

# Task Type Effects on EFL Oral Production, Perception, and Proficiency

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## Abstract

This study investigates the oral production and perceptions of 38 EFL learners using two task types: personal information and narrative picture tasks. It also examines whether proficiency level moderates the impact of task type on EFL speech. Results from two-way ANOVAs and thematic analysis revealed that the personal information task was less demanding for EFL learners than the narrative picture task. The data also indicated that EFL learners achieved higher levels of accuracy and syntactic complexity during the personal information task, diverging from theoretical underpinnings and existing research findings in this area. Furthermore, the data showed that while proficiency affected the accuracy and fluency of speech production, it did not moderate task performance, suggesting that EFL learners' performance on the two tasks remained consistent across different proficiency levels. These findings have significant implications for research, pedagogy, and assessment in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** accuracy, complexity, EFL speech fluency, proficiency, task type

## 1. Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language, with students typically having limited opportunities for English practice outside the classroom. These language classrooms are described as "minimum input" environments (Larson-Hall, 2008, p. 36), characterized by limited weekly instruction hours and few chances for EFL learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language (Saito & Hanzawa, 2018). The predominant teaching method in Saudi classrooms is Presentation, Practice, and Production (PPP), which entails introducing new language elements, practicing them, and then applying them in production activities (see Albarqi, 2020). Although this method offers organization and opportunities for practice, it has faced criticism for placing greater emphasis on accurate language production rather than fostering meaningful communication (Willis, 1996).

The emphasis on accuracy and the limited availability of authentic communication opportunities in classrooms impact EFL students' oral proficiency (see Chen, 2021). One language aspect particularly vulnerable to this influence is fluency, which requires not only an expanded knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also consistent practice to facilitate seamless retrieval of such knowledge (Kormos, 2006). For this reason, L2 researchers emphasize the importance of employing Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which facilitates learning in a manner similar to natural language acquisition by providing opportunities to use the L2 authentically in language classes (Faez & Tavakoli, 2019). It involves meaning-focused activities that include a gap, encouraging L2 learners to use their linguistic resources to communicate and complete the task meaningfully (Ellis, 2003, 2012). Tasks are believed to involve naturalistic acquisition mechanisms, enabling "the underlying interlanguage system to be stretched, and drive development forward" (Skehan, 1998, p. 95). TBLT research has identified various features and conditions, such as task types, that can impact oral performance in different ways.

While previous studies have explored the impact of task types on oral performance, the majority of these studies have been conducted within L2 contexts where TBLT is the primary instructional approach (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022). In fact, both theoretical frameworks and empirical findings have predominantly emanated from data collected in TBLT contexts. There is still a need to determine whether similar outcomes can be observed within EFL contexts, where the pedagogical focus tends to be more form focused. Another gap in this area is the need to complement the examination of task performance with retrospective interviews, as recommended by researchers (see Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022). By investigating students' perceptions of task difficulty, researchers can gain valuable insight into the factors contributing to their perceived difficulty. Such an investigation bears significant implications, particularly in the context of this study, where task characteristics have been underexplored due to the predominance of traditional teaching methods (see Albarqi, 2020). The present study also seeks to examine whether EFL proficiency can mediate task performance.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Task Complexity

Task complexity and its impact on L2 oral performance have been extensively investigated in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) research (see Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998, 2009). Task performance is commonly evaluated through three main dimensions: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). Complexity pertains to the use of new linguistic items, indicating development within the interlanguage system. Accuracy reflects an inclination towards control and error reduction. Fluency refers to an emphasis on conveying meaning

seamlessly, fostering automatization and real-time processing (Skehan & Foster, 2012). Within TBLT, two principal models of task complexity have been proposed: Skehan's (1998, 2009) Limited Attentional Capacity and Robinson's (2003, 2015) Cognition Hypothesis. These models offer theoretical frameworks regarding variables that influence L2 performance across the three areas of CAF. Manipulating these variables can promote development in these areas and enhance pedagogical decision-making (Skehan & Foster, 2012).

Skehan's (1998, 2009) model posits that task complexity must be viewed within the context of the limited attentional resources available to speakers during L2 learning. According to this perspective, learners may struggle to effectively attend to both form and meaning when engaging in demanding tasks (Skehan & Foster, 2012). Consequently, there tends to be a trade-off between complexity and accuracy, with one often improving at the expense of the other. Conversely, L2 learners can achieve simultaneous improvements in complexity and fluency, or accuracy and fluency. This assumption has been validated in some studies, which indicate that tasks involving familiar information lead to greater accuracy and fluency (see Skehan & Foster, 2012). On the other hand, Robinson's (2001) Cognition Hypothesis challenges the idea of limited attentional capacity. This model proposes the presence of multiple attentional pools and expandable resources that adapt to increasing communicative demands (Robinson, 2001). Increasing task difficulty results in enhanced accuracy and complexity, as they are perceived not to compete for attentional resources. Additionally, it is anticipated that demanding tasks will negatively impact fluency. The Cognition Hypothesis distinguished between 'resource-directing' and 'resource-dispersing' variables (see Robinson, 2001, 2005). Resource-directing factors, such as contextual support and reasoning demands (e.g., intentional, causal, spatial reasoning), draw learners' attention towards the language code, leading to higher rates of complexity and accuracy. For instance, increasing task demand along intentional reasoning can result in increased complexity and accuracy (see Awwad et al., 2017). In contrast, increasing the demands along 'resource-dispersing' variables, such as planning time, single vs. dual tasks, and prior knowledge, may lead to trade-off effects between complexity and accuracy. For example, the absence of planning time or insufficient prior knowledge diverts the task performer's attention away from the linguistic aspects (accuracy and complexity), leading to a detrimental effect on L2 performance. In summary, the former model anticipates better performance on less complex tasks, while the latter predicts better performance on more complex ones.

In terms of task type, it has been suggested that different tasks can involve varying levels of task demand. Some L2 studies have explored the impact of task types, such as personal information and narrative tasks, on CAF aspects. For example, Foster and Skehan (1996) investigated the effects of three task—personal information exchange, narrative, and decision-making—on the performance of pre-intermediate English language learners. Their findings revealed that the personal information task elicited more accurate and fluent language but was associated with low syntactic complexity, whereas the narrative task elicited high levels of complexity but low levels of accuracy. Similarly, Kuiken and Vedder (2007) examined the effects of task type on L2 written production. They found that task complexity influenced accuracy but not fluency, with no observed interaction between task type and proficiency level. Furthermore, Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli (2022) explored the impact of task types, including personal information and narrative tasks, and found that the personal information task elicited the most accurate and fluent language. They did not find interaction effects between task type and proficiency. Research suggests that personal information tasks, which involve discussing personal experiences, are often perceived as familiar topics due to their relevance to individuals' lives, interests, and backgrounds (Bui & Huang, 2018). In summary, the findings of these studies align with the theoretical underpinnings of Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity theory, suggesting that less demanding tasks may promote greater accuracy and fluency in L2 speech but not accuracy and complexity.

### *2.2 Proficiency Levels and Task Performance*

Language proficiency, defined as the essential linguistic abilities and competencies required for effective comprehension and expression in a second language, is pivotal in influencing L2 performance and acquisition (Gaillard & Tremblay, 2016). TBLT researchers has consistently shown that L2 learners with higher levels of proficiency tend to exhibit better task performance compared to less proficient learners (see Albarqi & Tavakoli, 2023; Kim et al., 2016). This advantage can be attributed to the automatization of certain speech processes, particularly the Formulator sub-processes (Towell et al., 1996). Automatization refers to the underlying speech processes becoming rapid, effortless, and less reliant on attentional resources (see DeKeyser, 2001; Tavakoli, 2019). According to Levelt's (1989) model of language production, these speech processes consist of the conceptualizer, the initial component responsible for generating preverbal messages or ideas for communication. The formulator entails grammatical encoding, which includes lexical access, syntactic and phonological encoding. The articulator executes speech, which is revised by the monitor before and after articulation (Levelt, 1989).

Automatization of speech processes enables learners to allocate their attentional resources more effectively to other aspects of speech processing, such as monitoring (Kormos, 2006). In contrast, less proficient L2 learners often struggle with formulation and articulation, as these processes require attentional resources and can hinder L2 processing and production (Kormos, 2006). The availability of cognitive resources at different proficiency levels significantly influences L2 production. As learners develop their proficiency, they become more adept at coordinating their available linguistic resources (Bygate, 2001). This coordination enables L2 speech processes to become automatized to a certain degree, thereby enhancing the learner's speech fluency (Segalowitz, 2010).

### *2.3 EFL Learners' Perception of Task Demand*

Perceptions of task demand refer to how learners perceive the difficulty or complexity of a given task. L2 learners' perceptions of task demand are important because they can influence their level of engagement and motivation in completing the task (Dörnyei & Dewaele 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2022). Several L2 studies have employed retrospective interviews to determine if tasks are at the expected level of

difficulty (Ishikawa, 2011; Robinson, 2015), whether L2 learners are aware of how they allocate their attentional resources during L2 processing (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), or if certain task features contribute to task demand (Sasayama, 2016; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). However, only a few studies have examined the factors contributing to task demand from L2 learners' point of view. One of the earliest attempts to identify factors contributing to task demand through retrospective interviews was conducted by Tavakoli (2009). The research drew upon four picture tasks with varying degrees of story structure. Data analysis demonstrated that the main factors mentioned were cognitive demands, linguistic demands, clarity of prompts, amount of information, and task structure (Tavakoli, 2009). Another qualitative study conducted by Awwad (2019) identified several factors that increased cognitive demand based on EFL learners' perspectives. These factors include task instructions, task content, time pressure and cognitive demand. Zhang and Zhang (2022) also investigated the extent to which four factors (i.e., prior knowledge, planning time, task steps, and task type) impact learners' perceptions of cognitive demand. From the learners' viewpoints, prior knowledge was perceived as the strongest factor in determining task difficulty. These studies examined difficulty of tasks within the same type (i.e., task sequencing). However, there is still a need to examine EFL learners' perception of task demand in relation to different types of tasks.

In summary, the existing TBLT literature has made significant contributions to our understanding of task types and their impact on L2 oral production (e.g., Skehan, 1996; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022). However, a significant gap exists in the research regarding the impact of task types within the EFL settings, which predominantly emphasize form-focused instruction and have limited authentic interaction. We still need to understand how EFL learners perform and perceive different types of tasks within such contexts, and whether their oral performances align with the existing research and theory in this area.

### 3. Research Questions

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of two task types—personal information and picture-based narrative tasks—on EFL learners' oral production in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency, as well as their perceptions of task difficulty. Additionally, it examines whether learners' EFL proficiency is a significant factor in performing these tasks. By analyzing these factors, the study aims to provide insights into the relationship between proficiency and task types in EFL learners' oral performance. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) How do task types (personal information and picture-based narrative tasks) affect L2 learners' oral production (as measured by CAF) and their perceptions of task difficulty within an EFL context?
- 2) What are L2 learners' perceptions of task demand in personal information and picture-based narrative tasks?
- 3) Are there effects and interaction effects of proficiency on EFL oral production in the two tasks (personal information and picture-based narrative)?

### 4. Method

#### 4.1 Participants

The study was conducted at the English Language Centre at Taif University, a state university in Saudi Arabia. Due to face-to-face restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was conducted online using the Blackboard platform. A total of 38 undergraduate learners from the Information Technology Department expressed interest in participating in the study. They all had at least 7 years of English language education at the primary, intermediate, and secondary school levels. The students in this study were in their first year of university and were placed in their classes based on the results of a university-administered placement test. However, their proficiency levels were further assessed through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). After completing the tasks, 24 participants were retrospectively interviewed about their perceptions of the two tasks (see Appendices A and B). All participants provided written consent, indicating their agreement to participate and their understanding of the research's ethical considerations.

#### 4.2 Oxford Placement Test

The grammar and vocabulary sections of the OPT were used to assess the linguistic knowledge of EFL learners (see Allan, 2004). The OPT consisted of 60 questions, with 1 point awarded for each correct answer. This test was chosen because it aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Participants' proficiency levels indicated that 21 students were at the A1 level and 17 at the A2 level, according to the CEFR framework.

#### 4.3 Tasks

Participants were instructed to complete two tasks: a personal information task and a picture-based task (see Appendices A and B). The rationale for employing these two tasks is their frequent use within the study's context, which is crucial for the study's ecological validity (see Préfontaine & Kormos, 2015; Tavakoli & Foster, 2011). However, it is important to note that these tasks, while commonly used as exercises within the study's context, differ from communicative tasks in TBLT (for distinctions between tasks and exercises, see Shehadeh, 2024). The personal information task required participants to speak about their weekend routine, including ideal weekend activities and associated feelings. The narrative picture prompt had fixed sequential structures and required participants to narrate a story and discuss the characters' feelings. It consisted of six colored images depicting a story of a group of students visiting a museum, culminating in an unexpected fire during the visit. The participants were given two minutes to read through the instructions and plan their speech before performing the tasks.

**5. Coding**

*5.1 Measures of analysis of speech production*

The participants in this study were asked to speak for one minute in each task. The data was transcribed and segmented into AS units following the guidelines proposed by Foster et al. (2000). The data was then coded for several CAF measures, as these measures have been commonly used in L2 research as oral indices of L2 proficiency (e.g., Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). CAF measures are valuable and reliable in evaluating variations in L2 proficiency and task features (Pallotti, 2009).

Table 1. Operationalisation of CAF measures

Dimension	Measures	Definition
Complexity	Syntactic complexity	It is calculated by dividing the number of words by the number of AS units (Foster & Tavakoli, 2009).
	Percentage of error-free clauses	This measure entails calculating the percentage of error-free clauses in a speech sample. It is determined by dividing the number of error-free clauses by the total number of clauses in the speech sample and multiplying the result by 100.
Accuracy		
Fluency	Speed	Number of syllables pronounced per minute.
	Repair	This refers to the total number of times a speaker corrected themselves within a single speech sample.
	Silent pauses	It involves dividing the number of silent pauses by the duration of the speech and then multiplying the result by 60 to get the number of silent pauses per minute.
	Filled pauses	It involves dividing the total number of instances where the speaker used filler words such as "err" or "um" by the duration of the speech in seconds. The result is then multiplied by 60 to determine the number of filled pauses per minute.

The speech samples were analyzed and coded for CAF measures following the established research in the field (e.g., Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Foster & Tavakoli, 2009; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). The mean length of AS units was calculated manually after removing all the filled pauses from the text and dividing the number of words by the number of AS units. Speed fluency was measured by the number of syllables per minute, calculated using the Syllable Count program ([www.syllablecount.com](http://www.syllablecount.com)). The accuracy measurement was calculated manually, as described in Table 1. To ensure consistency, 10% of the data was coded by a second rater, achieving an agreement of 97% for syllables per minute, 95% for syntactic complexity, 87% for error-free clauses, 89% for repair, and 92% for pauses. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

**6. Analyses and Results**

*6.1 Quantitative Analysis*

A mixed method approach was employed to answer the first research question. For the quantitative analysis, proficiency was utilized as a between-participant continuous variable, while task type served as a within-participant variable. Relevant descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. The data were analyzed using a two-way ANOVA to examine the effects and interaction effects of task types and proficiency on EFL oral production. A summary of the results of the two-way ANOVAs is presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the two types of tasks

Measures	Weekend M(SD)	Museum M (SD)
Accuracy	47.7 (20.1)	33.7 (18.3)
Silent Pauses	22.2 (5.1)	22.2 (4.7)
Filled Pauses	16.2 (7.9)	17.8 (7.7)
Repair	3.42 (2.6)	4.6 (3.4)
Syllable per Minute	132.3 (37.8)	130.7 (34.6)
Mean Length of AS units	13.4 (4.1)	10.7 (2.9)

Whenever significant differences were detected, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni adjustment, with a significance level of  $p < 0.008$  (0.05 divided by 6). The results in Table 3 indicated significant differences between the personal information task (the Weekend) and the picture-based task (Museum) in terms of accuracy measure. Specifically, the personal information task elicited a

higher level of accurate oral performance ( $M = 47.7, SD = 20.1$ ) than the picture-based task ( $M = 33.7, SD = 18.3, p < .000$ ), with statistical significance confirmed by the Bonferroni adjustment.

Table 3. Two-Way Analyses of Variance in CAF

Measures	Effects	F	P	Partial eta squared
Accuracy	Task Type	19.37	.000*	.150
	Proficiency	4.43	.000*	.446
	Task Type * Proficiency	.949	.529	.147
Silent Pauses	Task Type	.007	.931	.000
	Proficiency	3.16	.000*	.365
	Task Type * Proficiency	.581	.918	.096
Filled Pauses	Task Type	.1.61	.207	.014
	Proficiency	5.99	.000*	.521
	Task Type * Proficiency	.395	.990	.067
Repair	Task Type	6.72	.014	.054
	Proficiency	3.44	.000*	.385
	Task Type * Proficiency	1.23	.237	.184
Syllable per Minute	Task Type	.392	.532	.004
	Proficiency	3.39	.000*	.417
	Task Type * Proficiency	.386	.992	.066
Mean Length of AS units	Task Type	28.64	.000*	.207
	Proficiency	1.59	.068	.224
	Task Type * Proficiency	.714	.805	.115

Note. Corrected alpha level of  $p < .008$ .

Furthermore, observed differences in performance were noted between the personal information task and the picture-based task on syntactic complexity measure. Specifically, the personal information task was found to induce a significantly greater mean length of AS units ( $M = 13.4, SD = 4.1$ ) compared to the picture-based task ( $M = 10.7, SD = 2.9, p < .000$ ). Collectively, these findings indicate that speaking about the personal information induced higher rates of accuracy and syntactic complexity in EFL speech compared to the narrative picture task. This partly addresses the first research question, which investigated the extent to which task types impact EFL oral performance. The qualitative analysis will be discussed in the subsequent section.

The third research question explored the role of proficiency on L2 oral performance. As shown in Table 3, all CAF measures were significantly affected by proficiency ( $p < .000$ ), except for syntactic complexity, which did not reach statistical significance. The results yielded small to medium effect sizes when assessed by partial eta squared (Table 3). This observation suggests that proficiency has a significant impact on EFL oral performance, as assessed by the CAF measures. Concerning the interaction effects of proficiency on EFL oral production, the results of the two way-ANOVA revealed no significant interaction effect between proficiency and task types. Hence, it can be reasonably concluded that EFL learners at differing proficiency levels exhibited more accurate and syntactically complex language when performing the personal information task compared to the picture narrative task. EFL learners across different proficiency levels demonstrated consistent performance on both types of tasks.

### 6.2 Qualitative Analysis

To answer the first and second research questions, retrospective interviews were conducted. These interviews aimed to uncover students' perceptions of task demands and the factors contributing to task difficulty. Conducted in Arabic, the responses were later translated into English and subjected to systematic coding using thematic analysis, following the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2022). This method was selected for its flexibility and thoroughness in analyzing the data. Regarding the first research question, the data showed that the majority of EFL learners perceived the picture-based narrative task as more demanding ( $M = .67, SD = .48$ ) than the personal information task ( $M = .13, SD = .34, p = .000$ ). This finding supports the two-way ANOVA of the impact of task types on EFL oral production, suggesting that the personal information task was less demanding than the picture-based task. Regarding the second research question, the coding process identified three sources of difficulty for the picture-based task and one for the personal information task (see Appendix C). For the picture-based task category, three themes emerged (see Figure 1):

1. Linguistic ability, encompassing vocabulary and pronunciation, with 7 codes accounting for 29.2% of the data.
2. Content of the picture prompts, including details and characters' feelings, with 10 codes representing 41.7% of the data.
3. Controlled nature of the picture prompts, with 2 codes making up 8.3%.

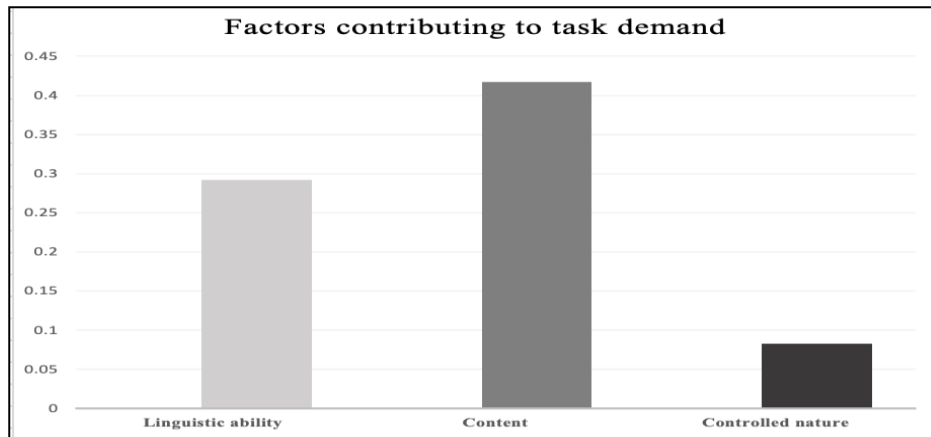


Figure 1. factors contributing to the picture prompt difficulty

The first factor relates to inadequate linguistic knowledge among EFL learners, including vocabulary and pronunciation. Example 1 illustrates how a lack of vocabulary can impede performance in these tasks. The following are direct quotes from students' interview responses:

Example 1: "Describing a picture was more difficult. It had lots of events. Thousands of ideas come to my mind. I didn't have much vocabulary to speak about that."

The second factor contributing to cognitive load is the content of the task, which includes details, events, and descriptions of characters' feelings. Example 2 demonstrates that task demands can increase when multiple events are included or when learners are instructed to describe feelings in picture-based tasks.

Example 2: "The picture prompt was more difficult because it had lots of details. Talking about feelings was very difficult, because feelings were not clear in the picture".

The third identified factor is the controlled nature of picture prompts. Example 3 below illustrates how restricting learners' speech to specific aspects of the picture can increase task difficulty.

Example 3: "The pictures controlled me to talk about specific things; I don't like to be controlled. So, I found talking about my weekend routine more suitable and easier."

The second category of the data pertains to the difficulties encountered by EFL learners while performing the personal information task. One theme emerged, relating to a lack of ideas when describing weekend routines. This theme constitutes 12.5% of the data. A few EFL learners found this task more demanding because it lacked visual cues or ideas, unlike the picture-based tasks (see Example 4).

Example 4: "Weakened routine was difficult. I could not find speech quickly or make sentences. I preferred describing pictures because they gave me ideas."

Example 5: "Talking about my weekend routine was difficult because I didn't have anything to do on the weekend, so I didn't know what to say."

The lack of personal experience proved to be a significant barrier for some learners, as demonstrated in Example 5. That is, a student who has never had a typical weekend experience may struggle with this task. Overall, the analysis of the retrospective interviews indicates that the picture-based task may be challenging due to its content, restrictive nature, or insufficient linguistic ability.

## 7. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the impact of two types of tasks on EFL oral production and perception. Additionally, it sought to assess whether proficiency mediated task performance in EFL speech. Oral performances were measured using Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF). The findings are discussed below in relation to the three research questions.

The first research question investigated the effects of task type on EFL learners' oral production (measured in CAF), as well as their perception. The quantitative and qualitative data analyses indicated that the picture-based task was considerably more demanding than the personal information task. The findings obtained from the two-way ANOVAs indicated that speaking about personal information induced a higher rate of accuracy and syntactic complexity in EFL utterances than the picture narrative task, suggesting that the personal information task is likely less demanding. Thematic analysis highlighted several factors that might increase the demand of the picture prompt, including insufficient linguistic ability, the content (details, events, and feelings of characters), and the controlled nature of the picture prompt. According to students' perceptions, one of the factors contributing to the difficulty of the picture prompt is the lack of lexical knowledge, as EFL learners did not know enough words or were unsure how to pronounce them correctly. One student mentioned: "All tasks were easy, but talking about the picture was a little bit difficult because of vocabulary. I like English and I really want to learn. I

understand when someone speaks but I could not speak, because I don't have anyone to speak with. I cannot express my thoughts." This shows that the student's insufficient lexical knowledge made the picture-based task more challenging. The student indicated that her inability to express her thoughts resulted from a lack of speaking outside the classroom. This phenomenon is common in EFL contexts, where "learners acquire English language mostly through classroom instruction and have few English communication opportunities outside the classroom" (Qiu, 2020, p. 2). EFL Learners may struggle with accurately describing pictures due to limitations in their linguistic ability, particularly vocabulary. On the other hand, research indicates that performing a personal information task, which involves familiar information, can stimulate more accurate L2 performance (Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Gavin, 2014). The less demanding task may allow L2 learners to allocate their attention to the accuracy of their speech (Skehan, 2014; Gavin, 2014). In other words, when the available cognitive resources are directed towards monitoring speech production (i.e., checking utterances before and after articulation) (Levelt, 1989), it can lead to a higher accuracy rate (Wang, 2014). Therefore, the perceived lack of linguistic ability could potentially hinder EFL learners' ability to produce accurate speech when describing the picture prompt compared to the personal information task.

The second factor that increases the demand of the picture-based task, according to learners' perceptions, relates to its content, including details, events, and descriptions of characters' feelings. If a picture involves lots of details, it may require learners to have a broader vocabulary to accurately convey all the nuances present in the picture. Learners might find this challenging if they are not familiar with the necessary vocabulary or if they do not understand the sequence of events. One student said: "The picture was more difficult; events were not clear. I didn't understand what happened." The student encountered ambiguity due to the events in the picture prompt. She could not understand or describe the sequence of events, which increased the cognitive load of the task. Another student commented: "The picture prompt was more difficult because it had lots of details. Talking about feelings was very difficult, because feelings were not clear in the picture." The instructions in the present study required learners to describe the feelings of the characters in the pictures. Learners might find it challenging if they cannot interpret non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, or if they lack the vocabulary to describe emotions. In addition, the picture prompt may be more demanding than the personal information task due to its restrictive nature (factor 3). One student remarked: "The pictures controlled me to talk about specific things; I don't like to be controlled. So, I found talking about my weekend routine more suitable and easier." This means that in the picture-based description task, learners are often confined to discussing only the elements presented in the picture. They must describe what they see, which limits their ability to introduce topics or details from their own imagination or experience. This finding aligns with Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli's (2022) argument that narrative tasks can be more demanding for L2 learners due to the restrictive nature of the task prompt, which limits the required information, structures, or linguistic items. The picture-based task prompt can also involve novel stories, which may be perplexing for EFL learners due to the requirement to explain details such as events or descriptions of characters' feelings. This can increase the cognitive and linguistic demands of the picture prompt. In short, the requirement to describe details, events, and characters' feelings in the picture-based task increases its cognitive demand. This may impact learners' production of syntactically complex utterances, as they may feel constrained to use specific language and describe predetermined events. Consequently, their ability to introduce topics or details from their own imagination or experience might be limited.

While previous studies have reported combined effects of the personal information task on accuracy and fluency (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022), the current study observed effects on accuracy and syntactic complexity. Given that complexity is linked to restructuring and risk-taking (Skehan, 2014), it could be argued that the less demanding task likely allows EFL learners not only to monitor their speech but also to engage in longer syntactic runs. As complexity is strongly affected by the influence of the Conceptualiser (Ellis, 2008; Pallotti, 2009; Skehan, 2009; Tavakoli & Foster, 2008), and accuracy relates to self-monitoring (Wang, 2014), it can be argued that the reduced attentional resources during personal task performance likely benefited the conceptualizer and the monitoring processes, leading to greater accuracy and syntactic complexity. These results diverge from both the assumption of Limited Attentional Capacity model and the findings of previous studies (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022). It has been argued that speaking about personal information directs learners' attention to accuracy and fluency of speech production, rather than accuracy and complexity (Skehan & Foster, 2012). Previous studies examining the effects of task type on L2 oral performance (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022) support this assumption. One potential explanation for the discrepancies in the current findings could be the teaching method, which prioritizes accuracy over fluency. Consequently, EFL learners may focus on accuracy, as this is a common practice in their language classes. Moreover, assigning a less demanding task that draws on familiar personal information may enhance their syntactic run during task performance.

The third question in this study examined the effects and interaction effects of EFL proficiency on oral production. The findings revealed that proficiency had a significant impact on accuracy and fluency of EFL speech. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have indicated a strong relationship between accuracy, fluency, and L2 proficiency (Albarqi & Tavakoli, 2023; Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Nakatsuhara et al., 2019). Research evidence suggests that accuracy and fluency are among the most reliable indicators of L2 proficiency development (Albarqi & Tavakoli, 2023; Housen et al., 2012). In fact, as proficiency increases, L2 speech becomes more accurate and fluent due to enhanced automaticity in L2 processing, leading to faster lexical access and a reduced need for pausing (Albarqi & Tavakoli, 2023; Suzuki, 2021; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). However, it is worth noting that proficiency did not have a significant effect on syntactic complexity, as measured by the mean length of AS units, even though task type had a significant effect on this measure in the current study. This finding is also consistent with previous research suggesting that task design may have a greater

influence on syntactic complexity than L2 proficiency (Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Skehan, 2014). Regarding the interaction between proficiency and task types within EFL context, the findings indicated that there were no significant interaction effects between the two. This suggests that the impact of task type on EFL oral performance remained consistent across different proficiency levels. This finding aligns with previous research by Garcia-Ponce and Tavakoli (2022) who similarly observed no interaction effects between task type and proficiency on oral task performance. Likewise, Kuiken and Vedder (2007) reported no interaction effects of these variables on L2 written performance. Taken together, the personal narrative task elicited higher rates of accuracy and syntactic complexity in EFL utterances compared to the picture-based task. This effect of task type remained consistent regardless of the learners' proficiency levels.

## 8. Conclusion

The current study investigated how task type influences EFL oral production and perception, and whether proficiency levels moderate task performance. The findings of this study have potential implications for EFL pedagogy, assessment, and research. The current findings indicated that the personal information task elicited higher rates of accuracy and syntactic complexity in EFL speech as compared to picture-based task, diverging from both the theoretical frameworks and existing research. Robinson's (2003, 2015) Cognition Hypothesis posits that increasing task difficulty across certain factors can enhance both accuracy and complexity. On the other hand, Skehan's (1998, 2009) Limited Attentional Capacity suggests that personal information task may promote both accuracy and fluency, but not complexity. This assumption was supported by research findings (e.g., Garcia-Ponce & Tavakoli, 2022; Kuiken & Vedder, 2007). One potential explanation for the different findings in the current study could be the emphasis on a form-focused approach rather than a communicative approach within the study's context, which may have negatively impacted fluency.

The practical implication of this finding is that instructors should consider employing communicative approaches, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which can enhance various aspects of language production, particularly fluency. Research suggests that while form-focused instruction can be beneficial for practicing language forms and automatizing learned linguistic elements, TBLT promotes language learning, interaction, and authentic communication between students "through pair and group activities, in which students mutually provide appropriate levels of assistance through scaffolding" (Shehadeh, 2024, p. 8). The results also indicated that the two task types elicited distinct utterances from EFL learners. This finding has significant implications for language assessment. Students who engage in less demanding tasks might unjustly receive higher scores in language assessment compared to those who speak about more challenging tasks. Studies demonstrate that even tasks with similar structures but varying numbers of elements can evoke different speech responses (see De Jong & Vercellotti, 2016). It has been contended that learners' oral language performance in task-based assessments reflect not only their language proficiency but also some additional variability influenced by task characteristics (Fulcher & Reiter, 2003). The current findings also showed that proficiency did not mediate task performance, suggesting that learners of all proficiency levels, including those with higher proficiency, can be affected by differences in task types. Therefore, it is important for practitioners to be aware of task features and the potential variations they may introduce in speech production to ensure a fair assessment of students. In conclusion, it is important to interpret the current findings with caution due to the small sample size involved in the study. Future research should aim to be conducted with larger and more diverse participant pools to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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## Authors' contributions

This paper was solely written by the author, including all aspects of research conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available



due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

#### Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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**Appendix A**

**Personal information task**

Please answer the following questions. You have to complete the task.

- What do you usually do over the weekend? And how do you feel?
- What do you ideally like to do over the weekend? And how would you feel?

**Appendix B**

**Picture prompt (Museum)**



**Appendix C**

Thematic analysis of EFL learners' perceptions of factors increasing task demand

Main categories	Themes	Examples
Picture-based narrative task	Language ability (Vocabulary, pronunciation)	"Describing picture was more difficult. It had lots of events. Thousands of ideas came to my mind. I didn't have much vocabulary to speak about that". "All tasks were easy, but talking about picture was a little bit difficult because of vocabulary. I like English and I really want to learn. I understand when someone speaks but I could not speak, because I don't have anyone to speak with. I cannot express my thoughts".
	Content (Details, Feelings)	"Picture was more difficult; events were not clear. I didn't understand what happened, when the snake came, I didn't know where it went". "The picture prompt was more difficult because it had lots of details. Talking about feelings was very difficult, because feelings were not clear in the picture".
Personal-information task	Controlled nature	"The pictures controlled me to talk about specific things, I don't like to be controlled. So, I found talking about weekend routine more suitable and easier for me".
	Lack of ideas	"Talking about weekend routine was difficult because I didn't have anything to do in the weekend, so I didn't know what to say". "Weakened routine was difficult. I could not find speech quickly. I could not make sentences. I like to describe pictures because they give me ideas".