Task-Based Approaches to Teaching and Assessing Pragmatics
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The book is about the intersection between task-based language teaching (TBLT) and pragmatics, disciplines which analyse how people use language to achieve social purposes, correlating aspects of the social-situational context with dimensions of communicative success. It illustrates how a task-based approach to pragmatics instruction can be applied to technology-enhanced learning, instructed second language acquisition, pragmatic assessment, discursive pragmatics and heritage language learning. The focus is on the use of tasks for the teaching of pragmatics, the development of pragmatic competence and the assessment of pragmatic competence in L2.

After the series editors’ Preface, an introductory chapter provides an overview of TBLT and outlines the scope of the book. Then the relevance of TBLT to pragmatics is explored with reference to the role of metapragmatic discussion (Chapters 2–4), the elicitation of language use (Chapters 5–8) and the assessment of pragmatics (Chapters 9–12).

In Chapter 1, Naoko Taguchi and YouJin Kim define and describe tasks in TBLT, contrasting them with instructional activities in pragmatics. The authors outline the goals of TBLT as an educational approach, overview the research in task-oriented instructed pragmatics, present the

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complementary research perspectives and advances in TBLT and pragmatics, and overview the rest of the book. This chapter highlights the importance of collaborative goal-oriented tasks to the learning of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors in the L2, pointing out how tasks offer L2 learners many negotiation opportunities in interaction.

The first part of the book focuses on the implementation of pedagogic tasks to the teaching of pragmatics. The studies collected here show how the promotion of L2 learners’ metapragmatic discussion on pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic topics can lead to more successful learning of given pragmatic features.

Chapter 2, by Minkyung Kim, Hakyoon Lee and Youjin Kim, explores the learning of honorifics in L2-Korean among university heritage language learners (HLLs) and foreign language learners (FLLs) in collaborative dialogue construction tasks. Both the HLLs and the FLLs developed their knowledge of Korean honorifics, while no significant difference emerged in the amount of learning opportunities (pragmatics-relevant episodes) between the HLL-FLL and the FLL-FLL dyads. The strengths of the work lie in the examination of a not commonly studied L2, namely Korean; in the comparison of the effect of the status of the L2 (as a heritage vs foreign language) on learning outcomes; in the use of mixed methods of data collection to ensure data triangulation; and in the care with which the authors minimised extraneous variables in carrying out the study.

The topic of Chapter 3, by Eva Alcón-Soler, is the impact of different participatory structures on the attention paid to and the learning of pragmalinguistic forms that encode formality and politeness during email writing tasks involving high-imposition requests. The task-based interaction favoured the use of request mitigators among the students involved, namely L2 learners of English at a Spanish university. Additionally, the teacher-led interaction group occasionally paid attention to pragmatics, while the student-led interaction group showed a greater degree of interactional engagement during the tasks. The study originally explores the effect of peer-to-peer interaction involving a whole group in a classroom setting, and excels in providing a lucid operationalisation of the concepts it addresses, a clear description of sample transcripts illustrating pragmatics-relevant episodes, and convincing interpretations of the findings.

Maria Pia Gomez-Laich and Naoko Taguchi’s contribution concludes the first part of the volume with an examination of the quality of college-level L2-English learners’ interaction patterns in a collaborative writing task (i.e. constructing a persuasive essay) under cognitively simple vs complex task conditions. Using a qualitative conversation-analytic inspired approach, the authors showed how the complex task condition led to more
reflection on task-related features and more negotiation on how to solve the communicative challenge of the task, which was relevant to the learning of rhetorical strategies. The study clearly explains the pragmatic focus of persuasive writing, thoroughly investigates the conventions involved in the act of persuasion, and sheds light on the strategies and features of students’ interactions focused on shared decision-making.

The chapters in the second part of the volume examine the use of tasks meant to foster pragmatic performance and pragmatic learning with a focus on oral and written speech acts.

Chapter 5, by Derek Reagan and Caroline Payant, investigates how the oral vs written modality of a task may affect the development of interlanguage pragmatic competence in the realisation of written requests among low-intermediate Spanish learners. The findings showed that in the oral modality the learners produced target structures more frequently, while in the written modality they focused more on grammatical accuracy. Besides excellently showing the relevance of tasks to pragmatic competence, the authors meticulously describe the characteristics of the data collection instrument, motivate the data collection and data analysis procedure, and account for the differences between their findings and those from previous studies.

Chapter 6, by Mayya Levkina, reports on a study involving B1- and C1-level Spanish learners of English, who were taught to produce apologies, justifications and thanks through tasks. The study revealed that both the low- and the high-proficiency students learnt how to structure and mitigate formal emails with those illocutionary points, showing a similar pattern in their development of pragmatic learning. The author thoroughly details the resources and strategies used for identifying the strategic-rhetorical peculiarities of non-native speaker discourse when compared with native speaker data used in the treatment tasks. She also offers an insightful interpretation of the findings and draws helpful implications for language pedagogy.

Chapter 7, by Roger Gilabert and Júlia Barón Parés, is a study on the role of task sequencing (i.e. simple-to-complex vs random) in students’ email writing, and on the validity of four levels of task complexity, defined as the demands imposed on attention and memory resources. One finding was that experts’ assessment of EFL students’ task performance for overall pragmatic performance did not show a significant difference between the simple-to-complex vs random task sequencing conditions. Another was that teachers perceived a significant difference only between two levels of complexity (i.e. very simple vs simple, complex and very complex combined). Important merits of this work include: the bottom-up selection of
the task variables for task grading and sequencing, based on a needs analysis conducted with communication experts; the independent assessment of task complexity in terms of pragmatic criteria by expert judges; and the indication of the impact of task sequencing on L2 performance and pragmatic development.

The work presented in Chapter 8 by Marta González-Lloret and Lourdes Ortega illustrates pedagogical tools and instructional materials showing the interconnections between pragmatics, TBLT and technology. The authors show how technology-mediated TBLT can relevantly engage learners in motivating authentic meaning-oriented interaction as well as lead them to reflect on cross-cultural issues, interpersonal relationships and interactional norms. The study focuses on the interactional aspects of task-based pragmatics-oriented performance, exploring the requirements of real-world tasks for the teaching and learning of L2 pragmatics, and reflecting on which technology-mediated tasks are best suited for which areas of pragmatic learning.

The third part of the collection deals with task-based assessment of pragmatics. It considers pragmatic competence and performance in oral and written discourse, exploiting the resources of Conversation Analysis (CA) and Gricean pragmatics.

The issue of validity in assessing pragmatic competence lies at the heart of Chapter 9 by Soo Jung Youn. Using CA, the author showed that various authentic task-independent interactional features emerged across the role-play situations where ESL university students enacted requests and refusals. The study also examined how interactional features can serve to develop rating categories for the evaluation of L2-English learners’ pragmatic performance, revealing differences across proficiency levels. The study has three main merits: it demonstrates how interactional organisation is a useful assessment criterion of oral task-based pragmatic performance with relevance to carefully designed role-play situations; it adopts a mixed-methods design to design valid pragmatic assessment tasks, with rating criteria derived from a qualitative analysis of role-play data; and it explores the challenges involved in assessing pragmatic competence in interaction, convincingly arguing that elicited role-play interaction can be socially consequential when it is ‘reflective of the normative nature of talk-in-interaction’ (p. 251).

Chapter 10, by Monika Ekiert, Sofia Lampropoulou, Andrea Révész and Eivind Torgersen, looks at ESL learners’ discourse appropriacy (i.e. the ability to pay attention to context) in oral production across five task types (complaint, refusal, narrative, advice and summary) and across four proficiency levels. The study showed that task type is a good predictor
of discourse appropriacy at less advanced L2 proficiency levels, and that L2 proficiency has an effect on the perceived appropriacy of L2 learners’ spoken discourse in pragmatic tasks. The authors innovatively explore the three-way interaction between task type, L2 learners’ proficiency and discourse appropriacy, stressing the importance for L2 learners to master a wide range of linguistic resources to both accomplish a task and attend to social relationships.

Chapter 11, by Folkert Kuiken and Ineke Vedder, deals with assessment of L2 functional adequacy, that is, successful task completion in relation to the Gricean maxims. The authors devised a rating scale for assessing contextual appropriacy and felicity. Its criteria were derived from baseline data collected by administering target tasks to L1 writers, which were then rated by experienced raters. Non-expert raters were later able to use that scale to assess L2-Dutch and L2-Italian university students’ oral and written argumentative texts on four dimensions of functional adequacy: content, task requirements, comprehensibility, and coherence and cohesion. The authors expertly detail the theoretical underpinnings and levels of their rating scale, showing their crucial relevance to the target tasks and their correspondence to real-life situations.

The final chapter of the third part by Veronika Timpe-Laughlin reviews different types of task-based assessment that target pragmatics. It pays attention to issues of task design and task difficulty that affect L2 pragmatic output, pointing out the challenges involved in the generalisability, reliability and validity of task-based language assessment (TBLA) practice, and highlighting future directions in L2 pragmatics and TBLA. The author effectively illustrates how, due to its high degree of contextualisation, task-based pragmatic assessment offers the opportunity to assess pragmatics in interaction because it simulates real-life contexts in which language is used to accomplish a specific goal.

The volume shows the importance of establishing collaboration between TBLT and L2 pragmatics in the areas of study design, tasks and data analysis methods. Touching on a wide range of issues relevant to pragmatically oriented TBLT examined from complementary perspectives, the book offers opportunities to researchers and teachers to delve deeper into the integration of task-based instruction in L2 pedagogy.

The work has several merits. It offers ground-breaking insights into the still largely unexplored intersection between the research domains of TBLT and pragmatics. It reveals the complexity of this research space, for example in reporting findings which are not always in line with the contributors’ original hypotheses. It illustrates how the situational and interactional authenticity of tasks (Ellis 2009) can foster L2 pragmatic development.
Finally, it considers TBLT across various L2s (Korean, English, Spanish, Dutch and Italian). Overall, the collected essays provide convincing evidence of how pragmatically oriented task performance, which provides opportunities for authentic language use, enables learners to achieve communicative goals and sustain social relations.

The editors’ supervision is evident throughout. The introduction contextualises the topic of the volume, tracing the state of the art of the research fields whose interconnections are explored. The conclusion explores the opportunities and challenges of using TBLA in assessing L2 pragmatics. The three parts of the book are balanced in the number and length of their chapters, and are complementary in focus. Also, the various studies are comparable in design, rationale and rhetorical arrangement: their authors describe the background of precisely identified gaps in knowledge; specify their research questions; thoroughly present their methods (offering analyses of sample data, attending to the issue of inter-rater reliability, providing descriptive/inferential statistical analyses); discuss and motivate their findings in relation to previous research; and highlight their strengths and limitations, exploring future perspectives. All the chapters are examples of research excellence.

However, occasional inaccuracies may be identified. First, some significant details are missing. For example, Chapter 2 does not specify whether all the items used in the study are accessible (p. 38), nor does it include global translations of the examples in Korean (pp. 41, 49–50). Chapter 3 does not reveal what the raters did when they did not agree on the coding of the data (pp. 66–7) or how the pilot study was conducted (p. 66). Chapter 6 lacks an overview of the literature on the speech act of justifications (p. 140). In Chapter 9, no information is provided on how the interlocutors involved in the role-plays received training for standardised conversation (p. 223). Also, an author or subject index could have been provided. Second, some formulations are not fully straightforward, which may lead to terminological confusion. For instance, on page 66 the difference between the ‘preparatory move’ (which might be a disarmer) and the ‘preparator move’ is not explained, while on page 254 it is not clear why the strategies listed about the speech act of refusal (e.g., regrets, apologies, wishes) are labelled ‘semantic’ instead of ‘pragmatic’. Also, punctuation marks are not always present (e.g. a colon between ‘language production’ and ‘therefore’ on p. 131). Finally, occasional typos are found across the chapters (e.g. p. 27, ‘Alcon-Soler’ instead of ‘Alcón-Soler’; p. 30, ‘RPE’ instead of ‘PRE’; p. 102, ‘impved’ instead of ‘improved’; p. 127, ‘form as it is fleeting whereas’ instead of ‘form, as it is fleeting, whereas’; p. 198, ‘thank him his understanding’; p. 206, ‘did not necessary follow’). This sometimes results in
inconsistent orthographic (e.g. ‘post-test’ and ‘posttest’) and labelling (e.g. ‘pragmatic-related’ and ‘pragmatics-related’) choices.

However, the merits of the publication far outnumber its oversights. The works presented here exemplify top-notch, rigorous research; in fact, they set standards for future studies. The relevance of their findings to teachers and researchers is clearly demonstrated, providing a strong contribution to mixed-methods research in language pedagogy (Riazi and Candlin 2014). Indeed, the pedagogical applications reported in the studies and the reflection on their pedagogical implications provide useful resources and insights for professionals in L2 education. I highly recommend the volume to all practitioners in applied linguistics.

References
