THE JOURNAL OF ASIA TEFL Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 191-211, Winter 2007

Topic Familiarity Effect on Accuracy, Complexity, and Fluency of L2 Oral Output

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Recent research into task-based language teaching claims that manipulation of task factors, learner factors, and task processing conditions can focus language learners' attention on the competing goals of accuracy, complexity, or fluency. The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the impact of topic familiarity on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of L2 oral output. Defining task familiarity in terms of learners' familiarity with task topic, the twenty upper-intermediate level participants of the study performed a familiar and then an unfamiliar task. The results of statistical analysis revealed that the participants produced a more accurate and more fluent, but less complex discourse in their performance of the familiar task. The findings highlight the need to consider topic familiarity as a task feature in syllabus design and materials development and the necessity of considering this task feature for accomplishing accuracy, complexity, or fluency in oral task production.

Key words: Task-Based Language Teaching, Topic Familiarity, Interlanguage Variation, Accuracy, Complexity, Fluency

INTRODUCTION

Tasks hold a central place in current language acquisition research and also in language pedagogy (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001; Lee, 2000; Skehan, 1998a; Willis, 1996). According to Foster (1999), task-based approach to language teaching has evolved in response to a better understanding of language learning processes. The traditional approach to language teaching regards learning as a process of mastering a succession of steps, each one building on the one before. Errors, in this approach are evidence of poor learning, requiring more presentation, practice, and performance. In contrast, the current view of language learning, based upon research results in both linguistics and psychology, is that learners do not acquire the target language in the order it is presented to them, no matter how carefully organized by syllabus designers and textbook writers. Language learning, as Ellis (1994) argues, is a developmental, organic process which follows its own internal agenda. Errors, according to this argument, are part of the natural process of interlanguage forms gradually moving towards target forms.

Such a view of language learning led to the development of various task-based approaches to language teaching (Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Rahimpour, 1999, 2007; Skehan, 2001). The common idea of these approaches is that learners should be given tasks to transact rather than items to learn. The syllabuses developed according to the three major task-based approaches to language teaching and learning, namely, procedural approach, process approach, and TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) consider 'task' as the unit of analysis (Long & Crookes, 1992).

Since 1970s, a number of researchers in the different fields of second language acquisition and language pedagogy have dealt with alternatives to traditionally defined linguistic units of syllabus content and sequence (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Candlin, 1987; Skehan, 1996a). Many suggest that 'tasks' are a valid alternative unit, and are not just a means for actualizing linguistically defined syllabus (Candlin, 1987; Crookes, 1986; Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996a, 1996b). In addition, in a task-based syllabus,

as Long (1985), Long and Crookes (1992), and Robinson (1995, 1996a, 1998, 2001a, 2002) argue, pedagogic tasks should be developed and sequenced to increasingly approximate the demands of real-life target tasks. This will enable the learners to obtain required lifetime performance goals (Carroll, 1980; McNamara, 1996; Robinson, 1996b; Robinson & Ross, 1996).

Most attempts in studying tasks made thus far are oriented at task difficulty, task complexity, and task production with special emphasis on learner factors (e.g. confidence, motivation, prior learning), task factors (e.g., number of steps, amount of context support, planning time), and text factors (e.g., length, and clarity) (for a review of research see Ellis, 2003; Rahimpour, 1997; Robinson, 2001b; Skehan, 1998a). The present study aims at exploring the ways topic familiarity would affect the achievement of the intended pedagogic outcomes in terms of accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Task and Task Outcomes

A number of definitions have been proposed for task. According to Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001), a task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective. Skehan (1996a) defines task as an activity in which (1) meaning is primary; (2) there is some sort of relationship to the real world; (3) task completion has some priority; and (4) the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome.

Referring to Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, Skehan (1996a, 1998a) has investigated the possibility that tasks may be chosen and implemented so that particular pedagogic outcomes are achieved. He distinguishes between the three dimensions of language production, namely, accuracy, complexity, and fluency, and argues that the learner cannot give full attention to each of these goals simultaneously.

'Accuracy' refers to the extent to which the language produced in

performing a task conforms with target language norms (Ellis, 2003, p. 339). Skehan (1996a) defines 'accuracy' as the ability of the learner to handle whatever level of interlanguage complexity he/she has currently achieved. The extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied is called 'complexity' (Ellis, 2003, p. 340). Skehan (1996a) defines the term as the utilization of interlanguage structures that are 'cutting edge', elaborate, and structured. 'Fluency' refers to the extent to which the language produced in performing a task manifests pausing, hesitation, or reformulation (Ellis, 2003, p. 342). According to Skehan (1996a), 'fluency' refers to the capacity of the learner to mobilize his/her system to communicate meaning in real time. Derwing, Rossiter, Murray, and Thomson (2004) define 'fluency' as an automatic procedural skill on the part of the speaker and a perceptual phenomenon in the listener.

Trade-offs in Learner's Focus of Attention

As Skehan (1998a, p. 112) argues, there are likely to be 'trade-offs' as a learner struggles to conceptualize, formulate, and articulate messages. Thus, learners vary in the extent to which they adhere to each one of these three aspects of language production. Some tasks demand or attract learner's attention to accuracy, some to fluency, and yet some others to complexity. Attention to one dimension is likely to be at the expense of others. The task designer's role is therefore to select tasks, which channel attention towards the desired pedagogic outcome.

Skehan (1996a) suggests a theoretical framework for task-based language teaching which claims to make a balance between fluency, accuracy, and interlanguage restructuring. Although this theory successfully explains the reason why different tasks elicit learners to engage in different aspects of language production, it fails to explicate the phenomenon that some tasks can achieve one aspect of greater language production without sacrificing the other two aspects. In other words, the trade-off theory is a theory of balancing language production but not the theory of improving language production. In

another framework developed by Willis (1996), practical ways of leading the learners through cycles of task planning, performance, repetition, and finally, comparison with NS norms are explained.

Following Skehan (1996a), distinguishing the three aspects of language production, namely, fluency, accuracy, and complexity, many researchers have concentrated on the possible way(s) of increasing these three dimensions of tasks by manipulating two sets of variables, including task features, e.g. 'required *vs.* optional information exchange', 'monologic *vs.* dialogic exchange', 'open *vs*. closed exchange', 'topic characteristics', 'discourse mode', and 'cognitive complexity', and task implementation conditions, e.g., 'participant's role', task repetition, interlocutor familiarity', and 'type of feedback' (Cummins, 1983; Ellis, 2003; Long, 1980, 1989; Long and Crookes, 1987; Rahimpour, 2007; Skehan, 1996b).

Task Topic

Generally, two factors are used for categorizing task topic, namely, topic familiarity, and topic importance. Gass and Varonis (1984) focused on the effects of topic familiarity on learners' performance of the same task with different topics and found that topic familiarity affected not only participants' comprehension, but also the amount of negotiation, with more comprehension and greater negotiation achieved in more familiar tasks.

Concentrating on topic importance, Zuengler and Bent (1991) found that if the task topic held little importance to the participant, the learners would function as active speakers and the native speakers as active listeners but the roles would reverse if the topic was important, for example, talking about a topic related to their field of study, with the native speakers functioning more actively in the conversation.

Topic can also have an impact which is independent of learner factor, i.e., that certain types of topics will predispose all learners to negotiate more than others. For instance, Newton (1991) investigated the number of negotiating questions on tasks that had an identical design but differed in topic. Two of

the tasks had a zoo topic which dealt with objective-spatial matters and another two a medical topic which dealt with human-ethical matters. It was found that the zoo topic resulted in a significantly greater number of negotiating questions when performed by adult learners. In another study, Lange (2000) found topic to have an important influence on the amount of talk, with more amount of talk observed in the task about which prisoner should be granted parole than which candidate should get a heart transplant operation.

Some topics are inherently more demanding or interesting than others. Topic familiarity has a demanding effect on the amount of meaning negotiation that occurs during task performance (Rahimpour & Hazar, 2006). On the other hand, the same factor has been shown to have a positive influence on learners' output (Gass & Varonis, 1984). For instance, Change (1999) found topic familiarity resulted in more fluency in monologic tasks. Also, in Robinson's (2001b) map task, the participants were familiar with the simple campus map and unfamiliar with the Tokyo street map and familiarity led the learners to produce more fluent discourse with the campus map task and more complex discourse with the street map task.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question and Research Hypothesis

The present study undertakes to examine the impact of learners' familiarity with task topic on their oral task performance. Thus, the study addresses the following research question:

Research Question: What is the effect of topic familiarity on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of learners' oral output?

Concerning the above-mentioned research question, the following null and

alternative hypotheses have been formulated:

H0: There is no relationship between task topic familiarity and learners' oral task performance accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

H1: Task topic familiarity has a positive effect on learners' oral output in terms of accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

Participants

The participants in the study were 6 males and 14 female freshmen English majors doing their Language Laboratory course at a state university in Tabriz, the capital of the Northwestern Province of East Azerbaijan in Iran. They participated in the study as part of the course assessment near the end of the spring term from February 2005 through June 2006 in their respective course. The second researcher was the teacher of that course and 'New Interchange' (Book One) was their course book covered during the term. The participants were selected out of a pool of 102 English learners based on their scores on the Nelson English Language Test (NELT; Fowler and Norman, 1976). The mean score of the selected participants on the NELT was 50. The participants' ages ranged between 20 and 30, and the average age was 23. The native language of the learners was Azerbaijani, the regional language used for everyday communication (Persian, the national language of Iranians, is used as the official language for public-life activities, especially schooling in Azerbaijan area in Iran), and English was their third/foreign language.

Procedure

Before the experiment, the participants were informed that the tasks would be considered as part of their course grades. They were also informed that the tasks would be used for research purposes. Each participant was tested and observed individually without the presence of the other participants. Every

individual participant of the study was provided with two tasks; namely, a familiar task and an unfamiliar one. Task familiarity was defined in terms of learners' familiarity with the task topic (Skehan, 1998a). Each of the two speaking tasks which were employed in the experiment involved a single type of stimulus, namely, a verbal prompt.

As the participant had already had a unit on 'family tree' in the course materials in the 'English Laboratory Course' they were already enrolled in that term and also had practiced the words and patterns related to that topic, the familiar notion of 'family life' was chosen as the familiar topic. First, the participants were given a paper on which instructions for the tasks were written in English (see Appendix). Each participant was given further explanation in Persian in the case of any problem in understanding the directions. After reading the directions, every individual participant was required to talk about his/her own believes and experiences of family life or the family life and experiences of a friend as mentioned in the instructions to the task. The allotted time was seven minutes.

The abstract notion of 'success' was considered as the topic of the unfamiliar task. No words or patterns related to this topic had been already taught or practiced during the course. The participants were asked to express their views of 'success' and some examples from their own personal experiences or a friend's experiences of success. As with the familiar task, each participant was given a paper on which instructions for the unfamiliar task were written in English (see Appendix). Again, each participant was free to receive further Persian explanation in the case of any problem in understanding the directions. After reading the instructions, every individual participant was required to talk about his/her or a friend's believes and experiences of 'success' as stated in the directions to the task within the allotted time of seven minutes.

The majority of the participants finished each task between 5-6 minutes. Every individual participant's performance on each task was audiorecorded. After the data were transcribed, they were coded, scored and analyzed with regard to the research question which the study set out to address.

RESULTS

Testing Instrument

In order to score the data, the measures used by Skehan and Foster (1999) and Foster and Skehan (1998) were adopted for scoring the 'fluency' and 'accuracy' of the participants' performance accordingly. 'Fluency' measurement was operationalized as the number of words per minute. 'Accuracy' measurement, on the other hand, was achieved by calculating the percentage of error-free clauses in the total number of clauses. In order to measure 'complexity', the ratio of lexical to grammatical words was calculated (Robinson, 2001b). In order to test our hypotheses to examine the way topic familiarity affected task response characteristics of the participants, these measures were employed to obtain every individual participant's score for accuracy, complexity, and fluency of task response for each task. Regarding the hypothesis of the study, the raw scores of the participants on familiar *vs.* unfamiliar tasks were used for further data analysis.

Data Analysis

The results of descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 1-3. Data analysis results for the accuracy of discourse produced by the participants in performing the familiar *vs*. unfamiliar task are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Accuracy of the Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Task Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Familiar Task	86.8049	3.0335
Unfamiliar Task	79.7804	3.9396

As Table 1 shows, the higher average accuracy was observed in the familiar task. In other words, the participants produced a more accurate discourse when they benefited from topic familiarity.

The means difference are clearly illustrated in Figure 1 which displays the means for the accuracy variable in familiar *vs*. unfamiliar task.

FIGURE 1
A Comparison of the Means for Accuracy of Task Response in Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Tasks

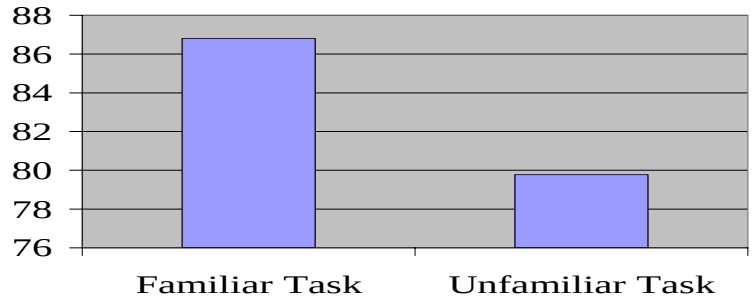


Table 2 depicts the results of data analysis for 'complexity' of the discourse produced by the participants in performing the familiar *vs*. unfamiliar task.

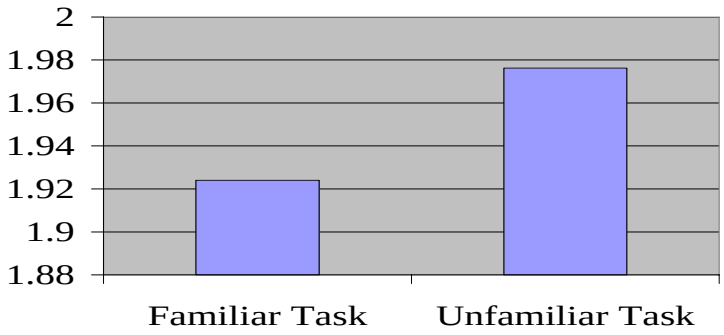
TABLE 2
Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Complexity of the Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Task Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Familiar Task	1.9240	.0743
Unfamiliar Task	1.9762	.0737

As Table 2 shows, the participants produced a discourse with a lower ratio of lexical to grammatical words as task response in their performance of the familiar task.

Figure 2 clearly displays the means difference. It compares the means for the complexity variable in the participants' performance of familiar *vs.* unfamiliar task.

FIGURE 2
A Comparison of the Means for Complexity of Task Response in Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Tasks



The results of data analysis for task response fluency of the participants in familiar *vs*. unfamiliar task are shown in Table 3.

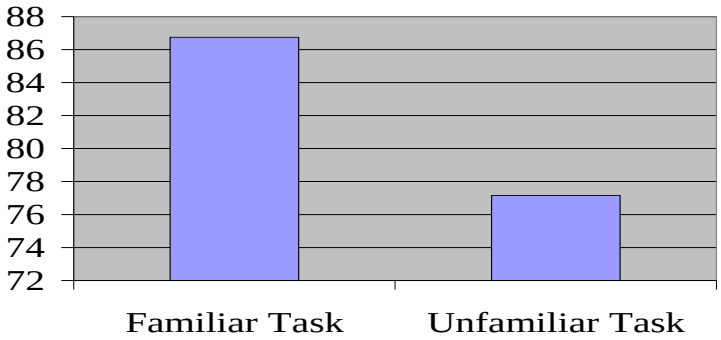
TABLE 3
Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Fluency of the Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Task Type	Mean	Standard Deviation
Familiar Task	86.7586	4.1572
Unfamiliar Task	77.1595	3.5817

A comparison of the means presented in Table 3 shows that the participants' familiarity with the task topic led them to produce a more fluent discourse.

Figure 3, demonstrates the means difference for the fluency of task response in the familiar *vs*. unfamiliar task.

FIGURE 3
A Comparison of the Means for Fluency of Task Response in Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Tasks



In sum, as can been seen in Tables 1-3 and Figures 1-3, the participants familiarity with the task topic had a positive effect on the accuracy and fluency of their performance but a negative impact on the complexity of task response.

In order to make the above conclusions more justifiable and test the research hypothesis, the results were compared using a Matched t-Test.

TABLE 4
Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Accuracy of Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Mean (Familiar Task)	SD (Familiar Task)	Mean (Unfamiliar Task)	SD (Unfamiliar Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
86.8049	3.0335	79.7804	3.9396	2.093	19	.05	2.211

TABLE 5
Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Complexity of Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Mean (Familiar Task)	SD (Familiar Task)	Mean (Unfamiliar Task)	SD (Unfamiliar Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
1.9240	.0743	1.9762	.0737	2.093	19	.05	2.003

TABLE 6
Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Fluency of Familiar Vs. Unfamiliar Task

Mean (Familiar Task)	SD (Familiar Task)	Mean (Unfamiliar Task)	SD (Unfamiliar Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
86.7586	4.1572	77.1595	3.5817	2.093	19	.05	2.404

It can be observed from Tables 4 and 6 that the observed t-value is greater than the critical t-value for the accuracy and fluency of task response in familiar *vs.* unfamiliar task (t-observed > t-critical, at .05 level of significance). However, as Table 5 shows, the t-value observed is less than the t-critical for the complexity of task response in familiar *vs.* unfamiliar task (t-observed < t-critical, at .05 level of significance). Therefore, concerning the impact of topic familiarity on accuracy and fluency, the null hypothesis can be rejected and the alternative hypothesis confirmed. But, that aspect of the null hypothesis which deals with the influence of topic familiarity on complexity cannot be rejected. In other words, according to the results of inferential statistics, task topic familiarity had a positive effect in promoting the participants' output in terms of accuracy and fluency, but no impact on complexity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

To discuss the results, we return to our research question. It addressed the impact of topic familiarity on learners' oral output. Dependent variables measured were 'accuracy' (operationalized as the percentage of error-free clauses in the total number of clauses), 'complexity' (operationalized as the ratio of lexical to grammatical words), and 'fluency' (operationalized as the number of words per minute). The independent variable was 'topic familiarity'.

The experiment found a positive effect for topic familiarity in promoting participants' performance in terms of accuracy. This finding is different from the findings of Chang's (1999), and Lange's (2000) studies in which no

significant effect of topic familiarity in promoting accuracy was observed. Concerning complexity, it was found that topic familiarity had no significant impact in increasing the ratio of lexical to grammatical words in the participants' oral output which is different from the findings of the study by Robinson (2001b). In addition, like Chang's (1999) and Robinson's (2001b) studies which indicate a positive effect of topic familiarity on promoting fluency, the results of the experiment revealed that participants' performance was considerably more fluent in the 'familiar topic' task. Ellis (2003) also argues that familiarity of topic promotes performance in terms of fluency.

Topic familiarity concerns the relationship between the thematic content of the task and the individual learner's world knowledge. On the basis of the results of the present study, it can be hypothesized that topic familiarity contributes to learners' propensity to negotiate meaning (Lange, 2000; Newton, 1991; Zuengler & Bent, 1991). As a result, it would encourage the learners to function as more active speakers. It is easier for them to organize the familiar propositional content of the task and encode the intended meaning with more self confidence (Ellis, 2003). Moreover, Familiarity of task topic reduces the processing load of the task, so that the learners do not need to spend that much time for on-line planning of the talk and this would, in turn, decrease their dysfluencies. Also, the reduction of processing load as a result of propositional organization of the intended meaning can be an influential factor for accuracy.

Learners vary in the extent to which they adhere to each one of the three aspects of language production, namely, accuracy, complexity, and fluency, with some tasks demanding or attracting learner's attention to accuracy, some to fluency, and some others to complexity. Attention to one dimension is likely to be at the expense of others. As Skehan (1998a) points out, each one of these three dimensions draws on different subsystems of language system. Fluency requires learner to engage in a semantic rather than syntactic processing, and consequently, to draw on his/her memory-based system, accessing and deploying ready-made chunks, and employing communication strategies to get by communication problems. On the contrary, accuracy and

especially complexity require learner to engage in a syntactic processing, and thus to draw on rule-based system. As Skehan (1998b) argues, when accessibility and time pressure are paramount, a lexical mode of communication will be relied on, which draws on a well-organized, and very rapid memory system. In contrast, when exactness or creativity matter, analyzability, and a concern for form, for syntax, and for planning, will predominate. In this way, Skehan explains why output has to be pushed before it engages the learner's syntactical knowledge. Skehan is also careful to stress that both types of processing are important and that task-based instruction needs to cater to both.

Regarding the results of the study, it is predicted that the purpose of a task is an important factor which contributes to the decision as to use a familiar or an unfamiliar task topic for oral production. For example, tasks directed to achieve accuracy and especially fluency are expected to require a more familiar topic compared to the ones directed to accomplish complexity. In other words, the purpose of the task is predicted to affect the way topic familiarity would function as a facilitative or inhibitative element.

In addition, if we are to cater for individual differences, a task should allow for alternative procedural routes to the same goal. However, an individual's preferred way of working may not prove to be the most effective. Task features and implementation conditions can be manipulated in such a way that not only the learners are helped to develop autonomy, but also the task original orientation to achieve accuracy, complexity, or fluency is fulfilled. Teachers need to integrate the competing demands of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. As Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) argue, learners can be instructed to pay attention to different features, for example, grammar, pronunciation, rate of speech, and completeness of information. Focusing learner's attention on form when they perform a task may help them overcome what seems to be a natural tendency to prioritize content.

The findings may have implications for syllabus design and materials development, too. An important issue in a task-based approach is that learners might be encouraged to prioritize a focus on 'meaning' over a focus on 'form', and thus be led to use fluent but unchallenging or inaccurate

language. The challenge for a task-based pedagogy, therefore, is to choose, grade, sequence, and implement tasks in ways that will combine a focus on meaning with a focus on form. One of the primary implications of this study for the language classroom is the need to use a variety of tasks that draw upon different skills to enhance fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Rather than limiting learners' oral performance to certain task types, teachers can choose tasks designed along a continuum of avoidance and control in terms of topic familiarity. For example, tasks that constrain learners by obliging them to search for unfamiliar rather than familiar words and structures are as important as tasks in which learners can rely on recognizable content either by repeating a task (Bygate, 1996; Nation, 1989) or by scaffolding their productions in interaction (Ejzenberg, 2000). Skehan and Foster (1999) advocate a balance of tasks to ensure that no one aspect of language (accuracy, fluency, and complexity) is overlooked. This advice can perhaps be extended to low proficiency classes, where fluency is traditionally not a high priority.

As in all classroom studies, the researchers were confronted with the inevitable limitation related to the sample size. The sample size for this study was not large, and thus, as always, further research is needed to make stronger generalizations.

In order to enable better accumulation of knowledge in this research domain, sufficient numbers of studies are needed. Hopefully, the issues raised and discussed in this work have offered insights for improved research practices. Replication studies are obviously advisable in order to permit greater confidence in the results. Replication of the study across different proficiency levels and investigating the contribution of individual differences to the way topic familiarity influences task performance are suggested.

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APPENDIX

Directions for the Familiar Task:

You have already had a lesson on 'family Tree' in your course book. You will be required to think about 'Family Tree' and "Family Life' and talk accordingly. You may talk about your own family and family life or the family of a friend. You are not allowed to take notes before talking. You will have 7 minutes to talk.

Directions for the Unfamiliar Task:

How do you define success? Do you consider yourself a successful person? Why or why not? You will be required to think about 'Success' and talk accordingly. You may talk about your own success or the success of a friend in a particular field. You are not allowed to take notes before talking. You will have 7 minutes to talk.