

Task Integrity and Task Frequency in the L2 Classroom

Craig Lambert, Curtin University

ABSTRACT

This article provides a practical introduction to gaining maximum benefits from the repetition of tasks in the language classroom. The article is intended to complement Lambert, Kormos and Minn (2016) with a practitioner's guide to tasks in language teaching. It begins with a discussion of the essential characteristics of tasks as pedagogic tools and the role that they play in L2 learning. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of task frequency in the learning process and how task repetition in the classroom might pose threats to the integrity of tasks as L2 learning tools. Finally, the last section discusses implementation strategies to ensure adequate task frequency while at the same time preserving task integrity, promoting optimum transfer of practice across tasks, and minimizing learner fatigue in repeating the same task multiple times. This section also discusses optional modifications to the basic approach to implementing tasks which can be used to optimize different aspects of learners' performance across a task sequence. The article thus provides a practical basis for teachers to experiment with task-based language teaching in their own classrooms in order to determine what works best for their learners and in their educational contexts.

TASKS AS L2 LEARNING TOOLS

Tasks have been variously defined in the literature on L2 instructional planning. At one level, any activity which requires effort on the part of a learner inside or outside of the classroom could be referred to colloquially as a task. However, in the more technical sense of task as a unit of analysis in task-based instructional design, tasks have been conceptualized in two primary ways. One of these focuses on situational authenticity (e.g., Long, 2015; Robinson, 2011) and the other on interactional authenticity (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Yule, 1997). In the former case, it is essential that tasks reflect real life events that learners need to complete outside of the classroom, and the focus in instructional design is to create progressively more demanding versions of these tasks in order to allow learners a graduated means of perfecting their skill at completing them (Long, 2015). In the latter case, there is no constraint on tasks to mimic something learners do outside of the classroom, but tasks do need to provide the opportunity to use language in ways for authentic communication in the classroom and be enjoyable enough to engage learners and to generate the effort required to perform them well.

In both approaches, however, tasks are argued to promote language acquisition in a way that is distinct from the other types of activities that are typically used in language classrooms. It is generally agreed that language knowledge, as it relates to the ability to speak a language fluently, is ultimately implicit knowledge (N. Ellis, 2002). Implicit language knowledge is the

comprehensive and relatively effortless knowledge that allows proficient speakers of a language to communicate in real time while focused on the meaning of what they are saying, often without being able to explain why they say the things they say. By contrast, explicit language knowledge is the less complete and conscious rule-based knowledge characteristic of speakers who have learned a language formally. Although these learners can usually explain why their utterances are correctly formed, the application of this knowledge tends to be slow and requires considerable conscious effort on the part of the speaker.

There is considerable evidence for a distinction between implicit and explicit knowledge. Paradis (2004) argues that implicit and explicit knowledge are likely to be stored in different parts of the brain. The basic argument is that explicit language knowledge is stored in the tertiary cortex and makes use of the limbic system like other forms of declarative memory, whereas implicit language knowledge is stored in connections between the cortical processors by which it is acquired and does not involve the limbic system. However, traditional approaches to language instruction are based on the assumption that explicit knowledge can become implicit knowledge through practice. Learners memorize rules, practice manipulating sentences exemplifying these rules, and then attempt to use these rules in communication during situated grammar activities in which they apply these rules. If implicit and explicit knowledge are distinct, however, as recent evidence seems to indicate, it is unlikely that explicit knowledge ever becomes implicit knowledge through practice and that they will be accessed and developed through different processes based on distinct cognitive mechanisms (R. Ellis, 2011). The uniqueness of tasks as learning tools is that they are able to tap into and develop learners' implicit language knowledge (Lambert, 2016).

At a practical level, the question for L2 teachers and materials designs is what essential features define tasks as learning tools and differentiate them from the range of other learning activities that are used in L2 instruction. R. Ellis (2009) argues that to preserve the integrity of tasks as learning tools, they must be designed and implemented to create four key constraints on learners' performance:

- (1) They should focus learners on the meaning of what is being said rather than on the language used to say it.
- (2) They should involve a gap in information, opinion or inference that creates the need for communication.
- (3) Learners should not be provided with language to use while performing the task nor should they be directed to use specific language while completing it. Rather they should be required to access the full range of their own resources in order to arrive at their own means of completing it.
- (4) The aim of a task should be to arrive at a communicative outcome beyond the use of language for its own sake.

If even one of these characteristics is absent, the integrity of the task as a learning activity will be compromised, and the resulting activity is likely to become a situated grammar activity in which learners draw on and develop explicit knowledge of the language. Although such

exercises may serve important functions in adult L2 acquisition, these functions are distinct from the function served by tasks. When all four of these characteristics are met, however, tasks often allow teachers and researchers to tap into and develop implicit rather than explicit knowledge.

TASK FREQUENCY IN THE L2 LEARNING PROCESS

It has been argued that a large part of mastering an additional language consists of the progressive and ongoing mapping of language forms to specific communicative functions (N. Ellis, 2002). This process involves learners in structuring and restructuring their resources into expedient linguistic strategies by which they can achieve their communicative needs (Verspoor, de Bot & Lowie, 2011). Verspoor and Behrens (2011), for example, describe the process as follows:

If language learning is a bottom-up process, where language is nothing more than a set of conventions, learners have to find their own strategies to express their intentions. They will pick up those conventions that they have heard most frequently, but in trying to express them, they may also try a set of varying strategies, from more simple ones to more complex ones, correct or incorrect, and often in juxtaposition. Eventually, however, they discard the least effective ones and use a combination of the more effective ones (Verspoor & Behrens, 2011, p. 38).

Crucial to this process is what MacWhinney (2001) refers to as the development of cue strength. As it relates to linguistic processing, cue strength refers to the degree of mapping between linguistic forms and functions or the likelihood that specific forms (morphological, lexical and syntactic) will be used to mark a given function. In order to successfully associate effective language forms to specific functional needs, L2 learners must accomplish tasks supporting this connection frequently. According to MacWhinney, task frequency can become a barrier to effective L2 acquisition. He argues that “because most basic linguistic tasks [in first language acquisition] are well above threshold frequency, the dimension of task frequency is seldom an important determinant of relative cue strength. However, in the case of a L2 ... task frequency could become a factor determining a general slow-down in acquisition” (MacWhinney, 2001, p. 71).

In other words, many essential task functions may not occur frequently enough in naturally occurring situations to result in the acquisition of a full range of linguistic resources in L2 learners. Thus, while one primary function of task-based L2 instruction is to provide learners with tasks that challenge their linguistic resources and push them to develop more precise and effective means of reaching specific communicative ends, a second primary function of task-based instruction is to provide them with intensive practice in performing these tasks so that they have adequate exposure to effectively internalize the new linguistic resources that they bring to bear in meeting task demands.

Intensive repetition of tasks can also facilitate the learning process by priming effective linguistic strategies brought to bear on tasks. N. Ellis (2002), for example, argues that learners tend to reuse utterances which have been recently primed in memory rather than constructing novel utterances. He claims that lexical items, thematic roles and word sequences prime themselves in memory over stretches of discourse approximately ten sentences in length or time intervals of up to 20 minutes. The probability of learners reusing forms increases as a function of how recently they have been used. Thus, task sequences planned to provide L2 learners with intensive task repetition can provide for threshold levels of task frequency as well as improve the practice opportunities that tasks provide by increasing the probability of specific task-relevant structures that learners have brought to bear in completing them being recycled throughout their performances.

PUTTING TASKS TO WORK IN THE L2 CLASSROOM

A key question for implementing task-based language teaching is thus how to ensure adequate task frequency while at the same time preserving task integrity and promoting optimum priming effects and transfer of new language across the tasks in a sequence. Bygate (2001) discusses two pedagogic options for providing learners with opportunities to repeat tasks: same task repetition and parallel task repetition. In the first case, learners repeat the exact same task, whereas in the second case, they repeat similar tasks with slightly different content (e.g., describe a different, but similar shirt each time). However, both forms of task repetition pose potential threats to task integrity and to learner motivation. It will be remembered that in order to preserve the integrity of tasks they must be designed and implemented to focus learners on meaning (R. Ellis, 2009). If learners have already completed a task, it becomes less likely that they will remain focused on achieving the same end when asked to do it again. Furthermore, even the most motivated learners are likely to have a point at which they become bored with repeating the same or similar tasks (Bygate, 2001).

Parallel task repetition has the advantage of preserving the integrity of tasks in terms of a focus on meaning as well as possibly prolonging learners interest in completing the task and delaying the onset of fatigue. The drawback is that it may reduce the transferability of primed language and consequently compromise the practice opportunities that tasks provide. Lambert (2014), for example, in a large-scale study of task-related language variation in both native and non-native speakers of English found that even on closely parallel clothing descriptions tasks, lexical selection and specific syntactic structures were partially dependent on the item being described. In other words, when the lexical items required for the task changed, the likelihood of novel linguistic strategies increased, and the likelihood that learners would be able to recycle the linguistic strategies that were used on previous versions decreased. Same task repetition avoids this reduction in transferability between tasks, but it can also compromise task integrity and increase the onset of boredom and fatigue. When two learners have established the communicative outcome of a given task, it is not realistic to expect that they will remain

focus on meaning in reaching this same outcome again. They are more likely to see the task as a means to practice language and focus more on the language they use than the communicative outcome they achieve in subsequent repetitions.

It is interesting to note, however, that people do often repeat the exact same task in naturally occurring communication outside of the classroom (e.g. reclaiming a piece of clothing from a cloak room, explaining how to install something, telling an interesting story, expressing an opinion about a book or movie). The difference is that they tend to do so with different interlocutors each time. Furthermore, they do not only perform these tasks themselves but hear others perform them as well. In a recent study of the effects of same task repetition on immediate gains in L2 fluency, Lambert, Kormos and Minn (2016) propose what they refer to as *Aural-Oral Task Repetition*. This involves learners repeating tasks in pairs, alternating the role of speaker and listener on each performance and working with a different interlocutor each time. This approach maintains the ecological validity of task repetition and preserves the integrity of tasks as learning tools by creating conditions in which learners can remain focused on meaning, address a genuine communication gap based on their own linguistic resources, and arrive at a communicative outcome for each repetition of the task.

Furthermore, the authors found that even after six repetitions of the exact same three tasks (instruction, narration, and opinion) as both speaker and as listener (36 performances total) over a period of 90 minutes, feelings of boredom or fatigue were quite rare among the 32 Japanese learners of English who participated in the study. Following the treatment, learners completed an open-ended questionnaire which asked about (1) the value they perceived in repeating the tasks, (2) the number of repetitions they felt were optimal, and (3) the value that they perceived in working with different partners. Almost all of the participants reported that repeating the tasks was useful for them. The two main reasons provided were that it helped them improve their fluency and that it helped them to incorporate new language into their performances either from memory or from their partners. Furthermore, they reported the optimal number of repetitions for solidifying these gains in the short term was between three and four depending on the task. Interestingly, these results corroborated the findings on the fluency of their speech. Same task repetition had the most pronounced effect on speech rate across the first three performances with smaller gains continuing through the fifth performance. Furthermore, gains between the first two performances were primarily associated with reduction in clause-final pausing, which the authors argue is connected with conceptualizing the content, whereas gains between the second, third and fourth performances were primarily associated with reduction in mid-clause pausing, which the authors argue is connected with refining the lexical items and syntactic structures used. Thus, three to four repetitions of the same L2 learning tasks seem to have been needed for learners to optimize the different aspects of their L2 fluency in the short-term regardless of the task being completed or the proficiency level of the speakers.

Asking learners to change partners after each performance of a task, however, can be time consuming. One possibility is to set up the classroom for groups of four. Learners should be seated so that two learners sit side-by-side to each other and face-to-face with the other two.

For the first task performance, they work with the learner in front of them. For the second, they quickly rotate 90 degrees and work with the learner beside them. For the third, they quickly switch seats with the person beside them and work with the learner who was previously sitting diagonal to them. These repetitions can also be timed and the time gradually reduced. This is known as 4-3-2 technique. Originally proposed by Maurice (1983), it has subsequently been researched in several studies beginning with Nation (1989) and Arevart (1989). Using this technique effectively, however, requires piloting the task with similar groups to understand how much time an unpressured performance requires and to determine appropriate reduction intervals to promote fluency while still allowing learners to successfully complete the task. Furthermore, when time permits and the teacher feels that a task is challenging enough for the group to benefit from more than three repetitions, learners can be shuffled into new groups by giving each member a number from one to four and asking them to form new groups based on these numbers (i.e., the four students with the number one form group one, twos group two, etc.). Lambert (2004) provides concrete lesson plans based on this principle. The task can then be repeated three more times following the same procedures outlined above.

Another useful device to bring learners' performances in line with teacher's expectations across a repetition sequence is to ask learners to self-evaluate after each performance. For example, suppose that the teacher's expectations are that learners are to complete a task, (1) using only English, (2) without showing their partner their paper, and (3) by finding the correct answer. One possibility is to create a self-evaluation sheet for learners to complete after each performance. They might be instructed to give themselves 3 points on Criterion 1, if they used all English, 2 points if they used no more than two words of their L1, and no points if they used more than two words. If similar scales are then created for the other two criteria to total of 10 points for each performance that meets all of the teacher's expectations, it puts learners in control of their progress and may result in more of them reaching criterion levels of performance by the end of each sequence (see, Stroud, 2016, for the effects of a similar technique using point cards over the course of an entire semester rather than a single task sequence).

However, it is important to remember that the ideas in this article, based on Lambert et al. (2016), are provided as an empirical basis for teachers to experiment with task repetition effectively in the classroom and to determine what works best with their own learners and in their own educational context. These ideas are not meant to be applied uncritically. Teachers should remain sensitive to their learners' responses to tasks and make adjustments accordingly. It is hoped that the present article will provide a basis for such experimentation and result in more effective task-based language teaching in Japan and elsewhere.

REFERENCES

Arevart, S. (1989). Grammatical change through repetition. *RELC Journal*, 20, 42-60.

- Bygate, M. (2001). Effects of task repetition on the structure and control of oral language. In Bygate, M., Skehan, P. & Swain, M. (Eds.) *Researching Pedagogic Tasks*. Harlow: Longman.
- Ellis, N. (2002). Frequency effects in language processing: A review with implications for theories for implicit and explicit language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 24, 143-188.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19, 221-246.
- Ellis, R. (2011). The Interface Hypothesis Revisited. In N. Yuzawa (Ed.), *Proceedings of the JACET 50th Commemorative International Convention* (pp. 1-6). Fukuoka: Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET).
- Long, M. (2015). *Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching*. Wiley/Blackwell.
- Lambert, C. (2016). Tasks versus Exercises. *TESOL Encyclopaedia of English Language Teaching*. Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell.
- Lambert, C. (2014). The Development of Nominal Constructions in Task-Based Foreign Language Instruction: The Case of Referent Similarity. Ph.D. Dissertation, Lancaster University.
- Lambert, C. (2004). Reverse-Engineering Communication Tasks. *ELT Journal* 58, 18-27.
- Lambert, C. Kormos, J. and Minn, D. (2016). Task Repetition and Second Language Speech Processing. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, First View.
- MacWhinney, B. (2001). The competition model: The input, the context, and the brain. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Cognition and second language instruction* (pp. 69-90). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maurice, K. (1983). The fluency workshop. *TESOL Newsletter* 17: 429.
- Nation, P. (1989). Improving speaking fluency. *System* 17 (3): 377-384.
- Paradis M. (2004). *A Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Robinson, P. (2011). *Second language task complexity: Researching the cognition hypothesis of language learning and performance*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Skehan, P. (2014). *Processing perspectives on task performance*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Stroud, R. (2016). *Goal-setting and L2 task engagement*. Manuscript in preparation. Hosei University.

Verspoor, M. & Behrens, H. (2011). Dynamic systems theory and a usage based approach to second language development. In M. Verspoor, K. de Bot & W. Lowie (Eds.), *A dynamic approach to second language development: Methods and techniques* (pp. 25-38). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Verspoor, M. de Bot, K. & Lowie, W. (2011). *A Dynamic Approach to L2 Development: Methods and Techniques*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Yule, G. (1997). *Referential Communication Tasks*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.