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The Effect of Open vs. Closed Tasks on Improving Iranian EFL Learners' Oral Performance

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Abstract

Among the latest efficient approaches in language teaching, Task-based Language Teaching has turned up to be the main approach in a way that it is currently recognized as the leading teaching approach in language instruction (Ji & Pham, 2017). Using the proper tasks based on the proficiency level of the learners can facilitate the process of language learning. The present study aimed at investigating the effect of open and closed tasks on improving Iranian EFL learners' oral performance at intermediate and advanced levels. This study is a quasi-experimental research with pretest and posttest design. The participants of the study included 55 female EFL learners at Jahadeh Daneshgahi language institute in Tabriz city, who were selected through cluster random sampling method. The data were collected through 10 open tasks and 10 closed tasks along with an oral pretest and an oral posttest checklist that examined grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, breakdown-response, interaction, and speech flow of learners' oral performance. The tasks were selected from the *Four Corner* series (Richards & Bohlke, 2012). The data were analyzed by a two-way MANCOVA test and ANCOVA. The obtained results indicated that open and closed tasks can improve EFL learners' oral performance and there is no significant difference between open and closed tasks in developing learners' oral performance in both levels. Besides, at the advanced level, the amount of oral performance development is greater than the intermediate level. The outcomes of this study can be useful for EFL teachers and learners regarding using the optimal kind of tasks in improving oral performance.

Keywords: Task, Oral performance, Open tasks, Closed-tasks

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As English is an international language, we use it to communicate with other people from different nationalities, so that the need to learn English is increasing every day. As a result, people need to gain the ability to speak English for international communication. Among the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) speaking is the most productive and the most problematic skill for most of the learners (Alaraj, 2017). As Yashima, Zenuck-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) have pointed out, evolving learners' oral communicative skills is one of the most stimulating accountabilities in language teaching. The practice of dissimilar communicative activities and tasks is an indispensable feature that regulates students' inclination to contribute to spoken accomplishments in language classrooms. In other words, we can say that where there is proper tasks, good preparation, and knowledge about the topic, there will be good oral communication. During the last three decades, task-based language teaching has gained in popularity because of its research bases from a variety of perspectives such as second language acquisition, pedagogy, education, and philosophy (Long, 2015).

The current years have witnessed emerging attention in the position of tasks in second/foreign language instruction. There is currently an important collection of investigations that study the effect of different task types and their associated directions on language learning (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mirbaghero & Khalaji, 2017; Talebinezhad & Esmaeili, 2012; Gashan & Almohaisen, 2014; Shoarnaghavi, Seifoori, & Ghafoori, 2014). However, these studies have scantly considered the effect of closed and open tasks between two proficiency levels of advanced and intermediate EFL learners. Thus, this article intended to explore the influence of two types of tasks which are open tasks and closed tasks on improving the oral performance of Iranian EFL learners at intermediate and advanced proficiency levels.

To achieve our objectives, the current research aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do open tasks affect the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral performances?
2. Do closed tasks affect the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral performances?
3. Is the interaction effect of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level and tasks different in improving their oral performances (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, breakdown response, interaction, and speech flow)?

Review of the Related Literature

Tasks have been classified into different types. For instance, Willis (1996) proposes six types of tasks: (1) Listing, (2) Sharing Personal Experience, (3) Creative Tasks, (4) Problem solving, (5) Ordering and Sorting, and (6) Comparing. Meanwhile, Prabhu (1987) identified three types of cognitive task varieties: (1) Information gap activity, (2) Opinion gap activity, and (3) Reasoning gap activity. Tasks can also be divided into Open and Closed types. "Closed tasks are ones that are highly structured and have very specific goals. Open tasks are ones that are more loosely structured, with a less specific goal" (Willis, 1996, p.28). Ellis (2003) makes a differentiation between these tasks. In open tasks, there is no single and predetermined solution and also their degree of openness is different. Duff (1986) believes that activities in which learners have their own ideas and say can be considered as open tasks like opinion-gap tasks. In closed type tasks, learners should reach a single solution and can barely express their own opinions. Information-gap tasks are considered as closed. Below some related studies are reviewed.

Huei-Chun (2007) explored the influence of task types among EFL learners' performance in speaking tests. The learners were Taiwanese college students. The participants were thirty students of English majors in a Taiwan university. In that study, three task types were adopted, they included picture

description, answering questions, and presentation. The data were collected by testing the participants in a language-lab site, and they answered by via audiotape. Once the speaking exam was finished, the learners completed a questionnaire intended to draw their affective responses to the three task types. The gathered data were measured individually by two EFL teachers who were native speakers of English. In addition, the taped conventions were transcribed to be used in the analysis of accuracy, complexity, and fluency of the learners. As the results were specified, there were not any significant differences in the learners' holistic rating scores considering the three types of the tasks, comprising picture description, answering questions, and presentation. In other words, the examinees showed no dissimilar performance on different task types of EFL speaking exams. Founded on the outcomes, significant differences exist in the complexity and fluency of test-takers' discourse considering dissimilar types of tasks. Besides, the research showed that the learners acquired better scores in their fluency ability once they accomplished answering task questions rather than the scores for the further two task types.

Ekiert, Lampropoulou, Revesz, and Torgersen (2018) examined the influence of task types and language proficiency related to discourse appropriacy in spoken task performance. They inspected pedagogic tasks as means of representing EFL learners' discourse appropriacy on speaking skill. Some 80 EFL learners' discourse appropriacy was estimated through three pragmatically-oriented task types including complaint, refusal, and advice through four diverse levels of proficiency. As the results exhibited, considering all of the task types, increasing general proficiency caused the increasing of ratings related to discourse appropriacy. According to the findings, there was a distinct difference in discourse appropriacy concerning the intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. Moreover, for learners at higher levels of proficiency, discourse appropriacy was not different from task to task. On the other hand, task type created a difference among less proficient

learners in terms of task refusal that was chiefly perplexing matched with further tasks.

Talebinezhad and Esmaeili (2012) studied the effectiveness of dictation tasks, individual reconstruction tasks, and collaborative tasks on EFL learners' acquisition of gerunds and infinitives which were associated with two types of instruction: explicit and implicit. The result indicated that there was an important difference among the groups. In this study, forty pre-intermediate male EFL learners in Lordegan, Iran, were designated as the main participants of the research. Here, for collecting data, a timed Grammaticality Judgment Test (GJT) was administered. With the aim of comparing three groups of this study, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. In this study, one-way ANOVAs, as well as t-test, were administered for mean comparison. Based on the findings of statistical analysis, we can support the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the performance of the three groups of the learners once they accomplished the treatments. The treatment of the study included individual reconstruction, dictation, and collaborative reconstruction. The participants who finished the collaborative reconstruction task overtook the other two groups that finished the dictation tasks and individual reconstruction tasks. Furthermore, the dictation group overtook the individual reconstruction group. Additionally, there was a significant difference between explicit and implicit groups. Besides, after getting the distinctive instructions, the explicit group showed superiority in relation to the implicit group. That is to say, considering the acquisition of grammatical structures, the explicit group had better performance than the implicit group.

Gashan and Almohaisen (2014) scrutinized the influence of task repetition on the accuracy and fluency of EFL female Saudi students' oral performance. As the outcomes revealed, task repetition occasioned in significant differences in the subjects' oral discourse considering fluency and accuracy. Thus, the result of the research revealed that in order to improve the

learners' oral performance, teachers and researchers could design effective task repetition.

Zahabi (2016) studied the influence of task conditions and task complexity on Iranian EFL learners' fluency, complexity, and accuracy of written task performance. The outcomes of this research strengthened the awareness concerning the cognitive processes of EFL production suggested by the theory of information processing. The outcomes designated that increase of task complexity has a significant effect on improving fluency and complexity in learners' written performance through the groups once the learners executed the open tasks, nevertheless the accuracy quantity revealed no significant consequences. In the meantime, as the statistical analysis displayed, accuracy and fluency of learners' writing performance were influenced significantly by task conditions during Here-and-Now tasks. However, the task condition of the Here-and-Now condition did not augment the complexity of learners' written performance.

In another study, Mirbagheri and Khalaji (2017) investigated open and closed types of tasks and the accuracy of speaking. The aim of this research was to explore the influence of task types on the oral production accuracy of Iranian EFL students. To accomplish this aim, some 30 learners were designated from amongst 100 EFL learners at Safir Language institute, Gholhak branch in Tehran centered on their performance in *Oxford Placement Test*. In this study, the language speaking classes were held based on two different circumstances. During the first period of the speaking lesson, the investigators administered a closed task type intended for five sessions. A sample of a closed task was the Information Gap Task that was used in this study. During the next five sessions, open tasks were used and the participants concentrated on the General Discussion phase. Succeeding the application of these two task types, the researchers asked about the difficulty level of each task during an interview session. Results showed that the participants agreed that closed tasks were more effective and through using these tasks leaners

focused more on the accuracy of speaking skill. The aforementioned study considered oral performance generally, however, in the present research speaking is examined in terms of different components.

Ganjouee, Ghonsooly, and Fatemi (2018) studied the effect of task-based teaching on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' emotional intelligence and speaking skill. The results indicated that the experimental group accomplished meaningfully well on the speaking posttest than the control group. Moreover, the outcomes similarly revealed that the learners in the experimental group turned out to be much more emotionally intelligent than the ones in the control group.

Method

Participants

The population of this study consisted of EFL learners in Tabriz city. The participants of the study comprised 55 female EFL learners at Jahadeh Daneshgahi language institute, Tabriz branch. For the aim of the study, the participants were selected randomly from learners at the intermediate level and advanced level studying at this language institute. The age range of these learners was 14 to 34 years old.

Table 1.
Characteristics of the Participants

Participants	Number	Gender	Age Range	Level	Language background
	55	Female	14-34	Intermediate and Advanced	Turkish/Persian

Instruments and Materials

The data of the study were collected through 10 open tasks and 10 closed tasks along with an oral pretest and an oral posttest checklist that examined grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, breakdown-response, interaction, and

speech flow of the learners' oral performances. This checklist was adapted from Correia (2016). The validity was ensured through content validity and the reliability was estimated by inter-rater reliability through the Pearson Correlation Coefficient (0.87). The tasks were selected from the *Four Corner* series (Richards & Bohlke, 2012) since they were used by the institute in which the data were collected. In order to ensure the preliminary homogeneity of the groups regarding their English language proficiency, a placement test of the institute was administered. The instrument for oral performance assessment is in the Appendix.

Procedure

The study included a pretest and posttest phase. In the pretest phase, the oral performances of the learners were examined based on the speaking assessment grid (checklist) of this study, which is based on the grid proposed by Correia (2016). Later the learners at the intermediate level were divided into two groups, the first group received open tasks and the second group was instructed based on the closed tasks. The same process was applied for the learners in the advanced level group, i.e. the learners at the advanced level were divided into two groups including a class that was conducted by open tasks and a class in which the teacher used closed task types for improving learners' oral performances. At the posttest phase, which was after 10 sessions of treatment, the oral performances of the learners in open and closed task groups were examined once more based on the speaking assessment grid in both advanced and intermediate levels. The sample of open and closed tasks are presented in the Appendix. The research hypotheses were tested through two-way MANCOVA and ANCOVA in order to find out the effectiveness of task types in improving the learners' speaking separately in both intermediate and advanced levels. To observe the normal distribution of the variables, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was administered. On the other hand, in the control group of both advanced and intermediate classes open and closed task types

were not used, definitely and separately, and just oral performances of the learners were examined in the pretest and posttest phases. That is to say, in the control group, both open and closed tasks were administered by the teacher based on the predetermined syllabus.

Operational Definition of Key Terms

Task: According to Nunan (2004, p. 25), "task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning". In the present study, the task is defined in terms of open and closed tasks selected from *Four Corners* textbooks.

Oral Performance (Speaking): Speaking skill is the capability of learners to control communication, to exemplify or transmit opinions by using language. The speaking skill is considered to be a productive aural/oral ability, which contains constructing organized spoken statements in order to transmit meaning (Nunan, 2004). In the present study, oral performance is defined in terms of a checklist adapted from Correia (2016). The checklist examined grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, breakdown-response, interaction, and speech flow of learners' oral performance.

Assessment of oral performance: Correia (2016) has proposed a 'speaking assessment grid', which assesses the oral performance from six different points: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, breakdown-responses, interaction, and speech flow. In the present study, Correia's assessment grid is adopted for assessing the learners' oral performances.

Results

Testing the Normality of Data

This section deals with descriptive statistics related to the distribution of learners' oral performances in open and closed tasks at the intermediate and advanced levels and the result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

Distribution of learners' oral performances at intermediate and advanced levels in open tasks. Table 1 shows the information about the distribution of learners' oral performances at intermediate and advanced levels in open tasks.

Table 1.

Distribution of Learners' Oral Performances at Intermediate and Advanced Levels in Open Tasks

Variables	Levels	Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Pronunciation	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.53	0.91
		Posttest	15	2.46	0.83
	Advanced	Pretest	11	3.27	0.9
		Posttest	11	4.18	0.75
Grammar	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.4	0.82
		Posttest	15	2.46	0.83
	Advanced	Pretest	11	3.54	0.82
		Posttest	11	3.81	0.87
Vocabulary	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.06	0.7
		Posttest	15	2.53	1.06
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.9	1.04
		Posttest	11	4.09	0.83
Breakdown-response	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.33	1.34
		Posttest	15	2.26	0.96
	Advanced	Pretest	11	3.63	0.67
		Posttest	11	4.27	0.64
Interaction	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.4	1.29
		Posttest	15	2.53	1.18
	Advanced	Pretest	11	3.63	1.02
		Posttest	11	4.09	0.83
Speech Flow	Intermediate	Pretest	15	2.4	1.45
		Posttest	15	2.26	1.03

Variables	Levels	Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation
	Advanced	Pretest	11	3.36	0.92
		Posttest	11	3.9	0.83
Oral Performance	Intermediate	Pretest	15	14.13	5.87
		Posttest	15	14.53	5.42
	Advanced	Pretest	11	20.36	4.8
		Posttest	11	24.36	4.006

Table 1 shows that in open tasks at the intermediate level, the mean score of pronunciation in the pretest is 2.53 with the standard deviation of 0.91, and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.46 with the standard deviation of 0.83. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 2.4 with the standard deviation of 0.82 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.46 with the standard deviation of 0.83. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 2.06 with the standard deviation of 0.7 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.53 with the standard deviation of 1.06. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 2.33 with the standard deviation of 1.34 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.26 with the standard deviation of 0.96. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 2.4 with the standard deviation of 1.29 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.53 with the standard deviation of 1.18. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 2.4 with the standard deviation of 1.45 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.26 with the standard deviation of 1.03. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in pretest is 14.13 with the standard deviation of 5.87 and in the posttest, the mean score is 14.53 with the standard deviation of 5.42.

Moreover, in the open tasks at the advanced level, the mean score of pronunciation in the pretest is 3.27 with the standard deviation of 0.9 and in the posttest, the mean score is 4.18 with the standard deviation of 0.75. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 3.54 with the standard deviation of 0.82 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.81 with the standard deviation of 0.87. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 2.9 with the standard deviation of 1.04 and in the posttest, the mean score is 4.09 with the standard

deviation of 0.83. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 3.63 with the standard deviation of 0.67 and in the posttest the mean score is 4.27 with the standard deviation of 0.64. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 3.63 with the standard deviation of 1.02 and in the posttest, the mean score is 4.09 with the standard deviation of 0.83. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 3.36 with the standard deviation of 0.92 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.9 with the standard deviation of 0.83. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in the pretest is 20.36 with the standard deviation of 4.8 and in the posttest, the mean score is 24.36 with the standard deviation of 4.006.

Distribution of learners' oral performances at intermediate and advanced levels in closed tasks. Table 2 shows the information about the distribution of learners' oral performances at the intermediate and advanced levels in closed tasks.

Table 2.

Distribution of Learners' Oral Performances at Intermediate and Advanced Levels in Closed Tasks

Variables	Levels	Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Pronunciation	Intermediate	Pretest	13	3.07	1.03
		Posttest	13	3.07	1.3
	Advanced	Pretest	16	3.18	0.75
		Posttest	16	3.87	0.71
Grammar	Intermediate	Pretest	13	3	1.08
		Posttest	13	2.8	1.21
	Advanced	Pretest	16	3.31	0.7
		Posttest	16	3.93	0.77
Vocabulary	Intermediate	Pretest	13	3.23	1.16
		Posttest	13	3.19	1.31
	Advanced	Pretest	16	3.5	0.73
		Posttest	16	4.25	0.77
Breakdown-response	Intermediate	Pretest	13	3	0.91
		Posttest	13	2.84	1.21
	Advanced	Pretest	16	3.5	0.63

Variables	Levels	Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation
		Posttest	16	4.25	0.68
Interaction	Intermediate	Pretest	13	3.76	1.3
		Posttest	13	3.46	1.56
	Advanced	Pretest	16	2.93	0.68
		Posttest	16	3.75	0.77
Speech Flow	Intermediate	Pretest	13	2.92	1.11
		Posttest	13	2.96	1.23
	Advanced	Pretest	16	2.81	0.83
		Posttest	16	3.43	0.72
Oral Performance	Intermediate	Pretest	13	19	5.9
		Posttest	13	18.34	7.51
	Advanced	Pretest	16	19.25	3.39
		Posttest	16	23.5	3.81

Table 2 shows that in closed tasks at the intermediate level, the mean score of pronunciation in pretest is 3.07 with the standard deviation of 1.03, and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.07 with the standard deviation of 1.3. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 3 with the standard deviation of 1.08 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.8 with the standard deviation of 1.21. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 3.23 with the standard deviation of 1.16 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.19 with the standard deviation of 1.31. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 3 with the standard deviation of 0.91 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.84 with the standard deviation of 1.21. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 3.76 with the standard deviation of 1.3 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.46 with the standard deviation of 1.56. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 2.92 with the standard deviation of 1.11 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.96 with the standard deviation of 1.23. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in the pretest is 19 with the standard deviation of 5.9 and in the posttest, the mean score is 18.34 with the standard deviation of 7.51.

Moreover, in closed tasks at the advanced level, the mean score of pronunciation in pretest is 3.18 with the standard deviation of 0.75 and in the posttest the mean score is 3.87 with the standard deviation of 0.71. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 3.31 with the standard deviation of 0.7 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.93 with the standard deviation of 0.77. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 3.5 with the standard deviation of 0.73 and in the posttest, the mean score is 4.25 with the standard deviation of 0.77. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 3.5 with the standard deviation of 0.63 and in the posttest, the mean score is 4.25 with the standard deviation of 0.68. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 2.93 with the standard deviation of 0.68 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.75 with the standard deviation of 0.77. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 2.81 with the standard deviation of 0.83 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3.43 with the standard deviation of 0.72. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in the pretest is 19.25 with the standard deviation of 3.39 and in the posttest, the mean score is 23.5 with the standard deviation of 3.81.

Table 3.
Distribution of Learners' Oral Performances at Intermediate and Advanced Levels in Control Group

variables	Levels	group	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Pronunciation	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.55	0.99
		Posttest	20	2.55	0.99
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.63	1.02
		Posttest	11	2.72	0.9
Grammar	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.45	0.99
		Posttest	20	2.45	0.99
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.09	0.53
		Posttest	11	2.54	0.68
Vocabulary	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.5	1.1
		Posttest	20	2.5	1.1
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.5	1.32
		Posttest	11	2.59	1.24

Breakdown-response	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.7	1.03
		Posttest	20	2.7	1.03
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.54	1.21
		Posttest	11	2.9	0.83
Interaction	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.45	1.23
		Posttest	20	2.45	1.23
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.9	1.3
		Posttest	11	3	1.18
Speech Flow	Intermediate	Pretest	20	2.45	1.09
		Posttest	20	2.45	1.09
	Advanced	Pretest	11	2.72	1.1
		Posttest	11	2.81	0.98
Speaking Skills	Intermediate	Pretest	20	15.1	5.82
		Posttest	20	15.1	5.82
	Advanced	Pretest	11	15.4	5.88
		Posttest	11	16.59	4.85

Distribution of learners' oral performances at intermediate and advanced levels in the control group. Table 3 shows that in the control group at the intermediate level, the mean score of pronunciation in the pretest is 2.55 with the standard deviation of 0.99, and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.55 with the standard deviation of 0.99. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 0.99 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 0.99. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 2.5 with the standard deviation of 1.1 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.5 with the standard deviation of 1.1. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 2.7 with the standard deviation of 1.03 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.7 with the standard deviation of 1.03. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 1.23 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 1.23. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 1.09 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.45 with the standard deviation of 1.09. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in pretest is 15.1 with the standard deviation of 5.82 and in the posttest, the mean score is 15.1 with the standard deviation of 5.82.

Moreover, in the control group at the advanced level, the mean score of pronunciation in pretest is 2.63 with the standard deviation of 1.02 and in the posttest the mean score is 2.72 with the standard deviation of 0.9. The mean score of grammar in the pretest is 2.09 with the standard deviation of 0.537 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.54 with the standard deviation of 0.68. The mean score of vocabulary in the pretest is 2.5 with the standard deviation of 1.32 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.59 with the standard deviation of 1.24. The mean score of breakdown response in the pretest is 2.54 with the standard deviation of 1.21 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.9 with the standard deviation of 0.83. The mean score of interaction in the pretest is 2.9 with the standard deviation of 1.3 and in the posttest, the mean score is 3 with the standard deviation of 1.18. The mean score of speech flow in the pretest is 2.72 with the standard deviation of 1.1 and in the posttest, the mean score is 2.81 with the standard deviation of 0.98. Generally, the mean score of oral performance in pretest is 15.4 with the standard deviation of 5.88 and in the posttest, the mean score is 16.59 with the standard deviation of 4.85.

Based on the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov in open and closed tasks and the control group, it can be argued that the significance level of all the variables is greater than 0.05. Thus, parametric tests are appropriate for analyzing the data in this study.

Response to Research Question One

RQ1: Do open tasks improve Iranian EFL learners' oral performance?

For assessing this research question, an ANCOVA test was administered. Initially, homogeneity of slope regression and variance homogeneity was applied.

The results of Table 3 illustrates that for assessing the interaction of the dependent variable and independent variables it can be assumed that the presumption was not violated ($p>0.05$).

Table 4.
Results of Slope Regression Homogeneity

Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Group	26.29	1	26.29	2.44	0.12
X	1501.37	1	1501.37	139/6	0/000
Group * X	8.18	1	8.18	0.76	0.38
Error	569.97	53	10.75		
Total	18737.25	57			

Table 4 shows the results of Levene's test for variance homogeneity. It can be assumed that variances are equal and this presumption was not violated ($p>0.01$).

By confirming the assumptions, the covariance analysis is presented as follows:

Table 5.
Results of Levene's Test for Variance Homogeneity

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig
Speaking Skills	48.91	1	55	0.013

Table 5 shows the results of covariance analysis related to the oral performance scores of the learners in the open task group and the control group. In this analysis, pretest scores were controlled statistically. That is to say, the effect of the scores related to similar variables was removed from the oral performance scores of the learners in both groups and the groups were compared based on the remaining variance. The obtained results showed that there is a meaningful difference between oral performance scores of the learners in both groups ($p<0.05$, $F=4.55$, $Eta=0.078$). By using open tasks in the classes, the oral performance of the learners can be improved at about 7.8 percent.

Table 6.
Results of Covariance for the Effect of Open Tasks on Improvement of Oral Performance

Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig	Eta
Pretest	1502.36	1	1502.36	140.32	0.000	0.72
Group	48.8	1	48.8	4.55	0.03	0.078
Error	578.15	54	10.7			

As Table 6 shows, the scores of the learners' oral performance in open tasks with the mean score of 18.04 is significantly greater than the score of learners' oral performance in the control group with the mean score of 16.17. Consequently, open tasks significantly improve the oral performance of the learners.

Response to Research Question Two

RQ2: Do closed tasks affect the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' oral performance?

For assessing this research question, an ANCOVA test was administered. Initially, homogeneity of slope regression and variance homogeneity was applied.

Table 7.
Mean and Standard Deviation of Oral Performance Improvement in Two Groups

Group	Mean	Std Error	95% confidence interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Open task	18.04	0.64	16.75	19.33
Control	16.17	0.58	14.99	17.35

The results of Table 7 illustrates that for assessing the interaction of dependent and independent variables it can be assumed that the presumption was not violated ($p>0.05$).

Table 8.
Results of Slope Regression Homogeneity

Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Group	20.87	1	20.87	1.6	0.21
X	1124.9	1	1124.9	86.53	0.000
Group * X	6.32	1	6.32	0.48	0.48
Error	728.004	56	13		
Total	22575	60			

Table 8 shows the results of Levene's test for variance homogeneity. It can be assumed that variances are equal and this presumption was not violated ($p>0.01$).

By confirming the assumptions, the covariance analysis is presented as follows:

Table 9.
Results of Levene's Test for Variance Homogeneity

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig
Speaking Skills	18.25	1	58	0.02

Table 9 illustrates the results of covariance analysis related to the oral performance scores of the learners in the closed task group and control group. In this analysis, pretest scores were controlled statistically. That is to say, the effect of similar variable scores was removed from the oral performance scores of the learners in both groups and the groups were compared based on the remaining variance. The obtained results showed that there is a major difference between oral performance scores of the learners in both groups ($p<0.05$, $F=4.36$, $Eta=0.071$). By using closed tasks in the classes, the oral performance of the learners can be improved at about 7 percent.

Table 10.
Results of Covariance for the Effect of Closed Tasks on Improvement of Oral Performance

Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig	Eta
Pretest	1247.36	1	1247.36	96.82	0.00	0.62
Group	56.17	1	56.17	4.36	0.04	0.071
Error	734.32	57	12.83			

As Table 10 shows, the score of the learners' oral performance in closed tasks with the mean score of 19.38 is significantly higher than the score of learners' oral functioning in the control group with the mean score of 17.31. Consequently, the closed tasks significantly improve the oral performance of the learners.

Response to Research Question Three

RQ3: Is the interaction effect of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level and tasks different in improving learners' oral performance (pronunciations, vocabulary, grammar, breakdown response, interaction, and speech flow)?

In order to answer the third research question, a two-way MANCOVA t-test was administered and the results of this test along with mean scores and the assumptions required for this test are presented in tables 10 and 11. This research question measured the interacting effect of open and closed tasks on oral performance improvement at the intermediate and advanced levels. Based on the findings, there is no major difference between using open and closed tasks for developing learners' oral performance. It can be affirmed that there is no substantial difference between the application of open and closed tasks on developing six components of the learners' oral performance (pronunciations, vocabulary, grammar, breakdown response, interaction, and speech flow). However, considering the level of the participants there is a significant difference in developing six components of oral performance. In considering the interaction of task type and level of the learners in developing

six components of oral performance, there is no noteworthy difference between the groups.

Equality of variance-covariance matrix. Table 11 shows the results of variance-covariance matrix equality.

Table 11.
Mean and Standard Deviation of Oral Performance Improvement in Two Groups

Group	Mean	Std Error	95% confidence interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Closed task	19.38	0.69	18.004	20.77
Control	17.31	0.66	15.97	18.65
Box's M	F	df1	df2	Sig
81.11	1.45	42	3371.74	0.03

As Table 11 displays, in this test the data have equal variance-covariance ($p>0.001$).

Levene's test. Table 12 shows the results of Levene's test that assesses the equality of variances for a variable calculated for two or more groups.

Table 12.
Results of Levene's Test

Variables	F	df1	df2	Sig
Pronunciation	2.98	3	51	0.04
Grammar	1.25	3	51	0.29
Vocabulary	1.06	3	51	0.37
Breakdown-response	2.55	3	51	0.06
Interaction	4.02	3	51	0.012
Speech flow	4.53	3	51	0.07

According to Table 12, which shows the results of Leven's test, the significance level of the test for all variables is greater than 0.01. Therefore, it can be assumed that the variances are equal.

Multi-Variable test of mean score difference based on the interactive effect of task form and level on oral performance. Table 13 shows the results of a multi-variable test of mean scores' difference based on the interactive effect of task type and level of the learners on their oral performance.

Table 13.
Multi-Variable Test of Mean Difference Based on the Interactive Effect of Task Form and Level on Oral Performance

		Value	F	Sig	Eta
Wilks' Lambda	**Group**	0.94	0.38	0.88	0.05
	Level	0.56	5.23	0.000	0.44
	Group * Level	0.78	1.82	0.12	0.21

As Table 13 displays, there is no important difference considering the effect of open and closed tasks on the combined dependent variables ($F=0.38$, $p>0.05$, Wilks' Lambda=0.94). In fact, there is no significant difference between using closed and open tasks for developing learners' oral performance. However, there is an important difference considering the effect of intermediate and advanced levels on the combined dependent variable ($F=5.23$, $p<0.05$, Wilks' Lambda=0.56). In fact, there is a major difference between levels of the learners considering the improvement in the oral performance at intermediate and advanced levels. The results of the interactive effect indicated that there is no noteworthy difference considering the use of open and closed tasks and the level of the learners in combined dependent variables ($F=1.82$, $p>0.05$, Wilks' Lambda=0.78). In fact, using open and closed tasks, separately at different levels of intermediate and advanced, revealed no significant difference.

Results of F test for comparing the effect of open and closed tasks on oral performance at intermediate and advanced levels. Table 14 indicates the results of F test for comparing the effects of open and closed tasks on improving learners' oral performance at intermediate and advanced levels.

Table 14.
Results of F Test for Comparing the Effect of Open and Closed Tasks on Oral Performance at Intermediate and Advanced Levels

	Variables	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig	Eta
Group	Pronunciation	0.1	1	0.1	0.18	0.67	0.004
	Grammar	0.02	1	0.02	0.04	0.83	0.001
	Vocabulary	2.55	1	2.55	0.000	0.99	0.000
	Breakdown-response	0.19	1	0.19	0.31	0.57	0.007
	Interaction	0.21	1	0.21	0.3	0.58	0.007
	Speech flow	0.03	1	0.03	0.06	0.79	0.002
Level	Pronunciation	12.06	1	12.06	20.73	0.000	0.31
	Grammar	8.45	1	8.45	15.95	0.000	0.26
	Vocabulary	13.31	1	13.31	21.02	0.000	0.31
	Breakdown-response	20.56	1	20.56	33.06	0.000	0.42
	Interaction	11.18	1	11.18	16.13	0.000	0.26
	Speech flow	9.96	1	9.96	19.09	0.000	0.29
Group * Level	Pronunciation	0.14	1	0.14	0.24	0.62	0.005
	Grammar	0.71	1	0.71	1.35	0.25	0.02
	Vocabulary	0.31	1	0.31	0.49	0.48	0.01
	Breakdown-response	5.51	1	5.5	0.000	0.99	0.000
	Interaction	0.05	1	0.05	0.08	0.77	0.002
	Speech flow	0.47	1	0.47	0.91	0.34	0.02
Error	Pronunciation	26.18	45	0.58			
	Grammar	23.85	45	0.53			
	Vocabulary	28.49	45	0.63			
	Breakdown-response	27.98	45	0.62			
	Interaction	31.19	45	0.69			
	Speech flow	23.47	45	0.52			
Total	Pronunciation	690.5	55				
	Grammar	646.25	55				
	Vocabulary	754.25	55				
	Breakdown-response	714	55				
	Interaction	726	55				
	Speech flow	596.25	55				

According to Table 14, which shows the results of dependent variables separately, it can be indicated that there is no substantial difference between the application of open and closed tasks for developing six components of the learners' oral performance (pronunciations, vocabulary, grammar, breakdown response, interaction, and speech flow) ($p>0.008$). However, there is an important difference between the levels of the learners in developing six components of oral performance ($p<0.008$). In considering the interaction of task type and level of the learners in developing six components of oral performance, there is no meaningful difference between the groups ($p>0.008$).

Mean score and standard deviation of open and closed tasks. Table 15 shows the mean scores and standard deviation of the scores obtained from using open and closed tasks in improving six components of the oral performance.

Table 15.
The Mean and Standard Deviation of the Scores from Open and Closed Tasks in Improving Six Components of the Oral Performance

Variables	Tasks	Mean	Std Error
Pronunciation	Closed task	3.32	0.16
	Open task	3.44	0.17
Grammar	Closed task	3.21	0.15
	Open task	3.26	0.16
Vocabulary	Closed task	3.5	0.16
	Open task	3.49	0.18
Breakdown-response	Closed task	3.46	0.16
	Open task	3.31	0.17
Interaction	Closed task	3.49	0.17
	Open task	3.34	0.18
Speech flow	Closed task	3.15	0.15
	Open task	3.09	0.16
Speaking Skills	Closed task	20.16	0.85
	Open task	19.95	0.91

Table 15 exhibits that the mean scores of the oral performance and its components among the learners using open and closed tasks are close to each other and thus they have no significant difference.

Mean score and standard deviation of oral performance and its components. Table 16 shows the mean scores and standard deviation of the scores related to oral performance and its six components among the learners at intermediate and advanced levels.

Table 16.

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Oral Performance and its Components at Intermediate and Advanced Levels

Variables	Level	Mean	Std Error
Pronunciation	Intermediate	2.79	0.16
	Advanced	3.97	0.16
Grammar	Intermediate	2.74	0.15
	Advanced	3.73	0.16
Vocabulary	Intermediate	2.87	0.17
	Advanced	4.12	0.17
Breakdown-response	Intermediate	2.61	0.17
	Advanced	4.16	0.17
Interaction	Intermediate	2.84	0.18
	Advanced	3.99	0.18
Speech flow	Intermediate	2.58	0.15
	Advanced	3.66	0.16
Speaking Skills	Intermediate	16.45	0.87
	Advanced	23.65	0.89

Table 16 displays that the mean score of oral performance and its components among learners at the advanced level is significantly greater than the mean score of the learners at the intermediate level.

Mean score and standard deviation of open and closed tasks' effect on oral performance and its components at intermediate and advanced levels. Table 17 indicates the mean scores and standard deviation of the scores obtained from using open and closed tasks that develop oral performance and its six components among the learners at intermediate and advanced levels.

Table 17.

Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Open and Closed Tasks' Effect on Oral Performance and its Components at Intermediate and Advanced Levels

Variables	Level	Group	Mean	Std Error
Pronunciation	Advanced	Closed task	3.86	0.23
		Open task	4.09	0.25
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.79	0.24
		Open task	2.78	0.23
Grammar	Advanced	Closed task	3.84	0.22
		Open task	3.62	0.24
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.58	0.23
		Open task	2.9	0.22
Vocabulary	Advanced	Closed task	4.21	0.24
		Open task	4.03	0.26
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.78	0.25
		Open task	2.96	0.24
Breakdown-response	Advanced	Closed task	4.24	0.24
		Open task	4.09	0.26
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.69	0.25
		Open task	2.54	0.24
Interaction	Advanced	Closed task	4.1	0.25
		Open task	3.87	0.28
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.88	0.26
		Open task	2.8	0.25
Speech flow	Advanced	Closed task	3.58	0.22
		Open task	3.73	0.24
	Intermediate	Closed task	2.72	0.23
		Open task	2.44	0.22
Speaking Skills	Advanced	Closed task	23.85	1.25
		Open task	23.46	1.36
	Intermediate	Closed task	16.47	1.31
		Open task	16.44	1.25

Generally, Table 17 reveals that the mean scores of oral performance and its components among the learners in interaction with task type and proficiency level (in four groups) are close to each other and hence have no significant difference.

Discussion

In this study, the effect of open and closed tasks on improving Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill was examined. The first research question examined the effect of open tasks among the participants that were at intermediate and advanced level classes. This question did not consider the level of the participants; it only tested the task type. The null hypothesis (NH) of research question one was rejected; that is to say, open tasks affected the improvement of the oral performance of the learners at intermediate and advanced levels.

The second research question considered the influence of closed tasks on learners' oral performance at intermediate and advanced levels. The related null hypothesis was rejected and the findings showed closed tasks improve the oral performance of learners at the intermediate level and similarly the oral performance at the advanced level.

In order to respond to the third research question, two-way MANCOVA was administered. The results demonstrated that the interactive effect of EFL learners' proficiency level and tasks is different in improving learners' oral performance (pronunciations, vocabulary, grammar, breakdown response, interaction, and speech flow). That is to say, two task types equally affect the improvement of oral performance at intermediate and advanced level classes and considering the level of learners, it can be maintained that in advanced level class task types improved the learners' speaking skill more than the oral performance of the learners at the intermediated level.

The results generally established the importance of task-based language teaching regardless of the task type. This point is in agreement with the findings of Ganjouee, Ghonsooly, and Fatemi (2018) who examined the effect of task-based coaching on the improvement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners' speaking skill and proved the influence of task-based teaching on the development of Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study are different from Mirbagheri and Khalaji (2017) who investigated open and closed types of tasks and the accuracy of speaking. The participants agreed that closed tasks were more effective and through using these tasks leaners focused more on the accuracy of speaking skill.

Also, in the same vein Shoarnaghavi, Seifoori, and Ghafoori (2014) investigated the effect of divergent tasks on the complexity and accuracy of intermediate Iranian EFL learners' task-based oral performance. The results showed that there was a substantial difference between groups in the accuracy of their speech, but there was no noteworthy difference in the complexity of their speech. The results of the current research revealed the effectiveness of both closed and open tasks on grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, breakdown-response, interaction, and speech flow components of learners' oral performance.

A study conducted by Yadollahi and Rahimi (2015) also backed up the results of the present study. They investigated the roles of task varieties on learners' speech in a cooperative virtual learning context. The results displayed the substantial influence of task types on the improvement of learners' written tasks. Thus, it can be claimed that task types are effective in developing learners' writing along with their spoken performance.

Conclusion and Implications

The results obtained from the present study exposed that closed tasks are effective in improving learners' speaking. In addition, open tasks affect the development of learners' speaking. This improvement is established at both intermediate and advanced level classes. However, the extent of this is greater among advanced level learners than at intermediate level learners. That is to say, teachers at the intermediate level can make use of both closed and open tasks in order to enhance their learners' oral functioning. The same conclusion was obtained for the teachers at the advanced level. It can be concluded that

since closed tasks are determined to transfer a certain linguistic, grammatical or communicative feature for the learners, they are more applicable in clarifying a particular linguistic element. In this way, teachers can work more precisely in instructing learners in order to speak accurately and fluently. On the other hand, open tasks do not constrain learners in using a certain structure or a set of vocabularies. Therefore, they are free to express their opinions in the form of the desired arrangement. This is more convenient and applicable among advanced level learners who have the required knowledge and background and are experienced enough in selecting a special form and function.

Thus, it can be argued that both closed and open tasks can be used by teachers in different proficiency levels and by proper practice of various tasks they can guarantee the improvement of their learners. The results of the current research can be of great significance for EFL teachers, learners, textbook developers and evaluators. Teacher and course book developers can use the findings in their profession and recognize that task types are important for developing linguistic and communicative skills. That is to say, coursebook developers can benefit from the findings and increase the inclusion of various kinds of tasks related to authentic contexts of the foreign language, especially the ones that can facilitate and improve oral performance. Furthermore, teachers and evaluators are required to pay more professional and academic attention to administering appropriate types of tasks in assessing learners' spoken and written performances.

As speaking is the most important and most difficult skill, and EFL learners are expected to have the ability to communicate orally, assessing oral performance is tough and time-consuming. The findings of the current study can enlighten the teachers about the tools used to teach and assess speaking.

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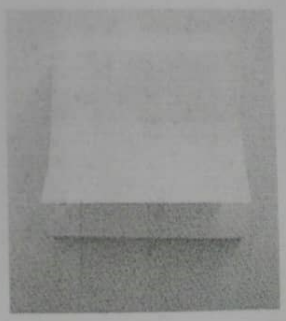
Appendix
Speaking Assessment Grid

Level	Pronunciation	Grammar	Vocabulary	Breakdown-Response	Interaction	Speech Flow
5	No mispronunciations	Grammar accurate, only occasional minor errors2;	Appropriate and precise to the context;	Effectively uses kinesics and circumlocution;	Interacts fittingly. No delay in answering. Is sensitive to turn-taking;	Speaks fluently
4	Rarely mispronounces	Few minor errors, no pattern	Appropriate to the context. Rare lack of preciseness;	Resorts to kinesics and circumlocution easily. Not always effective;	Interacts easily. Minor delay in answering. Is usually sensitive to turn-taking;	Rarely hesitates
3	Occasional mispronunciations which do not interfere with understanding;	Few minor errors, no pattern. Occasional major errors3;	Choice of words sometimes imprecise or inadequate to the context;	Resorts mostly to kinesics. Uses circumlocution with effort;	Interaction is adequate, but with long delay in answering. Difficulty in turn--taking;	Maintains flow of speech but uses repetition and/ or self-correction;
2	Often mispronounces, but intelligible with effort;	Constant major and minor errors;	Limited or inadequate to the context;	Little or no use of circumlocution. Limited use of kinesics	Interaction limited to simple phrases. May answer illogically	Hesitations are frequent and disrupt the flow of speech;
1	Is unintelligible	Grammar inaccurate, except in formulaic expressions.	Lacking in vocabulary necessary to the context	No use of strategies to compensate proficiency deficiencies	Cannot maintain interaction. Produces irrelevant answers	Speech flow so halting that little interaction is possible.

Closed-task sample

B Complete the sentences. Use the passive with the simple present, simple past, or present perfect. Then compare with a partner.

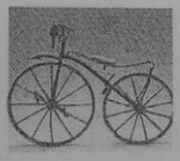
The 3M company _____ (know) for its innovation for a long time. But there have been mistakes along the way. Today employees _____ (encourage) to learn from past mistakes. That's how Arthur Fry learned about a special glue. It _____ (create) in the 3M lab in 1968. The glue wasn't strong enough, so it _____ (forget). But Fry found it in 1974 and used it to develop Post-it Notes. The original Post-it Notes _____ (improve) since then, and now they _____ (sell) all over the world.



Open task sample

4 Speaking Early innovations

Group work Look at these products. What improvements have been made to the products recently? Have all of the improvements been good ones?


"Tennis shoes have been made lighter. Their design has been improved a lot."