

**Individual Paper Session 4**  
**Classroom**  
**Tuesday, July 4**  
**3:15-3:45pm**

**Measuring the effects of storyline structure upon first and second language performance**

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Recent research into task-based language performance has shown that task characteristics and task conditions give rise to variations in second language performance. For example, particular task characteristics can influence task difficulty, (Robinson 2001) and this impacts on the accuracy and complexity of the performance. Similarly, factors such as narrative structure and pre-task planning have selective influences upon performance areas such as fluency and accuracy. (Skehan and Foster, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997, Tavakoli and Skehan 2005). There is little comparative evidence on whether the same characteristics of tasks would influence the fluency and complexity of native speakers' language performance in similar ways.

This is an interesting angle to take on task performance as it casts light on how the brain prioritises attention between complexity and fluency during a speaking task, and may show how differences between native and non-native performance arise from the additional processing demands of a second and imperfectly known language.

This paper presents the findings of a study designed to examine how narrative structure and narrative complexity influence the performance of both native and second language users who were asked to tell stories presented in cartoon strips.

Forty native-speakers and eighty non-native speakers took part in the study. Each performed two of four narrative tasks that had different degrees of narrative structure (loose or tight) and storyline complexity (with or without background events). Quantitative measures of lexical variety, fluency, accuracy and complexity of the data were taken, and a further qualitative analysis of the lexis was also carried out. The preliminary results support the findings of previous research that task structure does affect accuracy and fluency, and that some of these effects are found in the native speaker data as well. Further analyses will be presented into the ways the combination of foregrounded and backgrounded information in the narratives supports complexity, and will compare the lexical choices made by native and non-native speakers to describe the same events.