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## The impact of task structure on the use of vague expressions by EFL learners

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Vague language (e.g. *thing, somewhere*) is one of the linguistic features which typically differentiate the language use of a native or near-native speaker from that of a language learner since native speakers typically make abundant use of vague expressions. Thus far, however, there has been no published research on how features of pedagogic tasks might encourage L2 learners' production of vague expressions. The present study sets out to examine whether and how task structure affects the number and type of vague expressions used by a group of higher-intermediate EFL learners. The participants were 50 Iranian EFL learners from six intact classes, all native speakers of Persian with limited opportunity to communicate with native speakers of English, and no experience in English-speaking countries. To elicit data, two picture description tasks were used. These picture-stories possessed the defining characteristics of structured and unstructured narrative tasks, respectively. Results revealed that (a) unstructured tasks were associated with the production of significantly more vague expressions; and (b) the most notable differences between performances on the two task types concerned 'vague nouns', 'vague quantifiers', 'vague deintensifiers' and 'vague subjectivisers'. The results of the study have implications for both teachers and teacher educators in that they may help identify the kinds of tasks which induce language learners to use vague expressions more frequently.

**Keywords:** Task, structured task, unstructured task, vague language, EFL

### Introduction

One prominent strand of research in the area of task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT/L) investigates how different task types, task design features and task-based implementation variables, implying various degrees of cognitive demand, affect second language production, typically operationalised as complexity, accuracy, fluency (CAF), and lexis (Housen, Kuiken and Vedder 2012). The ultimate goal of this line of research is to enable teachers and teacher educators to make empirically-informed decisions about selecting pedagogic tasks which best provide learners with opportunities to produce complex and accurate language fluently (Skehan 1998). While the CAF triad is of paramount importance in capturing what is involved in native-like language production, obviously there are many other linguistic features

which may characterise the typical language use of language learners compared with native or near-native speakers (McCarthy and Carter 2001; Mumford 2009). One such feature is the use of ‘vague expressions’, such as *about*, *rather*, *very*, *thing*, *stuff*, and *something*<sup>1</sup>.

Vague language (hereafter VL) comprises a linguistic unit which ‘has an unspecified meaning boundary, so that its interpretation is elastic in the sense that it can be stretched or shrunk according to the strategic needs of communication’ (Zhang 2013: 88; see also Zhang 2015; Zhang and Sabet 2014). For example, in ‘She is *very* young’, the word *very* ‘stretches the degree of youth’, in ‘She is *rather* young’, the word *rather* ‘shrinks the degree of youth’, and in ‘She is *about* 20 years old’, the word *about* ‘stretches or shrinks the meaning boundary of *20 years old*’ (Zhang 2013: 88). Thus, in these sentences the words *very*, *rather*, and *about* constitute examples of VL (see also Channell 1994).

Although the use of VL in conversation might, at first sight, appear to be an undesirable phenomenon, research findings suggest that it is frequently used by native speakers (see Carter and McCarthy 2006; Channell 1994; Cutting 2007; Gassner 2012; Jucker, Smith and Ludge 2003; Overstreet 1999, 2011; Parvaresh 2015; Parvaresh *et al.* 2012; Terraschke 2010). This may be partly due to the fact that speakers often feel that further precision would not contribute to their argument (Cutting 2012; see also Cutting 2015), and that conversational contributions need to be tailored to ‘the perceived informational needs of the other participant(s)’ (Drave 2000: 27). In this respect, research has demonstrated that VL ‘is by no means equal to loose talk but rather is an endeavor strategically made to achieve certain communicative goals’ (Parvaresh and Tayebi 2014: 597).

Furthermore, as discussed by Sobrino (2015: 120), VL is used by speakers to communicate their emotions or thoughts even if they do not have an absolute knowledge of what they mean; thus, ‘vagueness prevents paralysis or silence.’ Additionally, the abundance of vague expression in human languages can in part be attributed to the fact that generally speakers ‘have a vague view of the world’ (Lipman 2009: 12).

Generally speaking, VL is one of the features of language where the oral style of native/near-native speakers and learners differs. VL use has proved to be a challenge for language learners. Therefore, it is of interest to identify activity types or language learning tasks that might induce learners to use VL more frequently. In other words, given that using VL is something that language learners typically do not master easily, it is important that we find ways to promote its use in language teaching contexts. In the study reported in this paper, we examine whether and how task structure affects the number and type of vague expressions produced by higher-intermediate EFL learners. We first review the theoretical and empirical background to the notions of task structure and VL. We then describe the methodology used in conducting the study. We discuss the results in the light of relevant theoretical and empirical findings.

### **Task structure**

The degree of structure implied in a narrative task is assumed to affect L2 oral performance (see Ahmadian, Abdolrezapour and Ketabi 2012; Ahmadian, Tavakoli

and Vahid Dastjerdi 2015; Skehan and Foster 1999). Tavakoli and Skehan (2005: 248-249) characterize a typical narrative task as telling ‘a story based on a sequenced set of picture prompts, which are given to participants in order to elicit language performance.’ The degree of structure in a narrative task is determined by the extent to which it has ‘a clear time line, a script, a story with a conventional beginning, middle and end, and an appeal to what is familiar and organized in the speaker’s mind’ (Tavakoli and Skehan 2005: 246). Much of the research in this area has been informed by a cognitive information processing perspective based either on Skehan’s (1998, 2009) Limited Attentional Capacity model or Robinson’s (2001) Cognition Hypothesis. It is generally argued that a task which is tightly structured – i.e. has all, or at least most, of the above-mentioned features – imposes less cognitive demand on task performers and as a result more processing resources would be left over to be allocated to the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 speech.

The construct of task structure was first proposed and discussed in a series of studies by Skehan and Foster (Foster and Skehan 1996; Skehan and Foster 1999). The primary goal of this line of research was to examine whether and how familiarity with the content of a task would affect L2 oral production. They found that talking about a familiar topic was associated with more fluent and accurate L2 output, while output focused on unfamiliar information tended to be less fluent and accurate but featured more complex language. However, for our purposes, what was most significant was that Skehan and Foster, in their post-hoc analyses, found that the most fluent task performance was elicited by those tasks which were tightly structured, irrespective of the degree of content familiarity.

Further studies lent empirical support to this post-hoc interpretation. Skehan and Foster (1999) found that narrative tasks with a tightly structured storyline induced learners to produce more fluent language than where the storyline was more loosely structured. More recently, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) found that, overall, task structure had positive and significant effects on the CAF triad; for example, statistically significant differences were found between structured and unstructured tasks for aspects of fluency such as the number of pauses and speaking time, length of run, the total amount of silence, and false starts. Ahmadian et al. (2015) investigated the combined effects of careful online planning and the storyline structure of a task on CAF in L2 oral performance and found that a structured task performed under careful online planning conditions tended to be associated with more complex, accurate and fluent L2 use while the unstructured task performed under pressured online planning produced the lowest scores for all three areas of oral production.

The studies reviewed above have focused exclusively on the linguistic dimensions of talk operationalised as the CAF triad and lexis. This line of research is informed by the general belief that successful language learning involves a balanced improvement in these aspects of talk (Skehan 1998). The study we present here suggests that there are other important features of language (e.g. the use of vague expressions) which have been neglected in task-based research but are as important to balanced L2 development as CAF and lexis.

To fill this gap, the present study explores a task design feature which may induce language learners to produce more instances of VL and thus practise a key feature of effective conversational interaction.

### Some notes on VL

As noted above, that natural language use is frequently vague has repeatedly been established by researchers (see Channell 1994; Cheng and Warren 2001; Cutting 2007, 2012; Fernández 2015; Fernández and Yuldashev 2011; Janney 2002; Parvaresh and Tayebi 2014; Pan and Felser 2011; Peires 1997; Powell 1985; Ruzaitė 2007; Zhang 2011, 2013). In the same way, it has been argued that while speakers have the ability to make their language less vague, it would be impossible for them to make it perfectly precise (Williamson 1994). Broadly speaking, ‘virtually all non-mathematical expressions in natural language must have vagueness as an inherent property’ (Smith, cited in Overstreet 2011: 293). The role of VL in social interaction is so pivotal that if people did not have access to vague expressions, ‘their range of communication would be severely restricted’ (Sinclair, cited in Fernández 2015: 2). Along the same lines, Crystal and Davy (1975) argue that vague expressions are among the frequent expressions used in human interaction. The rather high frequency of vague expressions in human interaction seems to be caused by the fact that ‘VL is multifunctional’ (Zhang, 2013: 91) and enables speakers ‘to take refuge in strategic imprecision’ (Leech, cited in Zhang, 2013: 91).

Defining what counts as a vague expression is, however, potentially problematic. As Adolphs, Atkins and Harvey (2007: 62) have pointed out, ‘a wide range of definitions exists, and the lexico-grammatical realisations and categories associated with VL vary considerably between researchers.’ In her seminal study of VL, Channell (1994: 20) affirms that an expression is vague if ‘it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition’, if it is ‘purposely and unabashedly vague’, or if the meaning ‘arises from intrinsic uncertainty.’

Cutting (2012: 248), in one of the most recent studies, defines VL as ‘forms that are intentionally fuzzy, general and imprecise, have a low semantic content and are heavily dependent on shared contextual knowledge for their meaning.’ The following are the most common categories of VL usually discussed in the literature:

- a) Vague quantifiers that are used to signal a vague reading (e.g. *about 35, 35 or so, a few, many, few, several, five-ish*);
- b) Vague possibility indicators that express if something is possible or valid (e.g., *possible, seem, appear*);
- c) Vague category identifiers (also known as ‘general extenders’) that are used to indicate a vague category (e.g. *or anything like that, or something, and all that, and that sort of thing*);
- d) Vague intensifiers that are used to intensify the tone of an utterance (e.g. *very, overly, extremely, really, obviously, so*);
- e) Vague de-intensifiers that are used to soften the tone of an utterance (e.g. *little, a little bit, some, kind of, somewhat, pretty much, fairly*);
- f) Vague nouns that are used to indicate unspecific meaning boundaries (e.g. *thing, thingy, stuff, someone, something*);
- g) Vague subjectivisers that are used to convey a lower degree of certainty or commitment (e.g. *I think, we believe, I reckon*).

(adapted from Zhang 2011: 574 and Zhang 2013: 90)

The categories of VL delineated above serve to perform the following common functions (see Channell 1994; Cheng and Warren 2001; Oversteet 1999; Ruzaitè 2007; Zhang 2011, 2013):

- 1) giving the right amount of information and excluding unnecessary information;
- 2) withholding controversial information from the hearer;
- 3) filling in lexical gaps;
- 4) covering lack of information;
- 5) doing self-protection by making statements less assertive;
- 6) establishing solidarity and rapport with other interlocutors.

Given the value of VL to fulfill a variety of functions in fluent interaction (Cutting 2007), VL is, as noted by Mumford (2009), of benefit to learners especially if they aim to deal with native speakers<sup>2</sup>. In fact, language teachers ‘share a common goal for their learners’ speaking development – to speak English that is recognized as ‘good’ or ‘standard’ by speakers outside their countries’ (Goh 2009: 311). Thus, language pedagogy may also need to include hitherto neglected areas of language use such as VL. As discussed by Metsä-Ketelä (2012: 264-265), ‘a skillful use of VL is part of an English speaker’s communicative competence and thus a valuable asset to anyone wishing to participate in the ever-increasing situations where speakers use English as a lingua franca.’ Despite the increasing number of studies that investigate VL use in spoken interaction, little attention has been paid to how these expressions are learned or how they could be taught in classroom contexts. It is nevertheless ‘desirable for both teachers and students to recognize that VL makes up a considerable part of language use’ (Koester 2007: 58).

### **The study**

Given the importance of VL in communication, the present study aims to explore whether and how task structure can induce learners to produce more instances of VL. In the light of our foregoing discussion, it is plausible to hypothesise that less structured tasks – which lack a time line, script, and/or clear beginning, middle and end – are more likely to induce speakers to produce more VL items but it is not clear which categories of VL are likely to occur more frequently (cf. Zhang 2013). Therefore, the present study addressed the following research questions:

- 1- Does task structure affect the number of vague expressions used by EFL learners?
- 2- How does task structure affect the production of different types of vague expressions?

### **Participants**

Sixty one higher-intermediate Iranian EFL learners from six intact classes initially participated in this study. The data from 11 participants were excluded after task performance either because they had used a dictionary or because they had taken notes while viewing the picture-story. All participants were native speakers of Persian

with limited opportunity to communicate with native speakers of English, and none had ever been to an English-speaking country. Prior to the study, they had undergone between 3 and 4.5 years ( $M = 3.20$ ) of EFL instruction in a private language centre. Their teachers were English/Persian bilinguals with extensive experience in teaching English. To control for language proficiency, the grammar part of the Oxford Placement Test (Allan 1992) was administered and the participants obtained between 51 and 69 out of 100, which confirmed that they were fairly equal in terms of their overall language proficiency<sup>3</sup>.

### **Tasks**

Two picture-stories were used (see Appendix). These were designed specifically for this study based on the defining characteristics of structured and unstructured tasks which, according to Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), include: (a) whether or not a task contains a clear macrostructure; (b) whether or not there is a logical relation among the elements of the story; and (c) whether or not the story entails a clear time line, conventional beginning, middle and end. The two picture-stories used were selected from a trial of five picture-stories specifically designed for our research. Ten experienced EFL teachers were asked to rank the five stories in terms of structure, based on Tavakoli and Skehan's (2005) criteria, while 10 higher-intermediate EFL learners performed oral narratives based on the five stories. Both sets of participants were then asked to select the most structured (the easiest) and the most unstructured (the most difficult) picture-story. There was general consensus across both teachers and learners on the selection of the two picture-stories to be used for this research. This is in line with research by Tavakoli (2009) and Ahmadian et al. (2012) which showed considerable similarity between teachers and language learners in terms of the criteria they consider consequential for identifying task difficulty. To make sure that the selection was based strictly on our criteria – i.e. having a clear timeline, beginning, middle and end – and not on any extraneous aspect of difficulty which might confound the research – the participants were asked to stick to the criteria specified by the researchers.

### **Procedure**

Data collection was conducted in two separate sessions, which, in order to control for the effects of task repetition, were held with a one-week interval. In the first session, the participants were asked to undertake the structured task followed by the unstructured task in the second session. In both sessions, participants were allowed 8 minutes to think about the pictures prior to narrating the story but were not allowed to use a dictionary or take notes during this pre-task planning time. They then started narrating the story and their narrations were audio-recorded. They were told that they had 10 minutes to narrate the story but none of them took more than 8 minutes for task performance ( $M = 7.15$  seconds). The recordings were then transcribed<sup>4</sup>

The seven categories specified in the previous section helped to identify the instances of VL in the transcribed data. However, as the goal of the study was to investigate which VL categories are used more frequently than the other categories, an endeavour which also meant examining possible new and innovative forms of VL<sup>5</sup>

(Metsä-Ketelä 2012), we needed an overall working definition. To this end, and drawing on Cheng and Warren (2003: 394), Cheng (2007: 163) and Zhang (2011: 572), we used the following definition to help us identify VL items on the basis of ‘context-dependability’ and ‘unresolvability’:

VL is language whose meaning is negotiable (i.e., *context-dependable*) but does not lose its status as vague as a result of this process (i.e., *unresolvable*).

The transcribed data were analysed manually by one of the authors and all examples of VL based on the above working definition were identified. These were then double-checked by the second author. To illustrate, consider the following excerpt from the data:

*He is happy em and he is thinking that the computer which em belongs to his friend is really em much better than his laptop.*

The word *really* was unanimously regarded by both researchers as an instance of VL in that, whereas it served to highlight the superiority of the computer in question (i.e. context-dependable), it did not disclose any specific information about the computer’s superiority (i.e. unresolvable). The vague item ‘*really*’ was no doubt used by the speaker to intensify the tone of the utterance. Following Tayebi and Parvaresh (2014), the small number of disagreements between the authors were resolved by consensus.

## Results

### *Analysing categories of VL*

All seven categories of VL were found in the corpus and examples are discussed below:

Vague nouns: these expressions are used to indicate unspecific meaning boundaries.

[1]  
*Jimmy em is a student. He is working on some things. These em things are em his assignments. He has to do these assignments quickly because em Jimmy have more things to do for tomorrow too...*

All the three uses of ‘*things*’ above constitute examples of VL in that although they refer to ‘the projects or assignments students are normally expected to do’ (i.e., context-dependable), they do not reveal any extra information as to what these projects or assignments really are (i.e., unresolvable).

Vague quantifiers: these expressions are used to signal an inexact reading. The following example is revealing:

[2]  
*This is hmmm because there are several people in the bus and he is not comfortable with these people who are em sitting next to him.*



In [2], although the quantifier ‘*several*’ serves to imply that ‘the number of people on the bus was more than expected’ (i.e., context-dependable), it does not disclose the exact number (i.e., unresolvable). Note that the vague quantifier *several* seems to have been used because an exact number is either not expected or not known or not relevant.

Vague possibility indicators: these vague words are used to indicate if something is possible or valid.

[3]

***Maybe** the guy is searching for someone em maybe to borrow a computer for em his projects. He calls his friend. And he ask for his help. And in the next picture emm **maybe** the guy have heard ‘yes’ from his friend ...*

In this example, ‘*maybe*’ constitutes a case of VL use in that although it serves to indicate ‘some irresolution’ (Zhang 2013: 99) in the description being provided (i.e., context-dependable), it does not indicate how uncertain the speaker is (i.e., unresolvable).

General extenders: these expressions, such as ‘*etcetera*’, occur at the end of utterances and are typically used to evoke some larger set. In these cases, they generalize from a preceding referent to the larger group of items to which that referent belongs (Overstreet 1999).

[4]

*He is in the computer shop. He is em very confused and he looks at the person who is you know are the owner of the shop. Maybe the owner hmmm says to him that he is busy and he cannot fix his computer **and and and**. Therefore, he call someone else. Maybe his friend.*

In this example, the general extender ‘*and and and*’ is vague in that although it indicates ‘things that might prevent the shop owner from repairing a computer on time (e.g., ‘being busy’, ‘having lots of other customers’, and ‘heavy workload’)’ (i.e., context-dependable), it does not spell out any information concerning what these things are (i.e., unresolvable).

Vague subjectivisers: these expressions help the speaker convey a lower degree of certainty or commitment.

[5]

***I think** the person in the computer repair shop tells him that he cannot mend em fix it for him. He tells our friend that em he has other things to do first. So he cannot help.*

In this context, the meaning of the subjectiviser ‘*I think*’ is context-dependable (i.e., it provides information about ‘the possibility of the computer technician saying that he cannot fix the computer’), but is unresolvable (i.e., it would still be impossible to say

how committed the speaker is to the truth of the utterances being made). Therefore, in the above example the subjectiviser ‘*I think*’ is an example of VL.

Vague intensifiers: these are expressions that serve to indicate that the speaker ‘recognizes potentially diverse positions but has chosen to narrow this diversity [...], confronting alternatives with a [...] confident voice’ (Hyland 2005: 52). The ‘confident voice’ expressed by intensifiers does not necessarily make the utterance any less vague, though.

[6]

*Now he is **really** happy. And and em **obviously** em he has a good laptop and his laptop is different from his old laptop.*

Here, the intensifiers ‘*really*’ and ‘*obviously*’ are examples of VL; they serve to indicate that the speaker is confident/certain of/about what she is about to say (i.e., context- dependable), but it would still be impossible to provide a definitive answer to a question such as ‘how confident is the speaker?’ (i.e., unresolvable).

Vague de-intensifiers: these expressions serve to vaguely soften the tone of the utterance.

[7]

*He was there and em after some time he understood that it was **somehow** late for him. He went to the bus stop and jumps the bus.*

In [7] above, ‘*somehow*’ is an example of VL for it is both context dependent (i.e., it reduces the strength of a description such as ‘being late’) and unresolvable (i.e., it would be impossible to determine for sure ‘if it was late or not’).

A quantitative summary of these categories will be provided in the next section.

### **Exploring the differences between the two tasks**

In total, the corpus comprised 37,313 words. The structured task comprised 17,509 words and the unstructured task, 19,804 words. 970 vague expressions were identified based on the coding procedures described above; 406 (42%) in the structured tasks and 564 (58%) in the unstructured tasks. Differences in the categories of VL use were also found between the unstructured and the structured task as shown in Table 1. As predicted, the unstructured task induced participants to produce more vague expressions (Unstructured task:  $M = 11.28$ ;  $SD = 2.30$  and Structured task:  $M = 8.14$ ;  $SD = 1.75$ ). This finding is consistent across most of the vague expression categories, except for vague intensifiers, vague extenders, and vague possibility indicators. A series of paired-sample *t*-tests<sup>6</sup> (Table 2) showed that the observed differences were statistically significant. Results demonstrate that the two tasks induced statistically significant differences in terms of total number of vague expressions ( $t(49) = -8.35$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), vague nouns ( $t(49) = -5.75$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), vague quantifiers ( $t(49) = -4.77$ ,  $p$

= 0.000), vague deintensifiers ( $t(49) = -3.093, p = 0.000$ ), and vague subjectivisers ( $t(49) = -9.333, p = 0.000$ ).

**Table 1 here**

**Table 2 here**

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper set out to investigate the extent to which task structure affects the number and type of vague expressions used by intermediate EFL learners in performing an oral narrative based on a picture-story. The results revealed that: (1) unstructured tasks are associated with more frequent use of vague expressions; and (2) with greater use of vague nouns, vague quantifiers, vague deintensifiers and vague subjectivisers in particular.

The statistically significant differences between the two task performances in terms of the overall number of vague expressions could be explained with reference to Levelt's speech production model (1983) and the limited nature of human attentional capacity (Styles 1997). When participants are engaged in performing an unstructured task, the inherent qualities of the task require them to both make sense of the story that they want to narrate – i.e. grasp the story behind the pictures – and, at the same time, search for the right vocabulary items with which to communicate the intended message. According to Levelt's model (1983), speech production involves three stages: the first stage, *conceptualisation*, involves conceiving the message which is to be communicated and producing what Levelt dubs preverbal message (a blueprint which is nonlinguistic in nature); during the second stage, *formulation*, the speaker selects the words and grammatical structures to realise the intended meaning in the form of what Levelt calls 'phonetic plan'; and finally, during the third stage, the speaker articulates the actual speech, hence the name *articulation*. In the light of this model, it could be argued that unstructured tasks induce speakers to allocate a sizable portion of their attentional resources to the conceptualisation stage during which they have to produce the preverbal message. This being the case, L2 learners who are performing an unstructured task may fail to make the required lexico-grammatical searches and lemma retrieval processes which are normally performed in the formulation stage and as a result, may 'resort to' making use of such vague expressions as '*things*'.

While performing a structured task, owing to its relatively straightforward and clear time line and macrostructure, task performers do not have to devote much processing and attentional resources to the conceptualisation stage and consequently, may manage to choose the 'non-vague' words – or what they think to be the right words, given their language proficiency. They might therefore not produce as many vague expressions as they would while performing the unstructured task.

This finding is in accord with Ahmadian et al. (2012) who found that structured tasks induce speakers to execute more error-repairs (which are concerned with grammar and lexis) whereas unstructured tasks induce them to make different-information and appropriacy repairs (which have to do with content and message). In effect, producing more error repairs is indicative of the fact that the task performer is

attempting to produce more accurate and less vague language. This result also further substantiates the claim that VL facilitates the goals of interaction. As Cheng (2007: 178) argues, '[t]he view that VL impairs communication needs to be replaced with the view that it facilitates communication when used appropriately in context.'

Additionally, the observation that in both groups 'vague nouns' were the most frequent category of VL is in line with many of the studies on VL. For example, Koester (2007), drawing on data that consisted of naturally occurring spoken interactions recorded in the offices of a variety of organisations and companies in North America and the UK, reports that vague nouns are perhaps the most frequent category of vague expressions.

It should also be mentioned that a few of the vague items produced, especially in the unstructured task group, reflected 'forced vagueness', a situation in which 'there is no word, or the speaker does not know or cannot remember the word, which precisely denotes the referent or situation' (Trappes-Lomax 2007: 122). A word such as '*thingy*', which is used to refer to items that the speaker cannot think of words for, would constitute a common case of 'forced vagueness'. As discussed by Carter and McCarthy (2006), an expression such as '*thingy*' is usually used when the items are present. However, as Mumford (2009: 141) insightfully suggests:

...learners could be trained to make use of this feature to substitute for unknown words, whether the referents are present or not. This seems preferable to the alternative, which is to define the unnamed item, for example: 'a thing for opening a bottle with'. Such complex grammatical structures are difficult to produce in real time and are likely to reduce fluency.

However, Parvaresh (2011) reports that an informal vague expression such as '*thingy*' is almost non-existent in the speech of some EFL learners. Generally speaking, 'the received wisdom about VL is that it is 'sloppy', and reflects unclear thinking' (Koester 2007: 57). It would, therefore, be desirable 'for both teachers and students to recognize that VL makes up a considerable part of language use' (Koester 2007: 58).

As was discussed earlier, virtually all studies on task structure suggest that structured tasks are most useful for enhancing fluency and accuracy of L2 performance (Ahmadian et al. 2012, 2015; Skehan and Foster 1999, 2001) and that unstructured tasks can foster dysfluency and inaccuracy. This in turn might suggest that unstructured tasks should only be used in L2 language teaching where there is a need for learners to practise producing complex language. However, the results of the present study imply that unstructured tasks can also be useful in providing a context which seems to lend itself to greater use of VL. If native and near-native language use is typically characterised by VL, then such practice could be important for learners. Bygate (this issue) argues that pedagogic tasks are expected to induce 'interactional authenticity'. If, following Bygate, we take interactional authenticity as 'typical features of normal target language use', then one way to achieve this would be to promote the use of VL in the classroom. To those familiar with the literature on task structure, advising teachers to use unstructured tasks may run counter to the previous research findings as most research studies point to the beneficial effects of structured tasks on L2 production. But in order for TBLT research to be of practical use we need

to move towards ‘researched development and gradual innovation of syllabus types, and controlled experimentation with alternative sequencing options’(Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris 2009: 497).

All in all, the current study recommends the use of both structured and unstructured tasks so as to induce language learners to produce more instances of vague expressions on the one hand and relatively more accurate language on the other. This will in turn facilitate ‘a balance between communication and focus on form’ (Van den Branden *et al.* 2009: 498) and will help materialising an extended version of Skehan’s (1998: 150) call for a ‘balanced development’ of L2 performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency which could include other features of language such as VL.

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- 1 Due to the fact that vague expressions make the message less domineering and more native-like, they are generally categorised as a ‘feature’ of appropriacy (see Mumford 2009). Even so, VL can also improve fluency of talk. For example, one can use a vague expression such as ‘thing’ when they are stuck on a word that they do not understand.
- 2 As non-native speakers of English and following Ferguson (1983, p. vii), we acknowledge the fact that the concept of ‘native speaker’ is quite vague and that “much of the world’s verbal communication takes place by means of languages which are not the users’ mother tongue, but their second, third or nth language, acquired one way or another and used when appropriate.” However, in reality and when it comes to the actual second language classrooms, it is very difficult to neglect the expectation of language learners which is, in most cases, to be able to use the language they want to learn as ‘naturally’ as possible. In most EFL contexts such as Iran, there seems to be a collapsing together of natural language use and (near)native-like language performance.
- 3 One of the LLJ reviewers rightly pointed out that ‘there seems to be relatively wide range on the OPT (51-96)’. However, the participants were selected from intact higher intermediate classes and according to their teachers and the placement tests that they had passed, they were considered to be at the same level of proficiency. Further, our holistic evaluation of their oral production confirmed that they were equal in terms of proficiency. We are inclined to suggest that the relatively wide range of scores on the OPT could be attributed to the fact that only the grammar part of the test was used. If a more complete test (such as TOEFL iBT) had been used, we are confident that the scores would have been more homogeneous.
- 4 The transcription was undertaken by a research assistant with an MA in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). One of the researchers checked approximately 15% of the transcribed data and found that there was a 97% agreement on the accuracy between the original recordings and the transcriptions.
- 5 For example, in our data we found ‘innovative’ examples of VL such as ‘He is tired, bored *and and* but he wants to finish his activities’ and ‘He tells him that he is busy and he asks why

does he come today to the shop *and this and that*. The boy becomes more worried.’ In both these cases, the expressions seem to have the meaning ‘*etcetera*’, i.e. allowing the listener to fill in the implied content, and the precise formulation may be the result of transfer from L1 Persian.

- 6 In the present study, multiple *t*-tests were run and in order to reduce the risks of committing Type 1 Error, Bonferroni adjustment was applied (see Tabachnik and Fidell 1996), such that the normal alpha value (.05) was divided by the number of dependent variables.

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**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for categories of vague expressions per 1000 words**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total (ST task)	50	4.00	12.00	8.14	1.75
Total (UNST task)	50	4.00	15.00	11.28	2.30
Vague nouns (ST)	50	1.00	4.00	1.54	.81
Vague nouns (UNST)	50	.00	6.00	2.68	1.32
Vague quantifiers (ST)	50	.00	3.00	1.38	.67
Vague quantifiers (UNST)	50	.00	5.00	1.96	.78
Vague deintensifiers (ST)	50	.00	4.00	1.20	.70
Vague deintensifiers (UNST)	50	.00	6.00	1.76	1.15
Vague subjectivisers (ST)	50	1.00	2.00	1.18	.39
Vague subjectivisers (UNST)	50	1.00	2.00	1.82	.39
Vague intensifiers (ST)	50	.00	2.00	.98	.32
Vague intensifiers (UNST)	50	1.00	2.00	1.02	.14
Vague extenders (ST)	50	.00	3.00	.96	.83
Vague extenders (UNST)	50	.00	3.00	.96	.83
Vague possibility indicators (ST)	50	.00	3.00	.96	.83
Vague possibility indicators (UNST)	50	.00	2.00	.98	.79

**Table 2: Differences between structured and unstructured tasks**

Comparison: Structured vs. unstructured tasks	Std. Error mean	t-value	df	Sig. (two-tailed)
Total number of vague expressions/1000 words	.37	-8.35	49	.000*
Vague nouns	.20	-5.75	49	.000*
Vague quantifiers	.12	-4.77	49	.000*
Vague deintensifiers	.18	-3.093	49	.003*
Vague subjectivisers	.07	-9.333	49	.000*
Vague intensifiers	.04	-1.00	49	.322
Vague extenders	.08	-1.30	49	.20
Vague possibility indicators	.14	-.846	49	.40

\*Level of statistical significance = .00625

**Appendix**

**A. The Structured Task**



**B. The Unstructured Task**

