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### The Comparative Study of Unfocused Tasks and Focused Tasks in Improving Student's Oral English Production

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#### Abstract

This study aimed at analyzing the effectiveness unfocused tasks and focused tasks in improving students' oral English production. Because these unfocused tasks and focused tasks focus on meaning, not on form, they are strong version of communicative language teaching. The research questions of this research are: (1) is there a significant difference of students' oral English production between students who are taught through unfocused tasks and students who are taught through focused tasks? (2) What problems do students find to speak English unfocused tasks? (3) What facilitates students to speak English in unfocused tasks? (4) What are the solutions of problems found in unfocused tasks? This was a mixing method research where of the three types of mixed methods research designs, the QUAN-qual model (the explanatory mixed methods design) was used. In this model, experiment and descriptive methods were used. This reserach was done at STBA Prayoga Padang where two groups of students at the same level were involved. One group was taught through unfocused tasks and the other group was taught through focused tasks. After doing the reserach, it was found that unfocused tasks and focused tasks can improve students' oral English production. It was found that unfocused tasks have better effect on students' oral English fluency and focused tasks have better effect on students' oral English accuray in terms of grammar. However, unfocused tasks have better effect than focused tasks on students' oral English production. In other words, there was a significant difference of oral English production of students who were taught through unfocused tasks and students who were taught though focused tasks.

Key Words: Unfocused Tasks, Focused tasks, Oral English Production

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#### I. Introduction

##### 1.1. Background of the Study

There have been some movements in language teaching, especially teaching English as a second/foreign language, for example the movement from teacher center to student

center, and from grammar translation and audiolingual methods to communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT).

Nevertheless, from preliminary study done in speaking class, it is still seen that some lecturers tend to dominate much in the teaching process. In other words, they give a few opportunities for students to participate in English classroom activities to practice their English. It may get worse for Indonesian English students since they do not have chance to practice their English in their society, except with their friends in campus in very limited time. It is because English is as a foreign language in Indonesia, which means that English is not used in society. As a result, some of the students do not have good English speaking (oral production) ability.

Moreover, from my interview with some of STBA Prayoga students, they said that they are not given much time to speak much English in the classroom because the lecturer tends to speak more. In other words, they say that the teacher (not students) practices his/her English in the classroom. According to them, the teacher's (not students') English will get better because the teacher practices speaking more English.

In addition, from my interview with some English teachers and lecturers, I know that some of them judge themselves that they have tried to give more opportunities to their students to practice their English in classroom or more opportunities to express what they want to say, so that the students can develop their communication skill, especially English speaking skill. However, much of what they have done (that they think has been under the label of Communicative Language Teaching) still have primary focus on practice form. For example, the lecturers still teach language focus, such as using simple present, and then ask the students to use this simple present in communication in pairs or in groups with some direct corrections from the lecturers, which make their students feel embarrassed and not confident to speak. Additionally, the students tend to focus on form (i.e., grammar or pronunciation) while speaking, not on meaning. As a result, they are not going to speak if they think that they cannot produce correct oral production or need time to think before speaking English.

Furthermore, some STBA Prayoga students say that they are often corrected by the lecturers directly when they make mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, which makes them discouraged and afraid to speak English since speaking English needs great courage and self-confidence. In addition, they say that the lecturer also likes to interrupt students while speaking when students do not talk exactly what the lecturer wants. Then, the teacher tends to speak as what she wants to talk about because it seems that the teacher still uses exercises, not tasks. The emphasis of exercises is the teaching specific form and then students are asked to practice the form in speaking. That is why whenever the students make mistake in grammar, they are corrected directly. It can be concluded that the teacher still focuses on form, not meaning in communication, which makes the students not motivated and afraid to speak English.

However, second language acquisition (SLA) research (Ellis 1985,1994,2003) has established the way that "teaching does not and cannot determine the learner's language will develop" (Skehan 1996) and there is much research to show that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach. Even in programs where patterns are drilled and practiced in an attempt help learners them correctly from the very beginning, learners fail to develop high levels of accuracy and lasting linguistic knowledge (Lightbown and Spada 1999; Ellis 1985). They may be able to reproduce the new items when their attention is on form in a monitored situation, but there is no guarantee that they have stored them for future use (Leaver & Jane 2004). In other words, there is no guarantee that what is taught and practiced will be learned; rather, this will depend on the developmental stage of the learner's interlanguage, which is internal to the learner.

Task Based language Teaching is a strong version of Communicative Language Teaching. Actually, there are two kinds of tasks in task-based language teaching: unfocused and focused tasks (Ellis 2003) that can be used to give them more opportunities to use English in the classroom since both tasks focus on meaning, not form. First, unfocused tasks is considered to be able to give more opportunities to students to use English in classroom without worrying and being restricted to use specific forms in their communication since these tasks are not designed with the use specific form in mind. In other words, they can choose from range of forms. Hopefully, by having more opportunities to speak without worrying and thinking specific forms students can have better English oral production especially in fluency. However, focused tasks aim to induce students to process, receptively or productively, some linguistic feature, for example, grammatical structure (Ellis, 2003). In addition, focused tasks have two aims: to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks) and to target the use of particular target feature. Hopefully, with these focused tasks students can have more opportunities to use English orally since they can stimulate communicative language use and their oral English production can be improved, especially their accuracy since they are used to target the use of specific target feature.

Both kinds of tasks seem to be able to give more opportunities to students to use English in classroom to improve their oral English production since they do not have or have few opportunities to use English in authentic context outside. Moreover, in these tasks (focused and unfocused tasks) students' communication in English is focused on meaning and the use of English naturally without direction correction. However, it is not known yet which kinds of tasks, focused task or unfocused task, can give better result on students' oral English production. Therefore, the writer was interested in doing a research about "The Comparative Study of Unfocused and Focused Tasks in Improving Students' Oral English Production.

## **1.2 Problems of the Study**

There are some problems that can identified from introduction above related to students, teachers, methods, and materials (tasks) which influence students' oral English production. However, the writer focused her research on comparing two kinds of tasks in Task Based Language teaching (unfocused tasks and focused tasks) in improving students' oral English production. Therefore, the problems of the research are formulated as follows:

1. Is there any significant difference of students' oral English production between students who are taught through unfocused tasks and students who are taught through focused tasks?
2. What problems do students find to speak English in unfocused tasks.
3. What facilitates students to speak English in unfocused tasks?
4. What are the solutions of problems found in unfocused tasks?

The hypotheses of this research are formulated as follows:

Hi: There is a significant difference of students' oral English production between students who are taught with unfocused tasks and students who are taught with focused tasks.

Ho: There is no significant difference of students' oral English fluency between students who are taught with unfocused tasks and students who are taught with focused tasks.

Therefore, the purposes of this study are: (a) to find out if there is any significant difference of students' oral English production between those taught through unfocused tasks and those taught through focused tasks, (b) what problems students find to speak English in unfocused tasks, (c) what facilitates students to speak English in unfocused tasks, and (d) What are the solutions of problems found in unfocused tasks?

## **II. Theoretical Framework**

### **2. Discussion**

#### **2.1. Task-Based language Teaching**

There has been a growing interest in task-based language teaching and learning (e.g., Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Leaver & Jane, 2004) since task-based language teaching is important for both fields of second/foreign language research and second/foreign language teaching and the swing of second/foreign language teaching paradigm from the behaviorist audiolingual method to communicative language teaching.

Ellis (2003) said that task-based language teaching (TBLT) proposes that the primary unit for both designing a language program and for planning individual lessons should be a task. Such tasks can be focused or unfocused.

#### **2.2. Tasks**

Before coming to discuss about focused tasks more deeply, it is better to discuss first about what a task is and how it differs from other devices used to elicit learner language, for example, an activity, an exercise, or drill so that there is no misunderstanding about the implementation of task-based teaching in the classroom or a research. First, Breen (1989) defines, "A task is a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication." He also states that a task can be a brief practice exercise or a more complex workplan that requires spontaneous communication of meaning. Concept related to task can also be seen in the following quotation (Long, 1985)

A task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting fence, dressing a child, filling out form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airplane reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, taking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination, and helping someone across the road. In other words, by task is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. Tasks are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.

Long's definition above seems so broad that include all what people do in everyday life whether they involve language for communication or not. This definition is quite different from Breen's.

Third, Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985) states,

A task is an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language such as response. For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, and listening to an instruction and performing a command, may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make teaching more communicative ..... since it provides for classroom activity which goes beyond practice of language for its own sake.

It seems that he supports Long's idea that a task may or may not involve language production, but it can be an activity or action as the result of understanding language or it can be said that task is as response. Fourth, Crookes (1986) states, " a task is a piece of work or an activity, usually with the specified objective, undertaken as part of an

educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research. Similarly, Prahbu (1987) says, "A task is an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process." Both Crookes (1986) and Prahbu (1987) say that the learners in a task need to achieve at a specific outcome or derived outcome. Moreover, Ellis (2003) said that a workplan that requires the learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes. It can be concluded that Ellis defines a task as workplan with content-oriented outcome.

### **2.3. Unfocused Tasks and Focused Tasks in Task Based Language Teaching**

Unfocused and focused tasks are two general types of tasks in task-based language teaching (Ellis 2003). Ellis (2003) uses these terms to refer to whether or not the task has a specific and predetermined linguistic focused. Moreover, tasks are designed to provide learners with opportunities for using language in general communicatively.

First, an unfocused task (Ellis 2003) is one that encourages the learner to use freely any language he or she can muster, without concentrating on just one or two specific forms. In other words, unfocused tasks may predispose learners to choose from range of forms but they are not designed with the use of a specific form in mind. For example, students are asked to tell about a picture of a view. Students are free to choose forms or linguistic features as far as they are appropriate with context. The main focus here is on meaning.

In addition, Nunan (2004) said, "An unfocused task is one in which the learners are able to use any linguistic resources at their disposal in order to complete a task." His opinion about what an unfocused task is not different from Ellis' (2003). Both said that unfocused tasks are ones that give opportunities to students to use any form that is appropriate with context to complete a task. Moreover, the important thing is meaning.

However, According to Nunan (2004), "A focused task is one in which a particular structure is required in order for a task to be completed." It means that students are hoped to use specific form or structure in completing a task. For example, Students need to use superlatives in completing a task.

Moreover, Ellis (2003) said that focused tasks are designed to aim to give opportunities to learners to process, receptively or productively, some particular linguistic feature, such as a grammatical structure. Of course this processing must occur as a result of performing activities that satisfy the key criteria of a task, i.e. that language is used pragmatically to achieve some non-linguistic outcome. Therefore, the targeted feature cannot be specified in the rubric of the task. Focused tasks, then, have two aims: one is to stimulate communicative language use (as with unfocused tasks), the other is to target the use of a particular, predetermined target feature. In addition, Ellis (2003) said that there are two main ways in which a task can achieve a focus. One is to design the task in such a way that it can only be performed if learners use a particular linguistic feature. The second way of constructing a focused task is by making language itself the content of the task. It is possible to make language point the topic of a task. For example, the topic is prepositions of time. Learners use the data supplied to complete a table by classifying the time phrases into those that use 'in', 'on', and 'at'. They, then, try to work out the rule to describe how these prepositions are used. This kind of activity which is called 'consciousness raising tasks (Ellis



2003)' is a task rather than an exercise because it requires learners to talk about the data. This talk, like talk about any other topic, involves the exchange of information and ideas and is meaning centered.

In addition, according to Ellis (2003), it is important to recognize that focused task, like unfocused tasks, must meet all criteria of tasks in general as mentioned above. In particular, there must be primary concern for message content (although this does not preclude attention to form), the participants must be able to choose the linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed, and there must be a clearly defined outcome. In this case, learners are not informed of the linguistic focus and treat the task in the same way as they would pay attention to message content in an unfocused task. In other words, this does not mean that learners will not attend to target form while they perform the task. It will be incidental. In short, attention to form is intentional.

From the two opinions above about focused tasks, it can be concluded that focused tasks are task which are designed to have students use some particular linguistic feature, such as superlatives in their communication or talk which focuses on meaning. In addition, some linguistic feature or focus is not discussed or informed before performing the tasks, but learners are guided to use the focus by the tasks themselves. For example, the task about "what are the five most helpful inventions and the five most annoying inventions?" will have learners use superlatives even though they are not told to do so.

### **III. Methods of the Research**

This research was a mixed-methods research. The QUAN-qual model (the explanatory mixed methods design) was used in this research where experiment and descriptive methods were used. First, true experimental design was used, which aimed at testing hypothesis to discover a more effective way to increase students oral production in terms of fluency. In this research, Pretest-Posttest Control is used. A pretest was given to both groups- the first experimental and the second experimental groups- to see if groups were essentially the same at the start of this research. At the end of the treatment, the posttest was administered to both groups receiving different treatments, unfocused tasks and focused tasks. The posttest scores of the first experimental group and the second experimental group were compared to determine the effectiveness of the two treatment Groups (Gay and Airasian, 2000: 392).

Clearly, the design can be seen as follows:

R    O    X1    O  
R    O    X2    O

R= random assignment of subjects to groups

X1= experimental group treated by focused tasks

X2= experimental group treated by unfocused tasks

O= pretest, posttest

In this research, the experimental research was done in eight meetings and the data collected in experimental research were analyzed and interpreted. Then, the research was continued with descriptive research based on the findings of the quantitative study (experimental research) in eight meetings. In this descriptive research, the data about what problems students found to speak English and what facilitates students to speak English in unfocused and focused tasks were collected through observation and interview, and finally analyzed and interpreted.

This research was done at STBA Prayoga Padang. The samples were the first' year students who were taking speaking class. Two groups were randomly selected. The two groups were given pretest to know their oral English fluency at the start. The procedures of taking the samples of the two classes were as follows:

1. Students were given an oral test as a pretest to know the students' English oral production.
2. Students' oral production test results were categorized into three: high, middle, and low.
3. Each Student's name in every category in the two classes was written on a piece of paper.
4. Each student was randomly selected accordance with his/her category. The first paper selected was assigned for the first experimental group taught through focused tasks. The second one selected was assigned for the second experimental group taught through unfocused tasks .This activity was done until all students' names selected were assigned to the first and the second experimental group based on their category.

The classroom procedures in each group are as follows:

**Table 1. The Classroom Procedures for the First experimental group and the Second Experimental group**

The First Experimental Group (unfocused Tasks)	The Second Experimental Group (Focused Tasks)
<p><b>1. The pre-task phase</b></p> <p>a. The students are distributed the unfocused task.</p> <p>b. The students are explained the objectives of the task.</p> <p>c. Brainstorming The teacher brainstorms what the students know about the task (unfocused task) which they are going to perform classically</p> <p>d. The teacher writes down the students' ideas on the board</p>	<p><b>1. The pre-task phase</b></p> <p>a. The students are distributed the focused task.</p> <p>b. The students are explained the objectives of the task.</p> <p>c. Brainstorming The teacher brainstorms what the students know about the task (focused task) which they are going to perform classically</p> <p>d. The teacher writes down the students' ideas on the board</p>
<p><b>2. The during-task phase</b></p> <p>a. The Students discuss the task (unfocused task) in pairs.</p> <p>b. The students perform the unfocused task in pairs (tell his or her partner about the focused task).</p> <p>c. Some pairs are asked to perform the focused task in front of the class.</p> <p>d. Every student interviews some of the classmates to find information that he/she has got from his/her partner.</p> <p>e. Some students report what they have got from their friends in front of the class.</p>	<p><b>2. The during-task phase</b></p> <p>a. The Students discuss the task (focused task) in pairs.</p> <p>b. The students perform the focused task in pairs (tell his or her partner about the unfocused task).</p> <p>c. Some pairs are asked to perform the unfocused task in front of the class.</p> <p>d. Every student interviews some of the classmates to find information that he/she has got from his/her partner.</p> <p>e. Some students report what they have got from their friends in front of the class.</p>
<p><b>3. The post-task phase</b></p> <p>a. Reflecting on the task. The teacher responds all students' performance</p>	<p><b>3. The post-task phase</b></p> <p>a. Reflecting on the task. The teacher responds all students' performance</p> <p>b. Language focus Students discuss what form they have used in</p>

	performing the task (language focus) with teacher's guide
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After the data had been collected, they were analyzed by some analyses- the normality testing, the homogeneity testing, and the hypothesis testing. These three kinds of the testing need to be used in analyzing the data in the research which are designed to see the effectiveness of the two group treatments.

The hypotheses were tested by using t-test to see the effectiveness between the experimental group and the control group . From the calculation of t-test, t-observed was compared with t-table by using 0.05 level of significance. The calculation of t-observed is interpreted by comparing it with the t-table value with 0.05 level of significance. If the t-value is equal to or greater than t-table value, then the null hypothesis (Ho) is rejected. This means that the research hypothesis (Hi) will be statistically accepted. In other words, if the t-value is smaller than the t-table value, then the null hypothesis (Ho) will be accepted and research hypothesis (Hi) will be rejected

To analyze the collected data in descriptive research in the second phase, the following steps (Gay, Mills and Airasian , 2009) were used:

1. Reading or Memoing.

The first step in analysis is to read and write memos about all field notes, transcripts, and observer comments to get an initial sense of the data.

2. Describing.

The next step, describing, involves developing thorough and comprehensive descriptions of the participants, the setting, and the phenomenon studies to convey the rich complexity of the research. The descriptions are based on the collected observations, interview data and field notes. The aim of this step is to provide a narrative picture of the setting and events that take place in it so there will be understanding of the context in which study is taking place.

3. Classifying.

Qualitative data analysis is a process of breaking down data into smaller units, determining their import, and putting the pertinent units together in a more general, analytical form. Qualitative data are typically broken down through the process of classifying or coding; the pieces of data are the categorized. A category is a classification of ideas or concepts; categorization, then, is grouping the data into themes. When concepts in the data are examined and compared to one another and connections are made, categories are formed.

#### **IV. Findings**

It was found that there was a significant difference between the mean score of students' oral English production in pretest and posttest in group 1 (taught through unfocused tasks). The students' mean score in pretest was 13.9348 and their mean score in posttest was 19.5. The standard deviations were 2.63415 in pretest and 2.07803 in posttest. From the T-test testing, it can be seen that the value of sig. was 0.000 and t result was 15.054. it was found that the value of sig. was less than sig.α (0.000 <0.05) and T result was more than T table (15.054 > 2.074).

In addition, there was a significant difference between the mean score of students' oral English production in pretest and posttest in group 2 (Taught through focused tasks). The students' mean score in pretest was 14.0652 and their mean score in posttest was 18.8478. The standard deviations were 2.00173 in pretest and 2.01379 in posttest. From the T-test testing, it can be seen that the value of sig. was 0.000 and t result was 16.923. it was found that the value of sig. was less than sig.α (0.000 <0.05) and T result was more than T table (16.923 > 2.074).



Finally, it can be concluded that the two tasks (unfocused tasks and focused tasks) have better effects on students' oral English production. Unfocused tasks have better effect on students' oral English fluency and focused tasks' have better effects on students' oral English accuracy in terms of grammar. However, from the two tasks, unfocused tasks have better effect than focused tasks because the mean score of students' oral English production in unfocused tasks is higher than mean score of students' oral English production in focused tasks. In other words, it is accepted that there is significant difference of students' oral English production between students who are taught with unfocused tasks and those who are taught with focused tasks

Moreover, there were two problems that the students found in unfocused tasks: vocabulary and grammar especially students who had lack of vocabulary and grammar, and these unfocused tasks have four advantages. They could express their ideas more freely, could improve their vocabulary and self confidence and could speak more fluently. Finally, solutions of the students' problems in unfocused tasks are that tasks should be completed with glossary and the model of doing the tasks with appropriate forms.

## **V. Conclusions and Suggestions**

It can be concluded that unfocused tasks and focused tasks are good tasks that can be used to improve students' oral English production. Unfocused tasks have better effect on students' oral English fluency because the students are free to choose the forms or grammar that they can use. In addition, focused tasks have better effect on students' oral English accuracy because the students are led to use specific form in speaking.

From the results of the research above, it can be suggested that English teachers should use task based language teaching in teaching especially speaking skill since TBLT focuses on meaning that can make students speak English more meaningfully. Moreover, English teachers should use unfocused tasks in teaching speaking skill to improve students' oral English production in term of fluency. Finally, English teachers should use focused tasks in teaching speaking skill to improve students' oral English production in term of accuracy.

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