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Edited by

María del Pilar García Mayo

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Contents

Foreword	
<i>Alison Mackey</i>	vii
Contributors	xi
Introduction	
<i>María del Pilar García Mayo</i>	1
1 Criteria for Classifying and Sequencing Pedagogic Tasks	
<i>Peter Robinson</i>	7
2 Information Distribution and Goal Orientation in	
Second Language Task Design	
<i>Craig P. Lambert and Steve Engler</i>	27
3 The Simultaneous Manipulation of Task Complexity	
Along Planning Time and [+ / – Here-and-Now]:	
Effects on L2 Oral Production	
<i>Roger Gilabert</i>	44
4 Tasks, Negotiation and L2 Learning in a Foreign	
Language Context	
<i>Marisol Fernández García</i>	69
5 Attention to Form Across Collaborative Tasks by	
Low-Proficiency Learners in an EFL Setting	
<i>Ana Alegría de la Colina and María del Pilar García Mayo</i>	91
6 Cognitive Task Complexity and Linguistic Performance	
in French L2 Writing	
<i>Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder</i>	117
7 The Effect of Manipulating Task Complexity Along the	
[+ / – Here-and-Now] Dimension on L2 Written	
Narrative Discourse	
<i>Tomohito Ishikawa</i>	136
8 Writing Tasks: The Effects of Collaboration	
<i>Neomy Storch and Gillian Wigglesworth</i>	157
9 L2 Vocabulary Acquisition and Reading Comprehension:	
The Influence of Task Complexity	
<i>Elke Peters</i>	178
10 Task-Effect on the Use of Lexical Innovation Strategies in	
Interlanguage Communication	
<i>Elsa González Álvarez</i>	199

11	Fostering EFL Learners' Awareness of Requesting Through Explicit and Implicit Consciousness-Raising Tasks <i>Eva Alcón Soler</i>	221
12	Interactive Task Design: Metachat and the Whole Learner <i>Marie-Noëlle Lamy</i>	242
	Index	265

Foreword

For years, second language (L2) tasks have been providing contexts for language use. Researchers can manipulate tasks to test theoretical claims, and teachers can shape them to promote L2 use and acquisition. As such, tasks have become central to both second language research and pedagogy. In fact, one helpful outcome of the classroom origins of many tasks and their corresponding ecological validity in research has been to provide a fruitful area of common ground between research and practice. Various aspects of tasks, task features, and task complexity are of key interest to today's second language acquisition teachers and researchers, who seek to understand the intricacies of how task-based interaction plays a facilitative role in instructed language development and how research on tasks can inform task-based syllabus design. The widely recognized importance of these linked goals is reflected in the impressive (and increasing) amount of research being carried out in this area. Top-tier journals and conferences on language acquisition now regularly include papers dealing with task-design issues, and several books have appeared providing overviews of task-based learning, teaching, and research concerns (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989). The collection of work brought together in the current volume adds to this body of work and demonstrates how theory and pedagogy can inform each other regarding shared questions and goals.

A classification and explanation of the effects of task features on learners' L2 production is fundamental to understanding the processes of language acquisition in both research and classroom contexts. In the first chapter of this collection, Peter Robinson points out that many of the intuitive lists of task features (e.g., cognitive load, communicative stress) proposed by teachers and researchers early on were insightful and have been worthwhile; nonetheless, he finds the lack of a single taxonomic system of empirically researched and pedagogically implementable task characteristics problematic. Answers to many of the questions that Rod Ellis usefully raised in his 2003 text can be clarified further: How can tasks be designed to influence language use? In what ways might language acquisition occur as a result? How can tasks be most appropriately used for assessment purposes? Robinson asks these sorts of questions using the lens of his own

classification system, focusing on interactional, cognitive, and ability-related criteria, with the goal of ascertaining how task complexity can promote interlanguage development and how tasks can best be sequenced in pedagogical settings. He notes that while certain distinctions have already enjoyed a substantial amount of research (e.g., planned vs. unplanned tasks, open vs. closed solutions), others have not progressed much beyond the proposal stage. Current questions of interest to Robinson include how the procedural and conceptual demands of tasks can affect learners' allocation of attentional resources, noticing of linguistic form, grammaticization of meanings, automatization of access to linguistic knowledge, and, ultimately, attainment of higher levels of L2 proficiency.

Many of the studies following this initial chapter take up a number of Robinson's questions, building on his proposals, testing his claims, and adding new perspectives. Several apply his model of task complexity to the investigation of particular task types and contribute to theorizing based on their results. Indeed, part of the usefulness of this edited collection lies in its bringing together of studies which may allow for a comparison of the effects of design features across a range of task types. Oral and written tasks are represented evenly, and a variety of measures are employed in evaluating learners' on-task L2 use. Several chapters (2, 3, 6, 7, and 8) report on learners' linguistic accuracy, fluency, and complexity, while others focus on aspects of language use such as discourse moves (Chapter 4), focus on form and metatalk (Chapter 5), lexical innovations (Chapter 10), and even the naturally occurring "learning talk" which occurs off-task (Chapter 12). Still others examine vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Chapter 9) and learners' pragmatics knowledge (Chapter 11).

In line with Robinson's research agenda, Craig Lambert and Steve Engler (Chapter 2) explore the effects of the task-design features of goal orientation (open or closed) and information distribution (shared, one-way, or two-way) on learners' oral L2 production, while Roger Gilabert (Chapter 3) examines the effects of planning time and orientation to the *here-and-now* versus the *there-and-then*. Other chapters comparatively evaluate Robinson's (2001, 2003, 2005) Cognition Hypothesis of task complexity against Skehan's (1998, 2001) Capacity Hypothesis, looking empirically at how well their contrasting predictions regarding learners' allocation of attention are borne out. For instance, in order to investigate whether attentional resources exist in multiple non-competitive pools, thereby allowing for simultaneously greater linguistic accuracy and complexity on more complex tasks (as with Robinson), or whether concerns with linguistic accuracy and complexity compete with each other for limited attentional resources (as with Skehan), Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder (Chapter 6) evaluate learners' output on L2 writing tasks which require more or less demanding reasoning. Results such as these have implications not only for theories of attention in SLA, but also for task sequencing in classroom contexts.

Other studies draw inspiration and make important contributions to, research on the value of interaction for language learning. Marisol Fernández García (Chapter 4), for instance, asks how tasks can be designed to promote features of interaction, such as negotiation for meaning, which have been linked to L2 development (Mackey & Gass, 2006). Drawing in part on work by Swain (1995, 1998), Ana Alegría de la Colina and María del Pilar García Mayo (Chapter 5) examine how low-proficiency learners can be pushed to reflect consciously on their own language production, focusing on form and producing metatalk about the target language while conveying meaning in collaborative tasks. Elsa González Álvarez (Chapter 10) investigates learners' problem-solving mechanisms in oral interactions, looking at whether task type influences the extent to which they employ lexical innovation strategies when faced with gaps in their L2 knowledge.

For those readers more interested in classroom concerns, several chapters deal with how task characteristics can be manipulated in relation to learners' needs and motivations. For example, in addition to investigating how task-design features affect learners' linguistic accuracy, fluency, and complexity, Lambert and Engler (Chapter 2) explore their effects on learners' affective engagement in task performance. Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo (Chapter 5) provide pedagogical guidelines for teachers in relation to encouraging learners' metatalk in the implementation of collaborative tasks. In Chapter 8, Neomy Storch and Gillian Wigglesworth examine differences in the writing produced by learners who have completed tasks collaboratively versus individually. The qualitative information they provide regarding the learners' approaches should be useful for educators. In discussing how consciousness-raising tasks can help learners to develop pragmatic awareness about making requests, Eva Alcón (Chapter 11) touches on whether learners show preferences for particular task types. Finally, Marie-Noëlle Lamy (Chapter 12) reconsiders the use of traditional communicative tasks in light of the incidental learning which can occur naturally in learners' conversations on self-selected topics. She highlights L2 learners' resourcefulness and warns that teachers' and researchers' expectations may overlook the educational validity of the "learning-talk" which occurs in off-task communication.

The focus on learner variables which is so important for pedagogy is significant for L2 researchers as well, of course. As Robinson argues, it is important to identify aspects of task complexity which show robust effects on language performance and acquisition across learners, but it is also crucial to investigate how individual differences in abilities and affective variables interact with task conditions so that specific modifications can be made to provide optimal learning opportunities. Along these lines, some of the chapters in this collection take a closer look at learner proficiency in relation to task features, asking, for example, how low-proficiency learners can benefit from metatalk during collaborative tasks (Chapter 5) and how

proficiency may mediate the relationship between task characteristics and lexical innovation (Chapter 10). Other chapters investigate how the effects of task complexity might be mediated by language aptitude (Chapter 7) and inferencing skills (Chapter 9).

In sum, this new edited collection provides a rich compendium of work on second language tasks that will be of interest to researchers and students of task-based language learning alike. The book also provides research-based evidence for second language teachers and educators who want to learn about best practices in task-based formal language instruction. Taken as whole, the text provides a broad and balanced overview of the current state of the art in instructed task research, with an impressive range of chapters from leading researchers in the field. The book deals with an interesting variety of target and source languages, modes, contexts and settings, and a range of aspects of task features from multiple complementary perspectives. It makes an important and timely contribution to the field and will be read with interest and profit by any serious task scholar.

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Introduction

MARÍA DEL PILAR GARCÍA MAYO

The purpose of this book is to contribute to the growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching that has been seen in recent years. Numerous publications on this topic (see, among many others, the work by Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2000, 2003, 2005; Lee, 2000; Long & Norris, 2000; Skehan, 1998; Robinson, 2001, 2005; Willis, 1996; the special issue of the journal *Language Teaching Research* vol. 3, 2000) and the first International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching (held in Belgium in September, 2005) attest to this interest. As is well known, task is a central concept in current second language acquisition (SLA) research, both as a research instrument and as a construct in need of investigation (Ellis, 2003: ix; Seedhouse, 2005). Researchers and teachers consider it of the utmost importance to elicit samples of learner language as this is the basic material that will help us understand how learners restructure their interlanguage over time and design materials accordingly.

As programmes in formal language settings that are currently implementing task-based syllabi seem to be on the increase, there is a need to (i) provide guidelines for task classification, sequencing and design and (ii) determine if this type of approach may actually inform effective teaching practice. The current volume brings together research that focuses on various aspects and effects of pedagogic task design. Eleven of the 12 contributions are data-based studies that use tasks to examine oral interaction, written production, vocabulary and reading, lexical innovation and pragmatics in different formal language learning settings. The number of languages involved (English as a foreign/second language, French/German/Spanish as foreign languages) together with the various aspects of the learning of a language analysed will hopefully provide the reader with different options that can be tested in other contexts, with different language combinations and different groups of learners.

In the opening chapter, 'Criteria for classifying and sequencing pedagogic tasks', Peter Robinson argues for the need of a classificatory system of pedagogic task characteristics. This categorisation will offer guidance as

to how to classify and sequence tasks and will introduce order in the data base of findings about tasks effects on L2 learning and performance. Robinson emphasises the importance that the L2 classificatory system meet these constraints: it should be (i) motivated by a theory, (ii) empirically researchable, and (iii) operationally feasible. He reviews interactional, cognitive and ability-determinant criteria for task classification and three proposals (the Skills Hypothesis, the Capacity Hypothesis and the Cognition Hypothesis) for task sequencing, providing a rationale for the two stages in which task complexity is increased in the Cognition Hypothesis.

Chapter 2, 'Information distribution and goal orientation in second language task design' by Craig P. Lambert and Steve Engler, focuses on two task design factors, information distribution and goal orientation, claimed to be related to the nature of discourse learners produce. More specifically, the goal of their paper is to determine the efficacy of those two design factors in supporting a dual-mode processing system. Thirty-six Japanese females with an intermediate level of English participated in the study whose results seem to provide support for shared or open versions of tasks as useful tools '[...] to push L2 development by encouraging more complex language use, whereas one-way versions might subsequently be used to practice and solidify these gains by encouraging more fluent and accurate language use'.

The next three chapters examine tasks and oral production by different groups of learners. In Chapter 3 ('The simultaneous manipulation of task complexity along planning time and [+ / - Here-and-Now]: Effects on L2 oral production') Roger Gilabert studies the impact of simultaneously manipulating pre-task planning time and the degree of displaced, past time reference on learners' narrative fluency, complexity and accuracy. A group of 48 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students with a lower-intermediate proficiency level were asked to narrate four wordless comic strips under four different levels of task complexity. Findings indicate that planning time has a positive impact on fluency and lexical complexity but no impact on structural complexity and accuracy. Increasing complexity along the [+ / - Here-and-Now] variable has a positive effect on accuracy, no effects on structural or lexical complexity and negative effects on fluency. The results are discussed in the light of L1 and L2 production models as well as opposing views of how attentional resources are allocated during task performance (Skehan, 1998; Robinson, 2001).

The study by Marisol Fernández García 'Tasks, negotiation, and L2 learning in a foreign language context' (Chapter 4), examines how two communication tasks (two-way and one-way information gap) contribute to create opportunities for beginner learners of Spanish to engage in the negotiation of meaning. The interaction of 21 dyads was recorded, transcribed and analysed. The overall findings of the study indicate that beginning foreign language learners do not seem to be limited by their linguistic resources and

try to make input comprehensible to their partners. They can also provide grammatical feedback by using various forms of modification. The study provides support for the use of tasks with beginner language learners.

In Chapter 5 ('Attention to form across collaborative tasks by low-proficiency learners in an EFL setting') Ana Alegría de la Colina and María del Pilar García Mayo also explore the issue of the use of tasks with low-proficiency learners. The study aims at exploring the facilitating effects of three collaborative tasks (dictogloss, text reconstruction and jigsaw) to promote Focus-on-Form (FonF) and metatalk about the target language. Twenty-four EFL graduate students took part in the study. They were all familiar with the topic of the tasks. The findings reveal that low-proficiency learners can benefit from collaborative tasks provided that they are allowed to carry out metatalk in their L1. The tasks proved to be suitable to draw attention to form as care was taken to free the learners' attention by reducing the cognitive load imposed by the task conditions. Though no great differences were found between the tasks under study, each one focused attention on different linguistic features influenced by the way input was provided.

The next three chapters examine tasks and written production. In Chapter 6 ('Cognitive task complexity and linguistic performance in French L2 writing') Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder focus on the question of whether cognitively more demanding tasks lead to syntactically and lexically more complex written output and whether they promote higher accuracy. Seventy-six Dutch learners of French with different proficiency levels participated in the experiment and two factors of the resource directing dimension (Robinson, 2005): [+/- few elements] and [+/- no reasoning demands] were manipulated. The findings suggest that task complexity does have an effect on linguistic performance as increasing task complexity along resource directing variables results in a more accurate text. No interaction between task complexity and proficiency level was observed in the pool of learners tested.

Chapter 7 'The effect of manipulating task complexity along the [+/- Here-and-Now] dimension on L2 written narrative discourse', by Tomohito Ishikawa, further investigates the issue of task complexity by manipulating the [+/- Here-and-Now] dimension on L2 written discourse. The participants in the study, 54 Japanese low-high intermediate EFL learners, were randomly assigned to two task conditions: [+Here-and-Now] and [-Here-and-Now]. They viewed a cartoon strip for 5 minutes and were given 30 minutes to write about it. The participants in the [-Here-and-Now] condition had to return the strip cartoon to the researcher. The results of the study show multiple significant effects of increasing task complexity along degree of displaced time reference on accuracy, complexity and fluency and, overall, seem to support Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis.

In their study 'Writing tasks: The effects of collaboration' (Chapter 8), Neomy Storch and Gilliam Wigglesworth investigate the process involved