communicative, real-life situations. In task based assessment, what is of prime interest is performance on tasks rather than the ultimate production.

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Task-based testing can be considered as part of performance assessment. Three major characteristics are attributed to this approach of language testing: First, it is based on tasks. Furthermore, the tasks should be authentic, and finally, the outcome of the task should be identified by qualified judges, since success or failure in task are performances.

In fact, task-based tests seem to be assessments that require students to be involved in a type of behavior which motivates them to use purposeful, goal-oriented language related to real life situations. Performances on these tasks are then evaluated according to pre-determined, real-world criterion elements (i.e., task processes and outcomes) and criterion levels (i.e., authentic standards related to task success)” (Brown, 2004).

As mentioned before, there has been a growing interest in the studies of task-based instruction, but few studies have been conducted with regard to task-based assessment and task-based reading in particular. Most of the studies concerning reading comprehension have focused on traditional reading tests rather than task-based reading. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the differences in the performance of EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment in comparison with those who take the traditional reading test. In sum, the present study was an attempt to answer the following research question:

1. Do EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment perform better than those EFL learners who take the traditional reading test?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 30 students, including 22 females and 8 males, studying English at an English Institute in Shiraz, Iran. They were aged from 20 to 27. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups, 15 students at each group.

### **Materials**

#### **The FCE Reading Paper**

According to FCE handbook (UCLES, 2001), the FCE reading paper tries to assess different reading skills. The focus and the test methods of the FCE reading paper is highlighted in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: The FCE focus and the test methods (The FCE handbook- UCLES 2001: 9)**

<b>Part</b>	<b>Task type and focus</b>
<b>1</b>	multiple matching, main points
<b>2</b>	multiple choice, details, opinion, gist, deducing meaning
<b>3</b>	gapped text, text structure
<b>4</b>	multiple matching, multiple choice specific information, detail

Nevertheless, for the purpose of the present study, the FCE reading paper (2008) developed by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations was employed. Furthermore, the reliability estimates of this FCE reading paper was established using Cronbach Alpha, which was .81.

### **Reading Comprehension Test**

A reading comprehension test was extracted from Baron’s TOEFL (1990), including 5 passages and 50 multiple-choice questions, and the average readability index .78.

The reliability of the reading comprehension test was calculated using Cronbach Alpha method of estimating reliability. The reliability index was found to be 0.76, indicating that the test was a reliable measure of reading ability.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection procedure lasted one session for each group. In the experimental group, the FCE reading paper was introduced to them and the participants answered all parts of the reading comprehension test. Besides, in the control group, the traditional reading comprehension test was given to the students, and they completed all parts. In addition, the students were provided with sufficient

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information about the purpose of the study, and they were encouraged to ask questions with regard to the content of the tests, to resolve any kind of ambiguity.

**Data Analysis**

To meet the aforementioned purposes, quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS package(16.0). Two sets of scores were obtained from two independent groups. An independent sample t-test was run to identify the differences in the performance of the participants.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As stated earlier, the present study was an attempt to investigate whether EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment perform better than those EFL learners who take the traditional reading test. First, Descriptive statistics of the control and experimental groups were calculated. Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics of the control and the experimental group, including the mean and standard deviation.

**Table 1: Group Statistics of the participants**

Item Difficulty		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Item sequence	Control	15	3.7133	1.28620	.32494
	Experimental	15	3.6233	1.35476	.36006

Second, in order to answer the research question, i.e. to compare the performance of EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment in comparison with those who take the traditional reading test, an independent sample t-test was run. As Table 2 displays, there is a significant difference between the control and experimental group regarding their performance in reading comprehension test.

**Table 2: Independent sample t-test for the control and experimental groups**

	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df				lower	upper
Item sequence equal variances assumed	4.85	.044	-2.217	21	.003	2.000	.733	-3.929	-1.299
Equal variances not assumed			-2.654	19.415	.001		.619	-1.071	-3.701

As shown in table 2, level of significance is .044 which is smaller than p value (p= .05); therefore, it appears to be a statistically significant difference two groups under investigation.

As a result, the significance of differences between control and experimental groups was proved and the hypothesis was confirmed, which means that EFL learners who take the task-based reading assessment outperformed those who take the traditional reading comprehension test.

It seems that the statistically significant improvement concerning reading performance of the participants in the experimental group might have been due to the stimulating nature of the tasks, which motivated the

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students to a higher extent. The results are consistent with the ideas of Brown (2000) who stated that one can assume that success in any task is concerned with the student's motivation. The results are also in line with the ideas of Richards and Rogers (2001) who believe that task activity and task achievement can motivate the students.

Another reason for this significant improvement might be attributed to the fact that the high degree of authenticity of task-based assessment results in tests including what the students are expected to encounter in real life situations. Additionally, as Jabbarpour (2011) suggested, "task-based assessment can be very useful for meeting actual inferential demands in language classrooms as it employs complex, integrative, and open-ended tasks" (p. 5).

The results of the present study are in line with the ideas of Bachman (2002), who suggested that a fundamental aim of most language performance assessments is to present test takers with tasks that correspond to tasks in 'real-world' settings, and that will engage test-takers in language use or the creation of discourse" (p. 20).

Besides, this finding is in agreement with Motallebzadeh and Defaie (2013)'s findings which showed that through using task-based listening activities, the development of learners' listening self-efficacy will be facilitated. The results also agree with the findings of Joe (1998), who found that tasks related to reading promote incidental vocabulary acquisition and expand vocabulary in EFL classroom contexts.

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