

**THE EFFECT OF TASK COMPLEXITY AND TASK
CONDITION ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS'
ACCURACY, COMPLEXITY AND FLUENCY OF
WRITTEN TASK PERFORMANCE**

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By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement.....	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures.....	xii
List of Abbreviations.....	xiv
Abstrak.....	xvi
Abstract.....	xviii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background to the Study.....	4
1.2.1 Foreign Language Teaching in Iran.....	4
1.2.2 The Goals of Teaching English in Iran.....	5
1.2.3 Language Learning Problems in Iran.....	6
1.3 Statement of the Problem.....	9
1.4 Objectives of the Study.....	12
1.5 Research Questions.....	14
1.6 Research Hypotheses	15
1.7 Significance of the study.....	17
1.8 Definition of Key Terms.....	20

1.9 Limitations of the study	23
1.10 Organization of the Study.....	24
1.11 Conclusion.....	25

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction.....	26
2.2 Task-based Language Teaching.....	27
2.3 Task-based Learning and Pedagogy	28
2.4 History of Task-Based Language Teaching in Iran.....	30
2.5 Rationale for Task-based Language Teaching.....	33
2.6 Task Definition.....	36
2.6.1 Real-world Tasks.....	37
2.6.2 Pedagogic Tasks.....	38
2.6.3 Problems with Task Definition	40
2.7 Task Types.....	42
2.8 Narrative Tasks.....	43
2.9 The Concept of Task Complexity.....	45
2.10 Skehan's Limited-Attentional Capacity Model.....	48
2.11 Robinson's Task Complexity Model and the Cognition Hypothesis.....	50
2.12 Research on Task Complexity and Task types.....	55
2.13 Research on Task Complexity and L2 Development.....	58
2.14 Research on Task Complexity with Dialogic and Monologic	61
Task Conditions	

2.15 Here-and-Now Versus There-and-Then studies.....	64
2.16 Task condition (Distinction between Open and Closed Tasks)	66
2.17 Aspects of Production: Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency.....	69
2.17.1 CAF in SLA research	70
2.17.2 Defining CAF	71
2.17.3 Operationalizing and measuring CAF.....	74
2.17.4 Interaction of CAF components.....	75
2.18 Theoretical Framework of the Study	76
2.19 Summary	80

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction	82
3.2 Research Design	83
3.3 Setting and Participants.....	85
3.4 Instrumentation.....	87
3.4.1 Placement test	87
3.4.2 Data Analysis for Placement test	88
3.4.3 Narrative Task	89
3.4.4 Instrument Validity	90
3.4.5 Instrument Reliability.....	91
3.4.6 Post-task Questionnaire	93
3.4.7 Open-ended Question	95
3.5 Data Collection Procedure	95
3.6 Measuring CAF	98

3.6.1 Accuracy Measure.....	99
3.6.2 Fluency Measure.....	100
3.6.3 Complexity Measure.....	100
3.7 Summary	101

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

4.1 Introduction	102
4.2 Data analysis	102
4.2.1 The Effect of Task Complexity.....	103
4.2.1.(a) RQ1: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in an open task?	103
4.2.1.(b) RQ2: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of Written task performance in an open task?	105
4.2.1.(c) RQ3: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task..... condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of Written task performance in an open task?	107
4.2.1.(d) RQ4: What is the effect of There-and-Then task..... condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in a closed task?	110
4.2.1.(e) RQ5: What is the effect of There-and-Then task..... condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of Written task performance in a closed task?	111
4.2.1.(f) RQ6: What is the effect of There-and-Then task..... condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of Written task performance in a closed task?	113

4.2.2 The Effect of Task Condition.....	115
4.2.2.(a) RQ7: What is the effect of Open Task on Iranian.....	116
EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?	
4.2.2.(b) RQ8: What is the effect of Open Task on.....	118
Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?	
4.2.2.(c) RQ9: What is the effect of Open Task on Iranian.....	120
EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?	
4.2.2.(d) RQ10: What is the effect of Closed task on.....	122
Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?	
4.2.2.(e) RQ11: What is the effect of Closed task on.....	124
Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?	
4.2.2.(f) RQ12: What is the effect of Closed task on.....	125
Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?	
4.3 Supplementary Data	127
4.3.1 Analysis of the Post-task Questionnaire	128
4.3.2 Analysis of the Open-ended Question	132
4.4 Summary of the Results	136
4.4.1 Descriptive statistics.....	136
4.4.2 Summary of Hypotheses	141
4.5 Chapter Summary.....	144

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction.....	145
5.2 Summary of the Quantitative Findings	146
5.2.1 The Effect of Task Complexity	148
5.2.2 The Effect of Task Condition	152
5.3 Summary of the Supplementary Data	155
5.4 Theoretical Implications.....	156
5.5 Pedagogical Implications	157
5.5.1 Implications for EFL Teachers and learners.....	158
5.5.2 Implications for Syllabus and Task designers	161
5.5.3 Implications for Test developers.....	163
5.5 Conclusion	163
5.6 Suggestions for Further Research	167
References	170

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Cartoon Picture ‘Dr. Krif’

Appendix B: Prompts for the HN and TT Conditions, and Vocabularies

Appendix C: Measuring and Scoring System

Appendix D: Guidelines for T-units, Clauses, Word Counts, and Errors
Taken From Polio (1997)

Appendix E: Oxford Placement Test developed by Lynda Edwards (2007)

Appendix F: Descriptive Statistics for the Placement Test Scores

Appendix G: Questionnaire and Open-ended Question

LIST OF TABLES	Page
Table 2.1 Task Types	42
Table 2.2 Triadic Componential Framework: Task Complexity, Task Condition, and Task Difficulty	50
Table 3.1 Quantitative Design of the Study	84
Table 3.2 Descriptive Statistics for the Placement Test Scores	87
Table 3.3 One-way ANOVA Results for the Placement Test	88
Table 3.4 Case Processing Summary	90
Table 3.5 Item-analysis	90
Table 3.6 Inter-item Correlation	91
Table 3.7 Measuring System Used in the Study for Written CAF	97
Table 4.1 Group Statistics for Comparing Complexity of Open task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	100
Table 4.2 Independent Samples Test to Compare Complexity of Open Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	100
Table 4.3 Group Statistics for Comparing Accuracy of Open task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	102
Table 4.4 Independent Samples Test to Compare Accuracy of Open Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	102
Table 4.5 Group Statistics for Comparing Fluency of Open task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	104
Table 4.6 Independent Samples Test to Compare Fluency of Open Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	105
Table 4.7 Group Statistics for Comparing Complexity of Closed task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	106
Table 4.8 Independent Samples T-Test to Compare Complexity of Closed Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	106
Table 4.9 Group Statistics for Comparing Accuracy of Closed task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	108

Table 4.10	Independent Samples T-Test to Compare Accuracy of Closed Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	108
Table 4.11	Group Statistics for Comparing Fluency of Closed task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	110
Table 4.12	Independent Samples T-Test to Compare Fluency of Closed Task in Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then conditions	110
Table 4.13	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Complexity in Here-and-Now condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	112
Table 4.14	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Complexity in Here-and-Now Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	113
Table 4.15	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Accuracy in Here-and-Now condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	114
Table 4.16	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Accuracy in Here-and-Now Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	115
Table 4.17	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Fluency in Here-and-Now condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	116
Table 4.18	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Fluency in Here-and-Now Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	117
Table 4.19	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Complexity in There-and-Then condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	118
Table 4.20	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Complexity in There-and-Then Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	118
Table 4.21	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Accuracy in There-and-Then condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	120
Table 4.22	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Accuracy in There-and-Then Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	120
Table 4.23	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Fluency in There-and-Then condition of Open vs. Closed tasks	122
Table 4.24	Paired Samples T-test to Compare Fluency in There-and-Then Condition of Open vs. Closed Tasks	122
Table 4.25	Questionnaire Results	124
Table 4.26	Descriptive Statistics for the Questionnaire	125

Table 4.27	One-way ANOVA Results for Questions about the Content	126
Table 4.28	One-way ANOVA Results for Questions about the Grammar	126
Table 4.29	One-way ANOVA Results for Questions about the Vocabulary	126
Table 4.30	Post Hoc Tukey Test for content, vocabulary, and grammar	127
Table 4.31	Reports of the summary of Participants' Responses to Open-ended Question	128
Table 4.32	Responses for Open-ended Question	130
Table 4.33	Descriptive Statistics for the Complexity of the Four Conditions	133
Table 4.34	Descriptive Statistics for the Accuracy of the Four Conditions	134
Table 4.35	Descriptive Statistics for the Accuracy of the Four Conditions	136
Table 4.36	Summary of Hypothesis	138

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 2.1 The Theoretical Framework of the Study Based on the Robinson's Cognitive Theoretic Approach	79
Figure 4.1 Mean Differences in the Rate of Open Task Complexity Between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	105
Figure 4.2. Mean Differences in the Rate of Open Task Accuracy between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	107
Figure 4.3 Mean Differences in the Rate of Open Task Fluency between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	109
Figure 4.4 Mean Differences in the Rate of Closed Task Fluency between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	111
Figure 4.5 Mean Differences in the Rate of Closed Task Accuracy between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	113
Figure 4.6 Mean Differences in the Rate of Closed Task Fluency between Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then Conditions	115
Figure 4.7 Mean Differences in the Rate of Complexity between Open vs. Closed Tasks under The Here-and-Now Condition	117
Figure 4.8 Mean Differences in the Rate of Accuracy between Open vs. Closed Tasks under The Here-and-Now Condition	119
Figure 4.9 Mean Differences in the Rate of Fluency between Open vs. Closed Tasks under The Here-and-Now Condition	121
Figure 4.10 Mean Differences in the Rate of Complexity between Open vs. Closed Tasks under The There-and-Then Condition	123

Figure 4.11	Mean Differences in the Rate of Accuracy between Open vs. Closed Tasks under The There-and-Then Condition	125
Figure 4.12	Mean Differences in the Rate of Fluency between Open vs. Closed Tasks under There-and-Then Condition	127
Figure 4.13	Percentages of Responses for Open-ended Question	135
Figure 4.14	Mean differences in the Rate of Complexity under four Conditions	138
Figure 4.15	Mean differences in the Rate of Accuracy under four Conditions	139
Figure 4.16	Mean differences in the Rate of Fluency under four Conditions	141

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAF: Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching

CUP: Central Unit Processing

D: Disagree

LD: Lexical Diversity

EFC: Error-free Clauses

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ELT: English Language Teaching

ESL: English as a Second Language

HC : Here-and-Now Closed condition

HN: Here-and-Now

HO: Here-and-Now Open Condition

IP: Input Processing

IPT: Information Processing Theory

IR: Irrelevant Response

M: Mean

N: Neither

NE: Not Enough

NO: Neutral Opinion

ND: Number of Dysfluencies

NI: Negative Idea

NR: No Response

OPT: Oxford Placement Test

P: Probability

PI: Positive Idea

PR: Production Rate

SC: Syntactic Complexity

SA: Strongly agree

SD: Strongly disagree

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

TBLT: Task-based Language Teaching

TC: There-and-Then Closed Condition

TO: There-and-Then Open condition

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

TT: There-and-Then

TTR: Type Token Ratio

VOCD: Vocabulary Diversity

WT: Written Task

**KESAN KEKOMPLEKSAN DAN CIRI TUGASAN TERHADAP
PRESTASI KEKOMPLEKSAN, KETEPATAN DAN KELANCARAN
DALAM TUGASAN PENULISAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR EFL
DARI IRAN**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan mengkaji bagaimana peningkatan tahap kekompleksan tugas (tugas *Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then*) mempengaruhi prestasi tugas penulisan pelajar EFL Iran, semasa melaksanakan tugas *open vs. closed* yang diutarakan dalam hipotesis Robinson's Cognition (2001). Seramai 64 orang pelajar tahun satu ijazah pertama yang belajar di Universiti Azad, Gorgan, Iran terlibat sama dalam kajian ini. Mereka dipilih secara rawak dan dibahagikan ke dalam dua kumpulan yang sama: satu kumpulan didedahkan dengan tugas *Here-and-Now* dan satu kumpulan lagi didedahkan dengan tugas *There-and-Then*. Setiap kumpulan diminta untuk menceritakan dua jenis cerita yang berbeza pada dua keadaan yang juga berbeza, iaitu *open vs. closed*. Dalam empat kumpulan eksperimen, peserta menonton cerita kartun, yang merupakan cerita bergambar 9-rangka. Kemudiannya, prestasi penulisan mereka dinilai atau diukur bagi kekompleksan, ketepatan, dan kelancaran (complexity, accuracy, and fluency, CAP). Bagi menguji cara dua variabel bebas daripada tugas *Here-and-Now* dan *There-and-Then* memberi kesan terhadap variabel bersandar, maka skor kasar peserta dimasukkan dalam perisian komputer SPSS (version 20). Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa peningkatan kekompleksan tugas secara signifikan meningkatkan kelancaran dan kekompleksan dalam prestasi penulisan pelajar dalam semua kumpulan apabila peserta melakukan tugas *open*, tetapi ukuran ketepatan tidak memberikan hasil yang signifikan. Sementara itu, analisis statistik menunjukkan bahawa keadaan tugas mempunyai kesan yang signifikan terhadap ketepatan dan kelancaran prestasi penulisan

pelajar yang melaksanakan tugas *Here-and-Now*. Dapatan kajian menguatkan pengetahuan berhubung proses kognitif daripada penghasilan EFL yang dicadangkan melalui teori pemprosesan maklumat. Selanjutnya, ia mencadangkan implikasi pedagogi dan teori dalam prestasi penulisan EFL bagi kedua-dua pelajar dan guru. Pengoperasian daripada kekompleksan tugas dan keadaan tugas memudahkan mereka menyesuaikan diri terhadap konteks arahan. Penggunaan tugas ini dalam konteks pedagogi boleh dimanipulasi secara mudah untuk meningkatkan kelancaran, kekompleksan dan ketepatan.

THE EFFECT OF TASK COMPLEXITY AND TASK CONDITION ON IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS' ACCURACY, COMPLEXITY AND FLUENCY OF WRITTEN TASK PERFORMANCE

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate how increasing the level of task complexity (Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then tasks) influences the written task performance of Iranian EFL Learners while performing open vs. closed tasks led by Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2001). Sixty four first year undergraduate students studying at Islamic Azad University of Gorgan, Iran served as the participants of this study. They were randomly selected and divided into two equal groups of those with Here-and-Now tasks and those with There-and-Then tasks. Each group was asked to narrate two different types of stories under the two different conditions, open vs. closed. In the four experimental groups, the participants were presented with the cartoon picture which was a nine-frame picture story. Then, their writing performance was measured for complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). To test the way the two independent variables of Here-and-Now task and There-and-Then task affect the dependent variables, the raw scores of the participants were fed into the computer software SPSS (version 20). Results indicated that increasing task complexity significantly promoted fluency and complexity in learner writing performance across the groups when participants performed the open task, but the accuracy measure did not yield significant results. Meanwhile, the statistical analysis revealed that task condition had a significant effect on the accuracy and fluency of learner writing performance while performing Here-and-Now task, but complexity of learner writing performance was not enhanced by the task condition of the Here-and-now condition. The findings of this study strengthen the knowledge regarding the cognitive process of EFL production proposed by information processing theory. Furthermore it suggests pedagogical and theoretical implications in EFL writing performance

for both learners and teachers. The operationalization of task complexity and task condition make them easily adaptable to instructional contexts. Using these tasks in pedagogic contexts can be easily manipulated to promote accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a developing interest in the role of tasks in second language acquisition. A significant body of research now exists researching the impact of different task types and their accompanying instructions on learning. Less is identified about how task complexity, task condition and task difficulty influence adult task-based language learning and performance.

Since the 1970s, a number of researchers in the areas of second language acquisition and language pedagogy have discussed, and proposed, alternatives to the choice of traditionally defined linguistic units of syllabus content and sequence (e.g., Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Crombie, 1985; Johnson, 1996; White, 1988; Widdowson, 1978; Wilkins, 1975; Willis, 1990), some arguing tasks are a valid alternative unit, and that tasks are not simply a medium for delivering a linguistically defined syllabus (Crookes, 1986; Long, 1985, 1998; Long & Crookes, 1992, 1993; Nunan, 1993; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996 1998). Rather they argue that in a task-based syllabus pedagogic tasks should be developed and sequenced to increasingly approximate the demands of real-world target tasks, with the goal of enabling language learners to succeed in attaining needed lifetime performance objectives (Long, 1996; MacNamara, 1996; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998; Robinson & Ross, 1996). In a task-based syllabus, the focus will be primarily on meaning, not on linguistic form. The model for describing task complexity and task condition that I adopt in this study provides a way of operationalizing such sequencing decisions.

Whereas in the heydays of task-based teaching, it was hoped that this strong, almost exclusive focus on meaning without (much) explicit focus on form could promote functional and communicative foreign language development, there now is a general consensus in the field of SLA research that instruction , also task-based instruction, is most beneficial to interlanguage development when it incorporates a task-induced focus on meaning and form or an explicit, not necessarily task-induced, focus on forms, i.e. on formal linguistic aspects of the input (Spada, 1997; Long & Robinson, 1998).Although both approaches have been shown to be effective (Norris & Ortega, 2000), these approaches are more obtrusive, interrupting the flow of communication.

Far more controversial is the way in which tasks should be sequenced. For, if linguistic progression, from easy and widely applicable rules to complex and less widely applicable ones, can no longer be the principle underlying syllabus design, what then can that principle be? What characteristics of tasks can be used to determine which tasks should be offered to learners first, and which tasks should be postponed until later? Being able to assess the cognitive and linguistic demands of a task makes it possible to match the learner's level of development and the task. Being able to assess a task's difficulty is crucial to understanding how it might be performed, and whether learners will have sufficient cognitive capacity left to focus on both meaning and linguistic form. Assessing the demands a task makes on learners' social and emotional skills will equally contribute to adequate task selection in the classroom. Knowing what demands a task will make opens up the possibility of using task design to manipulate the learners' attention between form and meaning in ways that may help interlanguage development.

There is a heavy emphasis on the quantity and quality of interaction accompanying increasingly complex task performance, and the shared attention to language that this can facilitate (Tomasello, 1999), as the prompt for L2 learning processes. In relating task-based pedagogy to acquisition processes some have argued that the meaningful language exposure that task work makes available to learners enables unconscious “acquisition” processes (Krashen, 1985) to operate successfully on the comprehensible input tasks can provide (see Prabhu, 1987): language production, and attention to form, are of much less, if any, importance. In contrast, the research made here is that task-based learning, sequenced according to the criteria the researcher describes, and others like them, leads to progressively greater attention to, “noticing”, and elaborative processing and retention of input (Robinson, 1995b; Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001); progressively more analysis of the input *and* output occurring during task work (Doughty, 2001; Muranoi, 2000; Pica, 1987; Swain, 1985, 1995), and also progressively greater amounts of *interaction* which in part facilitate those attentional and analytic processes (Long, 1996; Mackey, 1999). Therefore, we can argue that both the cognitive processing, *and* interactive consequences of task sequencing decisions are mutually responsible for subsequent task-based language development.

The predictions of the Cognition Hypothesis for second language acquisition processes, are based on related claims in areas of functional/cognitive linguistics, (e.g., Givon, 1985, 1995; Rohdenburg, 1996, 1999; Talmy, 2000; Tomlin, 1990), in L1 developmental psychology (e.g., Cromer, 1991; Slobin, 1993), and in SLA research (e.g., Becker & Carroll, 1997; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Perdue, 1993; Schmidt, 1983, 2001). The hypothesis claims that increasing the cognitive demands of tasks contributing to their relative complexity along certain dimensions will (a)

push learners to greater accuracy and complexity of L2 production in order to meet the consequently greater functional/communicative demands they place on the learner and (b) promote heightened attention to and memory for input, so increasing learning from the input, and incorporation of forms made salient in the input, as well as (c) longer term retention of input; and that (d) performing simple to complex sequences will also lead to automaticity and efficient scheduling of the components of complex L2 task performance (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007: 62).

This chapter is associated with the background of the study including foreign language teaching in Iran, the goals of teaching English in Iran, language learning problems in Iran, statement of the problem, objectives of the study, research questions, research hypotheses, significance of the study, definition of important terms, limitations of the study, and organization of the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

1.2.1 Foreign Language Teaching in Iran

Historically, the first European language introduced into the Iranian educational system as a foreign language, was French. The establishment of Daroulfonoon in 1848 in Tehran the capital, marked the beginning of foreign language study in Iran. Consequently, the first group of Iranians sent abroad by the government for further studies, went to francophone countries like France and Belgium. When these graduates returned, they introduced French into the Iranian institutions where they worked or taught. In addition, a large number of works were translated from French into Farsi and vice versa. The dominance of French in academia left a lasting impact on the socio-cultural landscape. For example, a large

number of French words such as *rob-de-chamber*, *telephone*, *lustre*, *decoration*, *saloon*, *balloon*, were incorporated into Farsi and are still being widely used today (Tajadini, 2002).

The fact that English replaced French in Iran and became a subject in the school curriculum is a direct result of British and American imperialism. This began with the discovery of petroleum in the early 1900s which attracted the attention of the European powers, especially England. In 1909, the Anglo-Persian Company (later British Petroleum) was founded and southern Iran came under British suzerainty. After the Second World War, the United States of America began to play a more active role in Iran in line with its superpower status and its geo-political strategies. As English gained ascendancy as the preferred second language with the expansion of American political, economic and cultural influence in Iranian affairs, its growth in Iran was propagated through organizations such as the US Technical Cooperative Mission. During this period, English became a popular subject to learn and the Iranian government encouraged the teaching of English as it was perceived to be a language of modernity. In this regard, the Iran-American Society and the British Council played pivotal roles as western cultural centers that used to teach English to Iranians at different levels (Tajadini, 2002). In fact, certain educational centers such as Pahlavi University, now known as Shiraz University, used English as a medium of instruction for all subjects while native speakers of English were invited to teach various courses (Tajadini, 2002).

1.2.2 The Goals of Teaching English in Iran

In 1981, two years after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a high-powered Cultural Revolution Council was set up in the Ministry of Culture and Higher

Education to review the curriculum of the different stages of university education (Saffarzade, 1988). In its review, it criticized the English language teaching scenario under the prevailing system. In its conclusions, the council stressed that all university educated Iranians should have a knowledge of English to meet the two following goals (Saffarzadeh, 1988).

These goals were:

- 1) Developing the ability of using the scientific and technological information found in English language publications to achieve national self-sufficiency in science and technology.
- 2) Utilizing English for cultural exchanges and for the introduction of the Islamic-Iranian culture and teachings to the world.

Based on the recommendations of the Council, the Committee for Curriculum Planning of Foreign Languages proposed that the study of English should ensure the students' mastery of the four basic language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It was further recommended that these skills should be taught at the pre-university stage with special emphasis on the reading and writing components (Saffarzadeh, 1988; Tajadini, 2002).

1.2.3 Language Learning Problems in Iran

In the field of English Language Teaching, Iranian students and teachers face numerous problems. These problems can be classified under three categories: learners, materials and setting, and instructors. According to Mirhassani (2003), the following problems exist in the Iranian language learning environment:" a) unqualified teachers, b) old methods of teaching, c) differences in cultures, d) non-

authentic materials, e) lack of audiovisual facilities, f) the lack of native speakers, and g) the lack of satellite channels to watch English language programs".

All the problems cited above have affected the Iranian EFL learners' English language proficiency which is defined by Richards et al (1992: 204) that is the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language.

Many of the above problems are related to language learners. Primarily most language learners lack motivation to study English (Talebinezhad & Esmaeli, 2012), while it provides one of the essential key factors that initiates Learning in L2. Lack of motivation can be because academic learners do not expect to use English in authentic situations in future, as very few Iranians travel to English speaking countries and Iran is not a very attractive tourist spot for native speakers of English. Consequently, many students become mark oriented and the major reason to study English becomes to pass the course and not to learn (Karimnia & Izadparast, (2007).

Karimnia and Izadparast, (2007) also found that Iranian learners encounter problems in all language skills. This problem is partially caused by strong language interference between English and Farsi (Ghazanfari, 2003). Research shows that some of the most problematic areas for Iranian students are comprehending and using English tenses (Keyvani, 1980), reporting speech in English (Yarmohammadi, 1995), and using English authentically (Karimnia & Izadparast, 2007).

Poor teaching materials and unsuitable instruction settings lead to some of the problems regarding English Language Teaching in Iran. In the academic setting, course books have been targets for criticism. Sadeghian (1996) believes that, "for certain methodological and ideological reasons, we water the language and content so much that what we teach has no educational values" (p. 1). Karimnia and

Izadparast (2007) too, find school and university curricula inefficient and blame them as one of the reasons for students' incompetency.

Many researchers believe that in academic setting, instruction duration is barely enough (Fallahi, 2007; Karimnia and Izadparast, 2007; Talebinezhad and Esmaeli, 2005). Learners in the academic setting study English for only 2 hours 15 minutes weekly at school and only 8 credit hours out of 140 credit hours at university.

Instructor-related problems are regarded more important than the other problems as teachers have always played more important roles than curricula or the learning environment. In the academic setting in Iran, many English teachers at school level are not competent enough to teach English (Talebinezhad & Esmaeli, 2005; Sadeghian, 1996). The majority of the teachers at schools use Farsi to teach Vocabulary items or to explain grammar. The situation is not any better at universities. Of course, "the university instructors are [competent], but the problem is that students are not at the level of proficiency to make the lecturers communicate with them in English" (Talebinezhad & Esmaeli, 2005, p. 94). This becomes a vicious circle as such graduates are the next generation school teachers (Sadeghian, 1996).

Many of the problems cited above like poor teaching materials, unsuitable instruction setting and instructor related problems have been considered and discussed by many researchers (e.g. Karimnia & Izadparast, 2007; Ghazanfari, 2003; Talebinezhad & Esmaeli, 2005; Sadeghian, 1996). But, Mirhassani in 2003 pointed out that one of the most important problems of English language teaching in Iran still existing is the Methodology that has been used for teaching English. Therefore, it can be concluded that one of the major problems of language learning in Iran is the ineffectiveness of the traditional grammar-based teaching methods.

1.3 Statement of the problem

According to the university syllabus for TEFL, the ultimate goal of teaching English in Iran has been to enable the learner to communicate effectively in both the oral as well as the written mode of the language (Yarmohammadi, 1995; Saffarzadeh, 1988). However, the objectives of the syllabus are rarely attainable and Iranian students often have problems with the oral mode as well as with the written form of English language. This problem is further exacerbated by the dominant method of teaching language i.e., the Grammar-Translation Method in Iran (Mirhassani, 2003) which is mainly grammar based and hence focuses only on teaching language through translation and neglects teaching other language skills such as listening, speaking and reading. Consequently, the translation mode is the predominant tool used in the writing process and this invariably contributes to the generation of poor quality written output containing grammatical errors and even communicative failures due to the inherent differences between the two languages (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Birjandi et al. 2004). Therefore, based on the previous studies, the researcher found this problem still unsolved and decided to investigate it in his research.

In the last decade, the focus of language teaching in Iran has been placed on changing the classroom practice from the traditional passive lecture to more active group learning that learners can be more easily exposed to target language use (Tajadini, 2002). The education system in Iran is now moving toward expecting Iranian EFL learners to be able to communicate in English, therefore has put a high precedence on introducing Task-based language teaching into the curriculum (Mirhassani, 2003). Task-based language teaching is an approach whose idea is to

engage the language learners on a kind of purposeful problem solving task. When the learners engage with the tasks as problem solving activities they find themselves in a situation in which they are highly motivated, have shown interactions with the highest self-esteem and self-confidence. Therefore, the active engagement of students with the tasks in class will lead to a better language learning.

Despite the positive attitude and keen interest in using Task-based language learning as a new method of teaching English in the Iranian institutions and universities, the majority of Iranian learners have always been labeled as weak and low proficient EFL learners, and that they are not proficient enough to take any academic work, (Talebinezhad & Esmaeli, 2012). Furthermore, recent Iranian studies also emphasized the difficulties Iranian EFL students encounter in using traditional methods of Language teaching such as Grammar Translation Method (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2008). Therefore, with respect to the current less suitable teaching methods dominant in Iranian EFL setting, (Rahimpour, 2008), this research aims to investigate the feasibility of integrating task-based language teaching (TBLT) as an alternative to the rather ineffective, yet widely practiced method known as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) on Iranian EFL adult learners.

In addition, producing a fluent, accurate and ultimately complex language is a demanding endeavor for second and foreign language learners (Cook, 2005). On the other hand, one of the problems that Iranian English language learners encounter while performing a task is their inability to produce accurate, fluent, and complex language. According to the following studies (Rouhi 2006; Rouhi & Saeid-akhtar, 2008), Iranian learners have difficulties in completing their written and oral task production, with respect to accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Meanwhile, they are unable to meet the requirements of CAF while they are performing on written or oral

tasks. Sometimes, students emphasize fluency that causes a lexicalized language with a need to accessibility, while at other times they give prominence to accuracy that leads to an accurate but less fluent performance and the output is slow and presumably capacity-robbing. Finally, if they focus on complexity, it necessitates more mental attention to new forms and it is risk-taking. As a result, the lack of each of these aspects affects language production differently (Skehan, 2003). To achieve these three goals, this necessitates a lot of attention to be devoted to each aspect. Ellis (2005b, p.6) calls this stage as "bottlenecks in working memory" that may lead learners to prioritize one aspect over the other.

Thus, considering the importance of accuracy, fluency, and complexity, Iranian English language learners' inability to strike a balance amongst them in their writing, the lack of research in the area of writing, and finally mixed results of the earlier task-based research, there is a great demand to investigate these three measures of language production.

As well as the three measures of language production which formulate the dependent variables of this research, there is also a need for more research on variables of task complexity alongside task conditions which are the elements of Task-based approach and how these affect task-based language learning and performance (Rahimpour, 2008). Each of these variables of task complexity and task condition has many subcategories including some factors which have not been studied before (see table 2.2, p: 50). In addition, there are only a few studies in Iran (e.g., Rahimpour, 1997; Rouhi & Saeed-akhtar, 2008) concerning task complexity and task condition since Task Based Language Teaching is quite a new approach which is used recently as a method of language teaching (Rahimpour, 2007). Furthermore, this research is different from the previous ones in that it investigates the effect of

task complexity and task condition simultaneously while the others investigated these two variables in isolation. Thus, the purpose of this research study will be to examine the effects of task complexity and task condition on different aspects of written performance, in particular with regard to the use of general versus specific measures of language proficiency. Research findings have shown that there are multiple task effects on EFL learning and performance, but what is lacking to date, is a generally accepted framework of task characteristics to explore the combined effect of task complexity and task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy, fluency and complexity of Written task performance.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This research aims to study the effect of task complexity and task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy, fluency and complexity of written task performance. It aims to achieve the following objectives which are divided into two parts:

1. Objectives related to the variable of task complexity (Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then tasks):
 - 1.1 To investigate the influence of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in open task,
 - 1.2 To investigate the influence of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of Written task performance in open task,
 - 1.3. To investigate the influence of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of Written task performance in open task,
 - 1.4 To investigate the influence of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in closed task,

- 1.5 To investigate the influence of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in closed task, and
 - 1.6 To investigate the influence of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of Written task performance in closed task.
-
2. Objectives related to the variable of task condition (open vs. closed task):
 - 2.1 To investigate the influence of Open Task on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,
 - 2.2 To investigate the influence of Open task on Iranians EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,
 - 2.3 To investigate the influence of Open task on Iranians EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,
 - 2.4 To investigate the influence of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in There-and-Then task,
 - 2.5 To investigate the influence of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in There-and-Then task, and
 - 2.6 To investigate the influence of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in There-and-Then task.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study, the present research attempts to answer the following questions:

A) Research questions related to the variable of task complexity (Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then tasks):

RQ1: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in an open task?

RQ2: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of Written task performance in an open task?

RQ3: What is the effect of Here-and-Now task condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of Written task performance in an open task?

RQ4: What is the effect of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in a closed task?

RQ5: What is the effect of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of Written task performance in a closed task?

RQ6: What is the effect of There-and-Then task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of Written task performance in a closed task?

B. Research questions related to the variable of task condition (open vs. closed task):

RQ7: What is the effect of Open Task on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?

RQ8: What is the effect of Open Task on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?

RQ9: What is the effect of Open Task on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in Here-and-Now condition?

RQ10: What is the effect of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?

RQ11: What is the effect of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?

RQ12: What is the effect of Closed task on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in There-and-Then condition?

1.6 Research Hypotheses

To test the above mentioned research questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

A) Research hypotheses related to the variable of task complexity (Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then tasks):

Hypothesis 1: Here-and-Now task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in open tasks,

Hypothesis 2: Here-and-Now task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in open tasks,

Hypothesis 3: Here-and-Now task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in open tasks,

Hypothesis 4: There-and-Then task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in closed tasks,

Hypothesis 5: There-and-Then task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in closed tasks, and

Hypothesis 6: There-and-Then task condition will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in closed tasks.

B. Research hypotheses related to the variable of task condition (open vs. closed task):

Hypothesis 7: Open Task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,

Hypothesis 8: Open task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,

Hypothesis 9: Open task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in Here-and-Now task,

Hypothesis 10: Closed task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' complexity of written task performance in There-and-Then task,

Hypothesis 11: Closed task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy of written task performance in There-and-Then task, and

Hypothesis 12: Closed task will have a significant effect on Iranian EFL learners' fluency of written task performance in There-and-Then task.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Among the recent effective approaches in Language teaching, Task-based Language Teaching, also referred to as Task-based Instruction, has become an important approach in a way that it is currently known as the dominant teaching approach to language instruction. As Kavaliauskiené (2005) writes, teaching through tasks creates favorable learning conditions for students who study English as a foreign language. In her words, task-based instruction seems to grant meaningful use of language and promote autonomous learning. Introducing task-based instruction as a practical methodology which can be supplemented in EFL textbooks, Finch (2004) asserts that by creating such student-centered and interactive learning materials, teachers can achieve syllabus goals and can help their students to become more motivated and effective learners.

Task-based language teaching as a new method of language teaching has been used recently among Iranian researchers, methodologists, and teachers, and also being present in ELT course books (e.g., Rahimpour, 2007; Saeed-Akhtar, 2008). Therefore, the findings of this research will offer benefits and may have contributions for them. The primary significance of this study lies in taking a further step toward investigating and gaining a comprehensive understanding of this newly used method of language learning, its nature, sources and causes and its effects on teachers and learners by providing them with some new insights into appropriate teaching methods and materials to facilitate the process of language learning. It is the first attempt to investigate and analyze the possible combined effects of Task complexity and task condition on Iranian EFL learners' accuracy, fluency and complexity of written task performance.

This study addresses one of the most important academic issues confronting Iranian students at different levels of English learning in Iran which affects the three levels of language production. So, the findings of this study would also help teachers of ESL/EFL to learn about the techniques and the potential effectiveness of applying tasks to their teaching, finding out how teaching in different ways could make a difference. For instance, Tasks of appropriate complexity are likely to be more motivating for learners as they feel that they are required to meet reasonable challenges (Willis, 1996). A fundamentally important reason for using pedagogic tasks, sequenced in order of increasing cognitive complexity, as the basis of syllabus design is that such a sequencing decision should effectively facilitate L2 development; the acquisition of new L2 knowledge, and restructuring of existing L2 representations (Robinson, 2005). Increasing the cognitive demands of tasks increasingly engages cognitive resources, leading to more attention to, and incorporation and rehearsal of (oral/written) task input in working memory. It also leads to greater attention to and modification of output, facilitating the 'noticing' and 'pushing' of learner production which is important in promoting interlanguage change (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007).

Tasks are different as they play different roles in fostering learners' attention to different aspects of production. Some of them require learners to pay attention to accuracy, while some of the tasks demand fluency and finally some of them need attention to complexity. The findings of this study can help syllabus and curriculum designers and also teachers in organizing, selecting and sequencing tasks which give priority to all aspects of production rather than one aspect. Furthermore, since test conditions are the best model of performing language in real-time pressure, the results of the present study can be helpful for teachers and scholars in designing tests

to make decisions on providing different task conditions prior to written tests to increase learner efficiency in examinations, interviews and proficiency tests. This will surely increase learners' efficiency in examinations, interviews and proficiency tests by decreasing learners' mental pressure and increasing cognitive capacity as in different task conditions provided for oral and written test of TOEFL examination. Moreover, increasing the level of task complexity can lead to a selective pedagogical outcome for teachers, by giving them the opportunity to selectively focus on specific aspects that might be problematic or necessary for learners.

Over and above all concerns mentioned which are particular to Iranians, it is intended that this study will be of value in increasing knowledge in the growing field of foreign language acquisition and further, will provide useful information for language planners, curriculum designers and teachers, teachers of Iranian EFL learners in particular, and teachers interested in foreign language learning in general. It is also believed that the empirical data would be a launching pad for future research and provoke other researchers for further investigation in this regard.

As a conclusion, this research is significant for various reasons. First, this study would add a new dimension to work already existing in the EFL literature, especially with regard to the significance of the current developments in task-based learning pedagogy and using it as a method of language teaching in Iran. There has not as yet been a comprehensive and detailed review of developments in task-based learning in Iran looking especially at the issues that were addressed in this review. This is the first study which investigates the combined effect of task complexity and task condition on Iranian EFL learners' written performance. Neither has any review of task-based learning as yet been analyzed from the perspective taken in this research. Second, practitioners involved in the field of task-based learning would find that this

review and its conclusions raise important epistemological questions concerning task complexity and task condition. Finally, the results would likely point to useful theoretical and methodological directions for further research in task-based language learning.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

TEFL students: TEFL students in this research refer to students undergoing the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program.

Performance: “A person’s actual use of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing)” (Fromkin & Rodman. 1998).

Interlanguage (IL): “A type of language produced by second or foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a language” (Richards. et al 1989: 145).

Proficiency: “Refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language” (Richards. et al 1989: 159).

Accuracy : Goal in language development that places value on the benefits of learning the grammatical system of the language. Attention is paid to achieving grammatical correctness (of Allen, Cummins, Harley, Lapkin, & Swain, 1988).

Fluency: Goal in language development that places value on the benefit of interaction as a vehicle to stimulate language learning. Attention is paid to developing the ability to interpret and communicate meaning (of Allen, Cummins, Harley, Lapkin, & Swain, 1988; Hammerly, 1988a, 1988b).

Complexity: Complexity is associated with testing the boundaries of the underlying

interlanguage system by attempting to produce new vocabulary and structures that have not been well integrated into the interlanguage system. It is also the capacity to use more advanced language lexically and structurally (Skehan, 1996, Skehan & Foster, 1999).

CLT : Communication language teaching aims to develop the ability of learners to use language in real communication. However, the goal of communicative language learning is not so different from that of earlier methods such as the audiolingual or oral situational method which also claimed to develop the ability to use language communicatively (Ellis 2003:27).

TBLT : Task-based language teaching, also known as task-based language learning (TBLL) or task-based instruction (TBI) focuses on the use of authentic language and on asking students to do meaningful tasks using the target language (Ellis, 2003).

SLA : Second language acquisition or second language learning is the process by which people of a language can learn a second language in addition to their native language(s). "Second language acquisition" refers to what the student does; it does not refer to what the teacher does (Ellis, 1994).

Task : "A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than forms" (David Nunan, 1989).

Real-World tasks : "Real-world or target tasks, as the name implies, refers to use of language in the world beyond the classroom. These tasks, refer to the things we do with language in everyday life, from writing a poem to confirming an airline reservation to exchanging personal information with a new acquaintance".(Nunan 2003:19)

Pedagogical tasks: A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than forms. They have a non-linguistic outcome, and can be divided into rehearsal tasks or activation tasks (Crookes, 1986).

Narrative task: Writing or telling the story of something or reporting an event that has happened (Kiernan, 2005).

Here-and-Now vs. There-and-Then: tasks which differ along the Here-and-Now versus There-and-Then dimension clearly require the learner to distinguish between the temporality of reference (present versus past), and to use distinct deictic expressions (this, that, here, there) to indicate immediately present, versus absent objects. This sequence of conceptual and linguistic development takes place in child L1 acquisition of English, and a similar sequence of linguistic development has been observed in L2 acquisition, as well (Robinson, 2001).

Cognition Hypothesis: The Cognition Hypothesis of task-based language learning proposes that pedagogic tasks be sequenced for learners largely on the basis of increases in their cognitive complexity so as to increasingly approximate the demands of real-world target tasks (Robinson, 2003).

Task Complexity: The concept of task complexity, springs from the need to establish criteria for sequencing tasks in a syllabus from easy/simple to difficult/complex in a reasoned way that will foster interlanguage development (Robinson, 2003)..

Task Condition: Task conditions are specified in terms of the information flow in classroom participation (e.g., one- versus two-way tasks) and in terms of grouping of participants (e.g., same versus different gender). Task conditions may also make

tasks with the same intrinsic cognitive load more or less difficult. They concern, on the one hand, the participation dimension, which is specified in terms of the well-known oppositions "convergent/divergent" or "open/closed", with divergent and open tasks being the more complex ones (Robinson, 2003).

Task Difficulty : Task difficulty refers to learner perceptions of the level of difficulty of a task, Which results from the abilities they bring to the task (e.g., intelligence, working memory capacity) as well as their affective responses (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy). Task difficulty accounts for interlearner variability, i.e. differences between learners when they perform the task (Robinson, 2003).

1.9 Limitations of the Study

Due to its own particular features, this study has certain limitations:

Firstly, this study is restricted to learners who are adult EFL learners in order to control the internal validity of the research.

Secondly, the research problem didn't investigate all kinds of tasks. It concentrates on certain kinds of tasks performed by certain types of students studying English as a foreign language in Iran. Thus, the results are not generalizable to all kinds of tasks. Of course, they are expected to have common features, but identifying them requires a number of comparable studies.

Thirdly, the study focuses on task complexity as an independent variable and its possible effects on task-based language learning and performance. There are several other dimensions connected to task complexity in the literature on various subject areas such as novelty and uncertainty. Some aspects (e.g., task duration, task ambition as well as task performers' expertise and experience) and their effects on

task-based language learning and performance were not analyzed. However, these examinations as such are not in the central focus of the present study.

Yet another limitation of this study was that the questionnaire and open-ended question do not follow any research question and are used to add more insights to the quantitative findings of the study; therefore, only descriptive statistics have been used to explain the data.

Finally, this study is looking at the issue from cognitive prospective, other dimensions such as sociocultural aspects are not taken into consideration.

1.10 Organization of the Study

Chapter One outlines the background of the study, the education system in Iran, the statement of the problem, the objectives of the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two contains a review of literature related to the present study. This includes discussions of task-based language learning, cognition Hypothesis which includes task complexity, task condition and task difficulty and their possible effects on task-based language learning and performance. It also presents the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter Three provides an extensive description of the methodology and design utilized in the study. It also describes the procedure pertaining to sample selection and data collection instruments.

Chapter Four analyses the collected data and presents the statistical analysis related to the data analysis.