

Researching tasks

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Task research is a dynamic and expanding field, qualities reflected in the range of topics addressed in the seven articles in this special issue of *Language Teaching Research* on the broad theme of ‘researching tasks’. As I interpret them, these topics include:

- teacher cognition and tasks (Erlam);
- the impact of task design and implementation conditions on performance and learning (van de Guchte, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam & Bimmel; Fukuta; Benson);
- the impact of learner factors on task performance (Shin, Lidster, Sabraw & Yeager);
- methodology for researching tasks (de Jong & Vercellotti);
- theoretical underpinnings (Ellis).

We see common ground here, but also fertile diversity. Diversity also characterizes the range of research settings and participants across the studies, including research carried out in Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and the USA, sited in high school, tertiary and adult-education contexts, and involving learners of German as a second language (L2) as well as teachers of foreign languages other than L2 English, although L2 English classrooms predominate. In research methodology, the studies show rather more conformity, being typically either quasi-experimental or experimental in design, although with considerable nuance and variety in design detail, procedures, measures, analyses and, last but not least, in the nature of treatment tasks across the studies. Of particular note here is Benson’s use of input-based tasks rather than production tasks, the latter being ubiquitous in task research. I look forward to this imbalance being corrected through more research modelled on this interesting study.

I now briefly discuss each article, before concluding with a general comment on the field. In the first article in this issue, Erlam reports on a study in which she investigated teacher understanding of the construct of ‘task’. Given the important role teachers play in implementing classroom tasks, it is surprising that only a modest proportion of task

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research has identified the teacher as a factor of interest. In fact, despite 'teaching' figuring so prominently in the acronym 'TBLT' (Task based language teaching), the teacher is more often than not invisible in task research. Erlam's study is a welcome correction to this oversight, particularly since it also addresses the under-represented sector of foreign languages education other than L2 English in school classrooms for learners in their early teenage years. The teachers in question had participated in a year-long professional development programme focused on task-based teaching. In a final assignment, these teachers designed classroom tasks which Erlam analysed for this study using four task criteria proposed by Ellis (2003) in order to evaluate their task-likeness. She found that while more than three quarters of the teachers were able to design activities that were task-like, the criterion 'learners should rely on their own resources in the task performances' was the one most frequently not met in these tasks. Erlam's research usefully identifies areas in which principles derived from scholarship and the understandings of experienced teachers align and misalign. This study reflects what I anticipate to be an area of growing interest in TBLT research, namely teacher cognition and the impact of professional learning on task-based pedagogy.

The next three articles by van de Guchte, Braaksma, Rijlaarsdam & Bimmel, Fukuta and Benson each focus on some form of task repetition. In a quasi-experimental study, van de Guchte et al. explore the effect of repetition of a similar task on the learning of two targeted grammatical forms for which the learners received feedback following the first task performance. The researchers report a positive effect of task repetition on tests of declarative knowledge of the two targeted forms, but no effect on oral tests of procedural knowledge. Among the interesting explanations they give for the lack of a strong effect of the task repetition treatment is that the comparison group did rather better than expected because, it is suggested, the students were aware of an upcoming assessed public performance at the end of the main task phase and so were more focused on accuracy than might otherwise have been the case. This point highlights the risks involved in gathering data from intact classes in research embedded in an ongoing programme of study. On the other hand, it also highlights the important role learner orientation plays in shaping learning affordances through tasks.

In a rather more straightforward experimental study, Fukuta investigated repetition of two short narrative tasks, but with the inclusion of stimulated recall interviews after each performance. Fukuta found statistically significant improvements in accuracy and lexical diversity in the repeated performance but no effect for fluency and complexity. Analyses of the stimulated recall protocols revealed a change in the learners' attentional orientation as they repeated the same task. In the repeated performance, they focused more on syntactic than conceptual processing. This change in attentional orientation was not attested in a comparison group which performed two unrelated tasks. Fukuta draws on Skehan's limited resource model to explain the results, arguing that the improvements in accuracy but not complexity may reflect a trade-off effect, and that two repetitions may not have been sufficient to encourage automatization.

In the third study involving task repetition, Benson investigated whether transfer occurred between performances of two similar pedagogic tasks, a question Benson claims has not been empirically tested in TBLT research. This is a meticulously designed and executed experimental study. Although Benton failed to find overall evidence of

transfer, in a post hoc analysis of the performance of lower proficiency learners she found that task training (the treatment) was a significant predictor of performance on the equivalent repeat task. Benson suggests a number of factors that may have contributed to the overall lack of effect for the treatment in her study, including the differences in the lexical domains required for successful performance of tasks which were otherwise assumed to be equivalent, a factor which is likely to have constrained transfer of expertise from one task to a similar task.

In these studies, evidence for the efficacy of the treatments appears to have been moderated by research design factors such as a low *n*-size (Benson and Fukuta) and individual learner factors, especially unanticipated variability in the proficiency and/or performance of students in control or comparison groups (Benson and Fukuta). All three studies also share the limiting design feature of a single repeated performance of the same or a similar task. With only one task repetition – task ‘practice’ if you will – it is not entirely surprising that gains in procedural knowledge were not observed in the two studies in which this outcome was measured (van de Guchte et al. and Fukuta). As van de Guchte et al. note, repeating a task just once is unlikely to turn explicit knowledge into implicit (or procedural) knowledge. It may be necessary to track performance on multiple iterations of tasks, perhaps through a longitudinal design, to address this issue, a consideration for future research on task repetition.

In the fifth article in this issue, Shin, Lidster, Sabraw and Yeager examine learners’ performance on a dictogloss (collaborative text reconstruction) task. Their particular focus is the effect of partner L2 proficiency level on shared performance. Overall, the study found a significant increase in the production of idea units in the pair work phase of the task, showing that pair work enhanced performance. However, there appeared to be little systematic effect of partner L2 proficiency on the number of idea units produced by learner pairs, apart from a general trend for lower proficiency students to benefit more from pair work. The authors suggest that the large variation in productivity among the different pairs of learners points to a confounding effect from other learner characteristics besides proficiency which come to the fore in pair work.

In the sixth empirical study in this issue, de Jong and Vercellotti address an important question for the design of research on tasks, namely whether equivalent sets of picture-based narrative prompts produce similar task performances. Supposedly equivalent sets of such prompts are frequently used to elicit comparable task performances for which some other factor such as +/- planning time is the independent variable being investigated. In this study the researchers selected five sets of prompts deemed equivalent in terms of sequential structure, storyline complexity and number of elements. They found the participants’ performances on the prompt sets similar according to complexity and accuracy measures, but different according to fluency and lexical measures. That seemingly equivalent prompts may require activation of different lexical resources was noted also in connection with Benson’s study on task-type repetition. The difficulty of creating or choosing prompts that are truly equivalent has clear implications not only for research design but also for the use of prompts for assessment.

The final article in this issue is a critical review by R. Ellis of the Focus on Form (FonF) construct, one of the solicited articles in this year’s volume of *Language Teaching Research* to mark the 20th anniversary of the journal. The relevance of FonF to tasks, the

theme of this issue, is made clear in Ellis' discussion of Long's advocacy of both FonF and TBLT. Given that FonF needs to occur in a communicative context, it requires the use of 'tasks' that focus learners' primary attention on meaning but also encourage periodic attention to form by the teacher and/or students when this is triggered by communicative need.

Ellis notes, however, that FonF is a malleable construct that has 'stretched' over time and expanded well beyond Long's initial description. FonF is, therefore, long overdue for a critical review such as the one presented here. In the concluding section of this review, Ellis usefully presents 10 key points concerning the way in which the FonF construct has evolved in the decades since it was first proposed by Long in 1988. One point that is particularly relevant to the theme of this issue is that FonF is no longer seen as an approach (and, as such, co-terminous with TBLT) but as a set of procedures, which can figure in both task-based and more traditional structure-based instructional approaches. This, it seems to me, is a useful disentangling of terms and constructs and one that adds clarity to our understanding of task research and the role of FonF within and beyond it.

The FonF construct explicitly informs the research design of at least one study in this issue, that by van de Guchte et al. FonF is operationalized in this study as the provision of targeted feedback on errors made on two pre-determined grammatical structures during task performance. In the spirit of the original conception of FonF, the delivery of FonF here is reactive, but in targeting pre-selected targets the design of the intervention hints at a more structure-based underpinning.

I alluded at the beginning of this editorial to the range of topics covered in research on tasks. Over the past quarter of a century (or so) in which I have been in the field, it has expanded rapidly. In the early 1990s (when I was writing my PhD thesis on TBLT), it was possible – just – to more or less keep abreast of published research on tasks in the field of applied linguistics. Here, in 2016, the flood of task-related research published in edited volumes, in journals and, indeed, in task-focused special issues of journals such as this one, makes that job nigh on impossible. I am grateful, however, to have been invited to contribute this short editorial piece, since doing so has given me the opportunity to read and re-read these seven interesting articles, each of which, in its own way expands and clarifies our understanding of, in simple terms, how tasks work. As I read these articles, I get the clear impression of a field fruitfully expanding as it explores and refines its understandings and boundaries.