

**María del Pilar García Mayo, ed. 2007: *Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters. xii + 267 pp. ISBN 1-85359-927-1/EAN 978-1-85359927-9 (hbk) ISBN 1-85359-926-3/EAN 978-1-85359-926-2 (pbk)**

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María del Pilar García Mayo edits the present volume with a clear and overtly stated purpose “to contribute to the growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching that has been seen in recent years” (1). With this goal in mind the editor presents a collection of mostly empirical studies conducted by some of the leading researchers in the field. The studies selected examine a wide range of aspects of pedagogic task design, from different, but quite often complementary, theoretical and methodological perspectives. They have been conducted in different foreign language (FL) and second language (L2) contexts and involve an interesting variety of languages and language combinations. Taken all together, they offer an extensive and updated overview of what are considered to be the key issues of present-day task-based research, making, without doubt, an important contribution to the field.

In the last two decades, tasks have become a central element in both language pedagogy and second language acquisition (SLA) research. With the communicative language teaching approach and its emphasis on the use of authentic language, tasks achieved a crucial status as the main unit of classroom design and, nowadays, task-based language teaching programs are being implemented in a growing number of L2 and FL settings. In the context of SLA research, they have received an equally increasing amount of attention, both as data elicitation instruments and as objects in need of investigation. An important, theoretically motivated line of research has developed aiming to explain the relationship existing between task design, learners’ performance and L2 learning. The results of this research are of major relevance for the development of both SLA theory and L2/FL pedagogy. A coherent and complete theory of task-based language learning should provide insights on how to manipulate task characteristics and conditions of implementation in order to achieve specific effects on learners’ production and interlanguage development within the classroom context. It should, as well, be able to provide empirically motivated criteria for task classification and sequencing in task-based syllabus design. It is therefore not surprising the amount of interest that tasks and task-oriented research have received in the last few years, not only from scholars and researchers but also from teachers, material designers and syllabus planners. As a result, the number of publications in the area is impressive. The volume here under review adds a new contribution to an already remarkable body of research – see, among many others, Nunan’s (1989) seminal work or, more recently, Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) and Ellis (2003).

Task-based research has been approached from multiple theoretical perspectives. Interactionist research has focused on the interactive features of tasks, manipulating

them in order to determine which task types generate the most opportunities for negotiation of meaning – negotiation being considered, within this framework, as an effective context for SLA (Long 1983, 1996). This theoretical and methodological approach, particularly popular during the 80s and early 90s, can be found in Chapter 4 of the book here under review. Since the 90s, however, the heaviest bulk of the research on tasks has been conducted from an information processing perspective. Skehan's Capacity Hypothesis (Skehan 1998) and Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson 2001, 2005) have provided the theoretical background for an impressive number of studies on the impact that cognitive task demands have on linguistic accuracy, fluency and complexity. The hegemony of this line of research is evident in *Investigating Tasks* – see Chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 9 and 10. Finally, in more recent years, an increasing number of researchers, trying to distance themselves from these psycholinguistic approaches, have looked at task performance from sociocultural (Vygotsky 1978), socio-affective and socio-semiotic perspectives. This new approach to SLA informs the work presented in Chapters 5, 8 and 12.

As already mentioned, the present volume brings together research conducted not only from different theoretical perspectives, but also on a variety of task-related issues and in a considerable range of settings. Some of the chapters examine oral production (from Chapter 2 to Chapter 4), whereas others focus on reading (Chapter 9) or writing tasks (from Chapter 5 to Chapter 8). Attention is paid to language use as well as language learning (Chapter 10 versus Chapter 9), at the level of lexis and pragmatics (Chapters 9, 10 and 11). Groups of learners from different proficiency levels and linguistic as well as academic backgrounds are also represented. We have, for instance, native speakers of Japanese (Chapters 2 and 7), Spanish (Chapters 3, 5, 10 and 11) and Dutch (Chapter 6) learning English as a FL. We also have learners of English as a L2 (Chapter 8), and Spanish, German and French as a FL (Chapters 4, 9 and 12). The volume offers in this way an open array of options and becomes of interest for different readers interested in different aspects of the language learning process.

The book is organized into 12 chapters, each of which, except for Chapter 1, presents the results of an original data-based study. These 12 chapters are preceded by a foreword by Alison Mackey and an introduction by the editor, María del Pilar García Mayo. These two sections together with Chapter 1, by Peter Robinson, are a must to read. The introduction by García Mayo offers a general overview of the key issues covered by the different chapters in the book, while Mackey's Foreword helps to place these different issues and studies within the general framework of task-based research.

Peter Robinson – see Robinson (2001, 2003, 2005), opens the volume calling for a single classification system of pedagogic tasks able to “introduce order into the current data base of findings” (8). He reviews and compares the different sets of criteria for task classification employed in previous research, before presenting his own taxonomic system. This taxonomy is able to accommodate cognitive, interactional and learner-related factors, and is theoretically motivated, empirically researchable and operationally feasible. On this basis, Robinson argues that it can be used to promote answers to what he considers to be one of the fundamental questions in L2 task research: “how do teachers design and deliver a sequence of tasks that sustains learner

effort to use the L2, from beginning to end, and which simultaneously leads to L2 learning and development?" (7).

This opening chapter is without doubt of major interest. It introduces much of the following research, which is situated within the framework of Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis, and provides a coherent set of guidelines to sort out the different approaches to task classification and analysis that the reader will encounter throughout the volume. For all these reasons, Chapter 1 constitutes a more than relevant introduction to the chapters that follow. These chapters, however, are fully independent from each other and therefore need not be read in any pre-established order. I would recommend the reader to find their own way through the book, in line with their personal interests and theoretical stance.

In Chapter 2, 'Information Distribution and Goal Orientation in Second Language Task Design', Lambert and Engler examine the combined effect of two different task design factors on the nature of learners' oral discourse. Thirty-six Japanese female learners of English as an FL were asked to complete six different types of oral tasks. The results of the experiment suggest that the manipulation of the information distribution variable can result in a trade-off between complexity and fluency/accuracy, and in this way serve to support a dual-mode processing system (see Skehan 1998). However, the effect of goal-orientation is not that clear. It seems that the two researched variables interact in complex ways with other task- and learner-related factors.

In Chapter 3, 'The Simultaneous Manipulation of Task Complexity along Planning Time and [+/- here-and-now]: Effects on L2 Oral Production', Gilbert takes up Robinson's research agenda. The final goal of the study is to identify how increasing the cognitive complexity of an oral narration task by manipulating pre-task planning time and the degree of displaced, past time reference can affect learners' production. An experiment was conducted with 48 Spanish learners of English as an FL. The data obtained shows that an increase of complexity along the second of these two variables can serve to focus learners' attention simultaneously on linguistic accuracy and complexity, thus supporting Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis versus Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity Model.

Chapter 4, 'Tasks, Negotiation and L2 Learning in a Foreign Language Context', offers a different approach to tasks. From an interactionist perspective, Fernández García examines the opportunities that two different communicative tasks – a one-way shared background task and a two-way non-shared background task – offer for negotiation of meaning. Whereas most research on negotiation has been conducted in English L2 contexts and with intermediate or advanced level learners, Fernández García's study examines oral interaction between 21 dyads of beginning level learners of Spanish as an FL. Evidence is provided of the usefulness of these two types of tasks to generate modified interaction leading to SLA, even at early stages of interlanguage development.

In Chapter 5, 'Attention to Form across Collaborative Tasks by Low-Proficiency Learners in an EFL Setting', Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo adopt a sociocultural approach to examine learners' interaction as they collaborate to complete three different types of writing tasks: a jigsaw, a text reconstruction and a dictogloss task. Previous research involving intermediate and advanced level learners suggests that these

three tasks are particularly effective to generate Focus on Form and metatalk. The results of the present study show that low level learners of English as an FL can also benefit from these collaborative writing tasks, particularly when allowed to metatalk in their L1.

Chapters 6 and 7 evaluate again Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis against Skehan's Limited Capacity Model. In Chapter 6, 'Cognitive Task Complexity and Linguistic Performance in French L2 Writing', Kuiken and Vedder examine the effects of task complexity on learners' written performance by manipulating two cognitive factors: [+/- few elements] and [+/- reasoning demands]. Seventy-six Dutch learners of French as an FL from two different proficiency levels were asked to complete two different writing tasks. Learners performing the more complex version of the task produced more accurate and lexically complex texts. It seems that an increase in cognitive task complexity leads to more attention to language form and subsequent higher levels of linguistic accuracy and complexity, which supports Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis.

Chapter 7, 'The Effect of Manipulating Task Complexity along the [+/- here-and-now] Dimension on L2 Written Narrative Discourse', by Ishikawa, follows a similar approach. The experiment designed by Ishikawa was completed by 54 Japanese learners of English as an FL and involved two different versions of the same writing task. The result obtained, again, support Robinson's claims. The greater cognitive and conceptual demands of the [- here-and-now] condition direct learners' attention to linguistic accuracy and complexity, leading them to produce linguistically more complex texts with a lower rate of errors. The author, however, points out the need for future research to pay more attention to individual variation.

In Chapter 8, 'Writing Tasks: The Effects of Collaboration', Storch and Wigglesworth look at task-based language use and learning from the perspective of the sociocultural theory of mind. In their study 72 learners of English were asked to complete the same two writing tasks. Twenty-four students worked individually and 48 in dyads. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted on the data show that collaborative writing leads to greater linguistic accuracy, because it offers opportunities for learners to discuss ideas, reflect on L2 form and provide each other with immediate feedback. On this basis, the authors argue that collaborative writing offers a positive site for language learning and therefore deserves a place in the L2 classroom.

Chapters 9 and 10 shift the focus of attention to lexis. In Chapter 9, 'L2 Vocabulary Acquisition and Reading Comprehension: The Influence of Task Complexity', Peters investigates whether it is possible to manipulate learners' attention and enhance lexical development by altering the instructions of a reading task. Twenty-one Dutch students of German as an FL participated in the experiment. The results of the study show that manipulating students' attention is quite an intricate issue. It is difficult to draw learners' attention to vocabulary rather than meaning during reading tasks. We cannot forget that students bring to the task their own needs and goals, which lead their actions and shape their activities beyond the limits established by the researcher.

In Chapter 10, 'Task-Effect on the Use of Lexical Innovation Strategies in Interlanguage Communication', González Álvarez analyzes the use of word coinage, foreignizing and code-switching communication strategies, across three different types

of oral tasks, by a total of 30 Spanish learners of English as an FL, from three different proficiency levels. The results obtained show that both the number and the type of lexical innovation strategies used are influenced by the proficiency level of the learner and the code and cognitive complexity of the task. Future research will need to investigate to what extent this impact on language use and word formation may also have an effect on L2 lexical development.

In Chapter 11, 'Fostering EFL Learners' Awareness of Requesting through Explicit and Implicit Consciousness-Raising Tasks', the focus shifts from lexis to pragmatics. Alcón Soler deals here with the problem of FL learners' acquisition of pragmatic features. She compares the effect of three different instructional models – focus on meaning, focus on form and focus on forms – implemented with three different groups of Spanish secondary school learners of English as a FL. Evidence is obtained supporting the use of explicit consciousness-raising tasks to develop sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence in the FL classroom context.

Most of the studies included in the book adopt a psycholinguistic perspective on task-based language learning, usually resorting to quantitative research methodologies and detailed statistical analyses. Notable exceptions are the investigations presented in Chapters 5 and 8 from the perspective of the sociocultural theory of mind, and the study that closes the volume in Chapter 12, 'Interactive Task Design, Metachat and the Whole Learner'. In order to distance herself from cognitive ways of looking at tasks, Lamy resorts here to socio-affective and socio-semiotic frameworks of analysis. The focus of the study is on the metalinguistic conversations or metachat produced by 40 English-speaking learners of French as an FL as they perform different types of online tasks. To explain the occurrence of metachat, as well as its different functions, Lamy looks not only at task design factors, but also at the nature of the online social context in which the interaction takes place, analyzing individual and social variables such as group membership or group dynamics.

More and more scholars are now pointing out the need for task-based research to look at data from more holistic approaches, paying closer attention to individual variation and the influence of the social context – see for instance Ortega (2007). In fact, some of the authors in this volume mention the need for further research to take a closer look at learners' needs, goals and motivation in order to be able to clarify the complex relationship existing between task design and L2 production – see Lambert and Engler, Ishikawa or Peters. From this perspective, I believe this final chapter constitutes an important contribution to the volume. It serves to close the collection and at the same time encourage future research adopting alternative approaches to offer a more comprehensive view of task-based language learning and teaching.

The book accomplishes with success the editor's initial goal. It provides plenty of up-to-date information on tasks and an excellent overview of the current state of task-based research. As the editor herself points out, the variety of theoretical orientations, methodological approaches and task-related issues considered along the 11 data-based studies serve to "provide the reader with different options that can be tested in other contexts, with different language combinations and different groups of learners" (1). The book constitutes thus a main contribution for students and scholars interested in conducting research in the field. But it is of equal value for teachers and educators. The

results of these empirical studies have direct implications, widely discussed in the volume, for the FL teaching practice, and serve to inform pedagogical decisions concerning task selection and implementation in the classroom. In sum, the book makes a major and much needed contribution to the study of task-based language learning and teaching; it is therefore highly recommendable to both teaching and research professionals.

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