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THE IMPACT OF CONVERGENT VS DIVERGENT TASK GOALS ON EFL LEARNERS' BEHAVIOURAL ENGAGEMENT AND ORAL PERFORMANCE IN ONLINE TASK-BASED CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on task-based language teaching (TBLT) has highlighted the potential of the approach for promoting engagement and language performance in conventional settings. At the same time, little attention has been paid to how convergent (decision-making) and divergent (opinion-exchanging) tasks shape learner engagement and oral performance in online environments. To address this empirical gap, this study aims to investigate the impact of task goal orientation on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' behavioural engagement and English oral performance in online task-based settings. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study invited 32 EFL learners from a Chinese university to complete two tasks in an online English-speaking course. Turn-taking frequency, word count, and task duration were used as indicators to assess behavioural engagement. Oral performance was also evaluated using syntactic complexity, accuracy, lexical complexity, and fluency measures. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gauge learners' experiences with online TBLT. The results indicated that participants exhibited greater behavioural engagement in convergent tasks. In contrast, their language accuracy was higher during convergent tasks than divergent ones. Additionally, participants demonstrated enhanced syntactic complexity while performing divergent tasks. Subsequent interviews revealed that task topics, pre-planning, language proficiency, and online learning conditions influenced learners' engagement and oral performance. These findings underscore the importance of task goal orientation in online task design. Convergent tasks can be utilised to improve EFL learners' behavioural engagement and language accuracy, while divergent tasks can be employed to enhance language complexity.

Keywords: *Task goal orientation, task design, task-based language teaching, behavioural engagement, English oral performance, online learning*

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a surge in online language learning. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, language learners and teachers are compelled to adapt to virtual English education. Online English learning offers much flexibility to address distance and time constraints. As a result, it can address the increasing need among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to enhance their learning outcomes remotely (Sahiman & Arokiasamy, 2024). Consequently, the trend of virtual English education continues to grow. Despite its advantages, some researchers have identified significant challenges in maintaining learners' attention and engagement in online environments (Bird et al., 2022). Researchers view engagement as a central concept in language learning (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000), and engagement refers to learners' physical, mental, and affective involvement in the learning process (Hiver et al., 2024). Although most scholars agree on the multidimensional nature of engagement, Fredricks et al. (2004) emphasised the three core dimensions, namely behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement, essential in understanding how learners participate in the language learning process.

As the core of all sub-dimensions of engagement, behavioural engagement refers to learners' active

physical participation in the learning process, which can be reflected by behaviours, actions, language production, and time spent by EFL learners during language learning (Hiver et al., 2024; Mercer, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Furthermore, learners' actions are considered indicators of cognitive (e.g., nodding at key points, asking and answering questions) and emotional engagement (e.g., laughter) (Oga-Baldwin, 2019), which highlight the interrelationship among behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Previous researchers also pointed out that enhancing behavioural engagement is closely linked to improved learning outcomes, such as language proficiency (Li & Baker, 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Several studies (e.g., Chen & Lin, 2024; Kang & Wu, 2022; Lin & Wang, 2025; Pan, 2023) have employed behavioural engagement as an indicator for learners' engagement, especially in online settings, as investigating behavioural engagement is essential to understand learners' overall engagement. In line with that, the current study focused on investigating the behavioural engagement of EFL learners in online task performance.

While there is a growing body of research on online language education, many studies have not fully addressed the intricate relationship between task-based language teaching (TBLT) methods, learner engagement, and language performance in online environments. Specifically, there is limited research on the effects of task design in online TBLT classroom settings. TBLT has emerged as a prominent method to foster learner engagement and improve language output in conventional face-to-face settings (Ellis et al., 2020). In online environments, TBLT could play a similar role in promoting authentic communication (Aubrey & Philpott, 2023; Young & Sun, 2023). Previous research has identified that task characteristics, such as goal orientation, influence learners' engagement in both conventional and online settings (Dao, 2021; Supervía et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2024). Task goal orientation refers to the inherent direction of a task. According to Pica et al. (1993), tasks that incorporate convergent goals encourage learners to converge on a single solution, while divergent tasks necessitate learners to explore multiple perspectives without concluding. Previous research discovered that tasks with convergent goals (i.e., decision-making tasks) foster greater collaboration between learners by focusing on achieving a shared outcome. The solution required by the tasks promotes higher cognitive and social engagement levels among the learners. Conversely, divergent tasks (opinion-exchanging tasks) encourage debate and the defence of differing opinions, which may produce more complex language. Therefore, divergent tasks can result in lower social engagement due to the lack of goal alignment (Dao, 2021). Consequently, investigating goal orientation in task design will deepen the theoretical understanding of task-based interaction and offer practical insights for designing tasks that can effectively enhance learner engagement and improve language outcomes in online environments.

Therefore, previous research has highlighted an empirical gap in research that investigates the impact of task goal orientation on learners' behavioural engagement and language performance in online contexts. To address this empirical gap, the current study aims to implement two types of tasks: decision-making and opinion-exchanging functions in an online English-speaking course to determine the effects of task goal orientation on EFL learners' behavioural engagement and language performance in an online setting.

Behavioural Engagement

The research on learner engagement has evolved, whereby some researchers saw engagement as the mediator of the relationship between motivation and learning outcomes (Skinner et al., 2009), underscoring its pivotal role in influencing academic success. While some researchers agree that engagement significantly impacts achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hiver et al., 2024; Lindström et al., 2021). Although there are some differences regarding the definition of the concept, including distinctions between learner engagement, engagement in language use, foreign language classroom engagement, and task engagement, researchers have reached a broad consensus on the conceptualisation of engagement through its subdimensions (Hiver et al., 2024; Lambert & Aubrey, 2025; Mercer, 2019; Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Additionally, several researchers investigate engagement from its three fundamental dimensions: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Guo et al., 2023; Lan & Hew, 2020).

Behavioural engagement refers to the quantity and quality of learners' physical participation in learning activities (Hiver et al., 2024). This dimension is widely

regarded as the most observable aspect of engagement (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). Behavioural engagement can be manifested through visible actions such as taking notes, responding to questions, and participating in task-related interactions. These behaviours are considered engagement indicators, reflecting learners' active participation during the learning process. On the contrary, off-task behaviour, such as daydreaming, indicates disengagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

Behavioural engagement is a key indicator of overall engagement due to its direct link to learners' efforts and investment in language tasks. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) argue that assessing whether learners are genuinely engaged in the learning process without visible behavioural engagement is challenging. Furthermore, behavioural engagement is closely linked to both cognitive and emotional engagement. For example, learners' active participation in learning activities by asking questions or sharing ideas demonstrates cognitive engagement (Oga-Baldwin, 2019). These actions indicate that learners are not only physically present but also mentally involved in processing information. Similarly, behaviours such as laughter or verbal affirmations reflect emotional engagement, highlighting the interconnectedness of the various dimensions of engagement. Hence, behavioural engagement is a practical and observable indicator of measuring overall engagement in learning environments, particularly in online settings where non-verbal cues and physical presence may be less readily accessible.

In second language acquisition (SLA), behavioural engagement is closely linked to language production and learning outcomes (Guo et al., 2022). The extent to which learners actively engage in tasks can be measured by language production, such as the number of words spoken or their involvement in turn-taking during interaction, and task duration, which refers to the total amount of time learners spend on task performance (Zhou et al., 2021). Consequently, in TBLT, where active learner involvement is paramount, behavioural engagement is critical in determining task effectiveness and learners' linguistic success (Hiver & Wu, 2022).

However, past studies show that EFL learners are less engaged in online learning environments than in conventional face-to-face settings (Aubrey & Philpott, 2023; Young & Sun, 2023). Although the statistics analysis shows minor differences in EFL learners' engagement levels or language performance between online and offline environments, many learners preferred conventional face-to-face learning environments. Given that task performance in TBLT contexts inherently depends on active participation and interaction, it is crucial to understand the patterns of learners' behavioural engagement patterns in online TBLT classrooms. Investigating behavioural engagement in such settings provides critical insights into how task design influences language production and engagement, as behavioural engagement is a practical means of evaluating task effectiveness. By focusing on behavioural engagement, this research aims to provide a clear, measurable framework for factors influencing EFL learners' behavioural engagement during online TBLT sessions.

Task Goal Orientation

It is a common practice in countries such as China to implement tasks in conventional English classrooms for the sake of enhancing learners' language performance and engagement (Guo et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). Researchers and instructors believe that tasks can provide learners with opportunities to enhance their listening and speaking skills, as tasks require the authentic use of English. Learners have adequate opportunities to use the target language for communication and to improve their language output and engagement (Ellis et al., 2020; Hiver & Wu, 2022). In this case, TBLT offers learners an authentic learning environment that fosters their communicative skills by transforming language input into output, ultimately leading to improved language production and interactions among learners (Dao & Sato, 2021). Decades of research on the TBLT approach in both conventional and online settings has revealed that task design significantly influences EFL learners' English performance and engagement (Ellis et al., 2020). However, the research on specific task characteristics in task design still requires further investigation.

Pica et al. (1993) assert that task goal orientation can be adjusted based on the communicative purpose and is categorised into two types based on goal orientations: convergent and divergent tasks. This distinction between convergent and divergent goal orientations is significant, as it influences the interaction during the

task. Convergent tasks necessitate learners to reach a consensus to achieve the task objective, whereas divergent tasks encourage learners to explore various pathways toward the task goal during performance. To illustrate the differences mentioned, one can refer to decision-making tasks versus opinion-exchanging tasks. Decision-making tasks incorporate a convergent goal, requiring learners to decide on the objective. In contrast, opinion-exchanging tasks demand learners to share ideas freely without attempting to convince or persuade one another, thereby serving as a divergent task.

The distinctions between task goals are believed to impact behavioural engagement and EFL learners' syntactic complexity, accuracy, lexical complexity, and fluency (CALF) (Dao, 2021; Keller-Lally, 2006; Qian et al., 2024). In convergent tasks, learners tend to exhibit greater social and cognitive engagement due to the necessity of collaborating toward a standard solution (Dao, 2021). Additionally, learners frequently take turns interacting and negotiating with their interlocutors during convergent tasks (Skehan, 2001), which positively affects their language accuracy. However, some studies have noted that while language accuracy may improve, language complexity tends to decrease for EFL learners during decision-making tasks (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Qiu & Cheng, 2021). Conversely, Dao (2021) noted that participants in his research were less engaged in opinion-exchanging tasks than decision-making tasks. During the subsequent semi-structured interviews, participants indicated that they focused on expressing their opinions rather than listening to their interlocutors' viewpoints. Dao (2021) argued that the lower engagement in opinion-exchanging tasks resulted from divergent goals in task design. When learners are not required to conclude task design, they focus on their expressions instead of engaging in interactions and discussions with their peers.

Previous research has predominantly investigated the impact of convergent goals on learners' engagement and language performance, leaving a gap in the impact of divergent goals on EFL learners' behavioural engagement and oral performance. Furthermore, understanding how task goal orientation impacts task performance is crucial, particularly in online settings, where maintaining learner engagement can be more challenging due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. Therefore, this study implemented tasks incorporating convergent and divergent goals in task designs within task-based classrooms utilising synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). This approach enables learners to perform real-time tasks (Choo & Ng, 2024). It aims to provide valuable insights for designing more effective online language learning tasks to foster behavioural engagement and enhance language outcomes. To achieve the research objective, this research aimed to address the following questions:

1. To what extent does goal orientation influence EFL learners' behavioural engagement in online TBLT classrooms?
2. To what extent does goal orientation influence EFL learners' language performance in online TBLT classrooms?
3. What factors influence EFL learners' behavioural engagement and language performance in online TBLT classrooms?

METHODS

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to address the research objectives. The current research adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of goal orientation on EFL learners' behavioural engagement and language performance in online settings and identify the factors influencing these two variables. This research was conducted at a university in Southwest China, and data collection was performed with learners attending an online English-speaking class. The course was conducted via online platforms like Microsoft Teams and Tencent Meeting. The study had also received institutional ethical approval before data collection.

Participants

Thirty-six second-year English majors initially enrolled in the course. During the introductory session on Tencent Meeting, students were briefed on the course structure, research objectives, and participant information, including their right to withdraw. Subsequently, four students chose to drop the course, resulting in 32 participants completing the online survey. The age of the 32 participants (6 males and 26 females) ranged from 18 to 21. Their English-speaking proficiency ranged from IELTS Band 5.5 to 7. Among all 32 participants, the oral proficiency of 30 participants varied from IELTS Band 5.5 to 6.5, which is classified

as B2 (Independent User) in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Only 2 participants achieved an IELTS Band of 7 and were deemed proficient in the CEFR.

Additionally, all participants in the current research had three years of experience with online learning linked to their learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first session, all students were paired up for task completion. Altogether, 16 pairs were formed.

Task Design

To examine the impact of goal orientation on EFL learners' behavioural engagement and English oral performance, as well as factors influencing task performance in online TBLT classrooms, both convergent and divergent tasks were assigned to the participants. Two decision-making tasks and two opinion-exchanging tasks were developed following the criteria established by Ellis and Shintani (2014): whereby the task design involves focusing on meaning and addressing a task gap by relying on prior knowledge to achieve a clear outcome. In terms of topic selections, the topics for both tasks were selected by participants before designing the tasks. When providing consent to participate in this study, participants completed an online survey that gathered their demographic information and familiarity with various topics. To manage task complexity, based on the participants' feedback, both types of tasks were developed based on one familiar topic and one unfamiliar topic.

Decision-making tasks are typically deemed convergent tasks, requiring learners to discuss, conclude, and decide on the task goal (Pica et al., 1993). In the current research, two decision-making tasks were designed based on topics: planning activities for a day off and apologising for being late for an appointment with friends. The instructional document of the two decision-making tasks clearly outlined that participants were required to discuss the given topics, attempt to persuade each other, and decide on a task outcome. Conversely, opinion-exchanging tasks were identified by Pica et al. (1993) as divergent tasks involving discussions and exchanging opinions without consensus. In this research, participants engaged in two opinion-exchanging tasks by exploring and sharing their views on the assigned topics. However, unlike decision-making tasks, which require learners to convince interlocutors to conclude, opinion-exchanging tasks allow learners to focus on sharing ideas without persuading. The topics for opinion-exchanging tasks are:

i. the Spring Festival and
ii. the reasons for attending college.

To differentiate between convergent and divergent tasks, the instructional document explicitly outlined that decision-making tasks require participants to discuss their options, persuade one another to reach a decision, formulate a plan, and present reasons to support their choices. After the discussion, one student from each dyad was responsible for delivering a speech that articulated their final decisions and the rationale behind them within one minute. In contrast, the requirements for opinion-exchanging tasks indicated that participants were expected to share their opinions freely without concluding. By the end of their discussion, each pair of participants was required to deliver a one-minute speech to conclude their opinions.

Data Collection Process

The current research employed a mixed-methods design, which included online observation of task performance to assess behavioural engagement and language performance. Additionally, semi-structured interview sessions were conducted to explore factors influencing task performance in online environments. Before data collection, six second-year undergraduates majoring in English (who were not participants in the current research) were recruited to participate in a pilot study to test the task's reliability and the data collection process. Consequently, the time frame for task performance and instructional documents were modified and revised to optimise the data collection procedure. During the first session of the online course, the course instructor, who is also the first author, provided detailed instructions regarding the research process and data collection procedures. Throughout the online observation period, participants were asked to complete two types of tasks over two consecutive weeks, namely during Weeks 6 and 7 of the semesters. Participants received an instructional document outlining the tasks at the beginning of each task session. The task performance process for both types of tasks was identical.

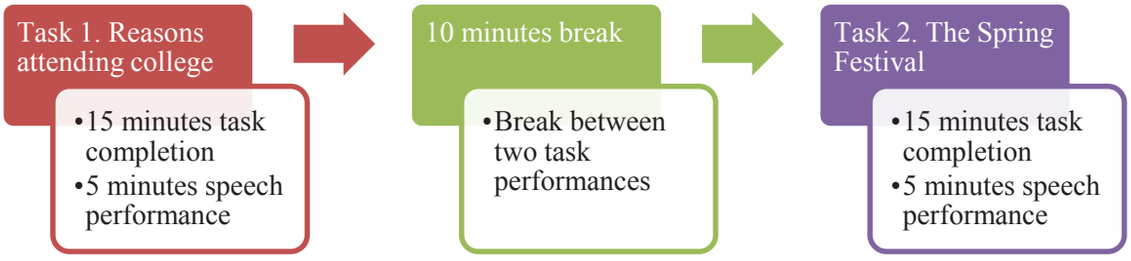

Figure 1 Opinion-exchanging task session procedure

Participants completed four tasks across two separate sessions, adhering to the same time frame. Participants had 15 minutes for task completion and 5 minutes for speech performance for each task. Figure 1 illustrates the process for the opinion-exchanging task session. For example, participants were given 15 minutes to complete each task, during which they discussed in pairs and shared their opinions on the "reasons for attending college". After 15 minutes of engaging in paired opinion exchange, one participant from each pair was given 5 minutes to prepare a one-minute speech summarising their discussion. Upon completing the first task, participants were provided with a 10-minute break. After the break, participants continued with the second opinion-exchanging task regarding the "Spring Festival". Following a similar timeframe, participants performed the two convergent tasks in the decision-making task session. With the participant's consent, the entire task performance procedure, involving task completion and speech performance, was recorded using Microsoft Teams. The recordings were subsequently analysed to gauge participants' behavioural engagement and oral performance.

After the online observation period, one participant from each pair was randomly invited to participate in a semi-structured interview to discuss and retrospect their online task performance experiences. The interview process was recorded using Tencent Meeting with the participants' consent. They were encouraged to provide feedback on the design of the decision-making and opinion-exchanging tasks, specifically regarding the factors that influenced their interactions and oral performance within the pair. To facilitate the interviewees' sharing of their opinions, interviewees were allowed to respond using their native language, Mandarin. The recordings of the interviews were then downloaded from Tencent Meeting and transcribed by the author, whereby the transcriptions were analysed using content analysis. Following that, a coding process was implemented to discern the factors identified by interview participants that may impact their task performance in online TBLT classrooms (Krippendorff, 2018).

Data Analysis

These recordings and transcriptions of the participants' 15-minute task completion process were quantified based on three indicators: the number of words, the number of turns, and the total time spent on the discussion to assess behavioural engagement (Zhou et al., 2022). Participants' one-minute speech performance was recorded and transcribed to evaluate their oral performance based on syntactic complexity, accuracy, lexical complexity and fluency (CALF) (Bui & Skehan, 2018). Syntactic complexity is measured by calculating the ratio of subordination (RoS) (Skehan & Foster, 2008), while language accuracy is assessed through the identification of error-free clauses (EFC) (Ellis et al., 2020). Lexical complexity is evaluated using Text Inspector's vocabulary diversity (VOCD) to determine vocabulary diversity (Bax, 2003). Skehan (2009) states fluency can be measured through breakdown, speed, and repair. However, due to the 12 presentation recordings being shorter than one minute, and there were challenges in accurately identifying pause types (Skehan & Foster, 2008), this study first focused on repair features, measuring false starts, replacements, repetitions, and reformulations to assess language fluency.

The codings were also subsequently reviewed by an appointed research assistant. The research assistant selected eight recordings and their corresponding transcriptions out of 64. The inter-coder reliability

between the coding of the author and the research assistant was assessed based on several metrics: word count (100%), turn-taking (100%), task duration (87.5%), subordination (75%), error-free clauses (87.5%), VOCD (75%), and repair (100%). These inter-coder reliability results are deemed acceptable per Lombard et al. (2002), and the quantified data were then entered into SPSS 26.0 for further analysis.

RESULTS

Due to skewed distributions in some datasets, non-parametric tests, such as the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, were performed to compare the distribution patterns. The results are shown as follows:

RQ1. The Impact of Goal Orientation on Behavioural Engagement

The first research question aims explicitly to identify variations in participants' levels of behavioural engagement when completing tasks with different goal orientations. The quantified results, including the number of words produced by participants, the number of turns taken, and the duration of discussions, serve as indicators of behavioural engagement. Due to the non-normally distributed datasets, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted to determine whether goal orientation impacts behavioural engagement. The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test are presented in Table 1.

The results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed a significant difference in the number of turns taken by participants during decision-making and opinion-exchanging tasks ($p=.000<.05$, effect size=$0.64>0.50$). Due to the non-normally distributed datasets, the effect size was calculated using the formula $Z/\sqrt{N}$ (Pallant, 2007), following Cohen's (2013) guidelines, where 0.1 is considered small, 0.3 is medium, and 0.5 or above is large. An effect size of 0.64 indicates a significant effect, suggesting that goal orientation significantly impacts participants' turn-taking frequency.

The descriptive statistics indicate that participants took turns more frequently during decision-making tasks (Mean=9.25) than during opinion-exchanging tasks (Mean=4.80). Nevertheless, the results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test suggest no notable difference in the number of words generated by participants ($p=.477>.05$, effect size=$0.13<0.3$) or the total time spent ($p=.360>.05$, effect size=$0.16<0.3$) on decision-making versus opinion-exchanging tasks. Although the descriptive statistics show that participants produced relatively more words and spent a comparatively longer time completing decision-making tasks (Words: Mean=526.47; Time: Mean=330.56), compared to opinion-exchanging tasks (Words: Mean=472.57; Time: Mean=295.37), the results of the non-parametric test and effect size indicate small effect of goal orientation on the number of words generated or task duration.

RQ2. The Impact of Goal Orientation on Oral Performance

The second research question aims to investigate the impact of goal orientation on English oral performance in online settings. The assessment of participants' English oral performance employed CALF (Bui & Skehan, 2018), including RoS, EFC, VOCD, and repairs. The quantified datasets underwent a Wilcoxon signed-rank test to investigate the impact of goal orientation on participants' English oral performance. The results of the descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed-rank test are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Results of descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed-rank test of behavioural engagement

	Decision-making		Opinion-exchanging		Wilcoxon signed-rank test		Effect size
	Mean(SD)	Median	Mean(SD)	Median	Z	p	
Words	526.47(353.523)	456	472.57(286.472)	398	-0.711	.477	0.13
Turns	9.25(6.016)	8	4.80(3.813)	4	-3.604	.000*	0.64
Time	330.56(179.809)	303	295.37(182.419)	247	-0.916	.360	0.16

*p<.05 indicates a significant difference

Table 2 Results of descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon signed-rank test of oral performance

	Decision-making		Opinion-exchanging		Wilcoxon signed-rank test		Effect size
	Mean(SD)	Median	Mean(SD)	Median	Z	p	
RoS	51.81%(.185)	50%	56%(.132)	51.21%	-1.128	.259	0.20
EFC	57.69%(.147)	57.14%	44.66%(.141)	42.86%	-3.103	.002*	0.55
VOCD	46.63(16.93)	41.73	52.85(18.70)	47.76	-1.889	.059	0.33
Repairs	8.31(4.73)	7	6.93(3.46)	6	-1.452	.146	0.26

RoS=ratio of subordination; EFC=error-free clauses; VOCD=vocabulary diversity
*p<.05 indicates a significant difference

Participants' language accuracy was significantly lower (p=.002<.05) when they performed opinion-exchanging tasks (Mean=44.66%) than during decision-making tasks (Mean=57.69%). Meanwhile, the effect size of 0.55 is greater than 0.50, suggesting a significant effect. Conversely, as presented in Table 2, no statistically significant differences were found in the ratio of subordination (p=.259>.05, effect size=0.2<0.3), vocabulary diversity (p=.059>.05, effect size=0.33<0.5), and repairs (p=.146>.05, effect size=0.26<0.3) in participants' oral performance. The descriptive statistics indicate that participants produced relatively more complex language, both syntactically and lexically, when engaging in opinion-exchanging tasks (RoS: Mean=56%; VOCD: Mean=52.85) compared to decision-making tasks (RoS: Mean=51.81%; VOCD: Mean=46.63). Furthermore, participants demonstrated relatively higher language fluency during opinion-exchanging tasks (Mean=6.93) than during decision-making tasks (Mean=8.31).

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test results indicate that goal orientation impacts language accuracy significantly. However, there is no notable impact on participants' syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, or fluency (small to medium impact).

RQ3. What Influences Behavioural Engagement and Oral Performance in Online Settings

To address the third research question, a content analysis was conducted to identify the elements influencing participants' behavioural engagement and language performance in online settings. The results revealed four factors that the interviewees frequently mentioned about behavioural engagement: interaction (13 mentions), negotiation (13 mentions), discussion (8 mentions), and persuasion (4 mentions). As for factors that influence their oral performance in online settings, they can be grouped into four main areas: English-speaking proficiency (4 mentions), the topic of tasks (3 mentions), pre-task planning (11 mentions), and task performance environments (6 mentions). After synthesising the coding, two themes emerged.

Influence of Goal Orientation on Behavioural Engagement

When asked about behavioural engagement within pairs, participants acknowledged that the goal orientation in task design influenced their behavioural engagement during task performance, especially the task duration and the number of turn-takings. The interviewees expressed that they negotiated, interacted more frequently, and spent extended periods discussing the given topics during decision-making tasks. They noticed that the duration of their task completion varied during decision-making and opinion-exchanging tasks. Eight participants recalled engaging rather intensively in discussions about selecting activities for their day off (decision-making task 1). Four participants acknowledged that their extended time spent on discussion and negotiation was driven by the need to persuade their interlocutors. They struggled to reach a consensus on what to do after missing a movie appointment with friends (decision-making task 2). One participant stated,

"My interlocutor does not want to apologise in person; he prefers to text his friend to apologise for missing their appointment. But, I think it is necessary to say sorry face-to-face. We do not agree with each other, which led to a lengthy debate."

According to the interview participants, the convergent goal in task design required them to engage in discussion and persuasion to reach a consensus, which significantly increased interaction between pairs.

Conversely, participants indicated that they did not behaviourally engage in discussions during tasks that incorporated divergent goals, which offered them opportunities to freely discuss the topic without necessarily concluding. Three participants preferred opinion-exchanging tasks, as they did not need to "argue" with their interlocutors to decide to complete the task. Therefore, they did not interact as much as they did during decision-making tasks. Two other participants noted that they and their partners took some time to write down their opinions before sharing them with their interlocutors. In fact, upon reviewing the online recordings of participants' performance process of opinion-exchanging tasks, most participants (62.5%) spent some time "sorting out their thoughts" before sharing their opinions in pairs. In contrast, participants began discussing the given topics immediately during decision-making tasks. Overall, the findings indicated that goal orientation in task design increases the negotiations, discussions, interactions, and persuasions within pairs, resulting in enhanced behavioural engagement.

Influence of Task-Related, Context-Related, and Personal-Related Factors on Oral Performance

Personal-related factors such as the level of English proficiency of the participants seem to influence their oral performance. When talking about their speech performance, participants noted that the task goal orientation may not be the main factor influencing their oral performance. Four participants noted that task design may not significantly impact their oral performance as it did on behavioural engagement. Instead, they attributed their challenges to low English oral proficiency, resulting in pronunciation errors, grammatical mistakes, and a limited vocabulary that affected their English oral performance. The interviewees noted that personal-related factors influence their oral performance to a certain extent.

Task-related factors involving pre-task planning and the task topic are also believed to impact participants' oral performance. Eleven participants mentioned that pre-task planning significantly impacts their oral performance. One participant noted that in his previous task performance experiences, the teacher usually released the task a day or even a week in advance. He observed that he made fewer grammatical errors and misused words when he had sufficient time to review vocabulary before the session. On the contrary, he made more mistakes and corrected himself a lot during the task performance in the current research, as he could not pre-plan. Ten participants stated that pre-task planning helps them familiarise themselves with the task, which benefits their oral performance. Furthermore, they reported feeling more confident after preparation. The finding indicates that pre-planning can potentially enhance participants' language production.

Three participants indicated that the topic of the task influenced their oral performance. One participant stated that the topic of the opinion-exchanging task (the reasons for attending college) was so abstract that he had never seriously considered it before. When sharing opinions with his interlocutor, he felt he had nothing "interesting or profound insights" to share with his interlocutor, and he essentially repeated what his interlocutor said. Consequently, they did not engage in further discussion after sharing. Therefore, participants believed that task-related factors involving pre-task planning and the topics influenced their oral performance.

Regarding context-related factors, online task performance environments were shown to be a potential factor influencing participants' oral performance and behavioural engagement. Six participants stated that online learning settings are "quite different" from conventional face-to-face environments. They preferred face-to-face settings, where they can rely not only on verbal and non-verbal cues, such as gestures and eye contact, which may influence interactions within pairs. The online settings hindered their ability to rely on non-verbal cues during communication. Nevertheless, ten interviewees believed that online settings do not significantly influence their oral performance and behavioural engagement compared to other factors such as task design, topic familiarity, peer familiarity, and language proficiency. They also acknowledged their extensive experience with online classes, familiarising them with online learning environments. Although they might encounter technical issues when using an unfamiliar online platform for the first time, they felt confident in their ability to adapt. Therefore, the context-related factor has a minor impact on participants' oral performance.

DISCUSSIONS

The current research investigates EFL learners' behavioural engagement and oral performance in tasks with convergent and divergent goals in online settings. Statistical analysis indicates that goal orientation in task design impacts EFL learners' frequency of turn-taking and the ratio of error-free clauses. Dao (2021) noted a significant impact of goal orientation on EFL learners' engagement. Participants in his research demonstrated lower engagement in opinion-exchanging tasks compared to decision-making tasks. Dao (2021) argued that the reduced engagement in opinion-exchanging tasks stemmed from divergent goals in task design. When learners are not required to conclude task design, they focus on their expressions rather than engaging in interactions and discussions with their peers. The current research shows that participants were less involved in discussions during opinion-exchanging tasks than decision-making tasks. The online observations also revealed that participants engaged in discussions after sharing their ideas during concluding decision-making tasks.

In contrast, during opinion-exchanging tasks, most participants focused on pre-task planning. As mentioned in the previous section, 62.5% of participants spent several minutes writing down or outlining their thoughts before sharing their opinions. After exchanging ideas, instead of engaging in persuasion and discussion, participants concluded the discussion phase by starting to prepare the one-minute speeches. The current research's qualitative and quantitative findings aligned with Dao's (2021) findings that task goal orientation influences EFL learners' engagement.

As stated by the interview participants in the current research, they found no necessity to continue the conversation after exchanging ideas due to a lack of a convergent goal that necessitates them to engage in discussion and persuasion to conclude. The quantitative findings of decreased turn-taking frequency, the relatively lower number of words produced, and the time spent on divergent tasks align with findings from previous studies (Keller-Lally, 2006). Additionally, Qiu and Bui (2022) found that pre-planning does not impact learner engagement. Therefore, the observed decrease in behavioural engagement in opinion-exchanging tasks should be attributed to goal orientation, not pre-planning.

Researchers have found that the pre-task planning condition has a complex impact on language production (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Qin & Zhang, 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Foster and Skehan (1996) stated that undetailed pre-planning enhances language accuracy more than detailed planning, and non-planning does not benefit language accuracy. In the current study, participants spent time on detailed pre-planning before performing opinion-exchanging tasks and had no pre-planning in decision-making tasks. However, their language accuracy was significantly higher during decision-making tasks when they did not engage in pre-planning. Therefore, it can be inferred that, rather than pre-planning, the divergent goals in opinion-exchanging tasks contributed to a reduced negotiation of meaning compared to decision-making tasks, resulting in lower language accuracy (Skehan & Foster, 2001). Conversely, participants' syntactic complexity improved due to the pre-planning of content (Foster & Skehan, 1996). As the descriptive statistics in the results section indicated, participants exhibited relatively higher levels of language complexity and fluency during opinion-exchanging tasks than decision-making tasks. These findings suggest that pre-planning has the potential to enhance language complexity and fluency, while goal orientation in task design influences language accuracy.

Regarding the factors of online settings, the qualitative findings in this study reveal that task performance environments can potentially influence EFL learners' ability to complete tasks. EFL learners often rely on non-verbal cues for communication and tend to struggle to depend solely on verbal communication in online contexts (Aubrey & Philpott, 2023; Qiu & Bui, 2022; Young & Sun, 2023). Therefore, learners' low oral proficiency can potentially influence their online communication abilities. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that these participants had three years of online learning experience during the Covid pandemic. Compared to the learning environments factor, participants highlighted the impact of task design on their performance during interviews, such as the topics of tasks, which aligns with findings from previous studies (Allaw, 2019; Qiu & Cheng, 2021; Khoram, 2019). Participants' task performance is less affected in tasks with familiar topics, as they can rely on prior knowledge to complete the tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

This study attempts to address a gap related to the impact of goal orientation in task design on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' behavioural engagement and oral performance in online task-based classrooms. Findings reveal that tasks with convergent goals, such as decision-making, promote higher behavioural engagement and enhance oral accuracy by increasing learner interaction through negotiation, discussion, and persuasion. Additionally, pre-task planning improves syntactic complexity and fluency, especially in opinion-exchanging tasks. The study also identifies key influencing factors, including pre-task planning, task topic, learners' English proficiency, and the online learning context. Using platforms like Microsoft Teams and Tencent Meeting, the study demonstrates the value of authentic online recordings in capturing detailed learner interactions without disrupting the task process. However, as the research focuses on synchronous communication (SCMC), its findings may not directly apply to asynchronous environments where alternative task designs may be necessary. The study is limited by its small sample size of 32 second-year English majors from one institution and its focus on intermediate-level learners. It suggests a need for future studies to include broader learner profiles and contexts. Pedagogically, the findings advocate for strategic task design in online classrooms: convergent goal tasks can foster accuracy and interaction, while divergent goal tasks can promote linguistic complexity. Educators are encouraged to align task types with specific learning outcomes rather than expecting a single task to enhance all aspects of language development.

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