

Task-Based Language Learning – Insights from and for L2 Writing

Heidi Byrnes, & Rosa M. Manchón (eds.) (2014)
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Reviewed by Yu Li

The collection *Task-Based Language Learning – Insights from and for L2 Writing*, edited by Heidi Byrnes and Rosa M. Manchón, seeks to explore a two-way dynamic between how insights from writing might reconfigure our understanding of task-based language teaching (TBLT) issues and practices and how work concerning TBLT might be beneficial to the learning and teaching of second language (L2) writing.

The text is divided in three parts. Part I revisits central TBLT tenets with a focus on the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of tasks and task performance. Part II contains six contributions that adopt various theoretical approaches to investigate how writing tasks are employed, how L2 writers differentially respond to tasks, and how tasks can contribute to L2 development. Part III, the concluding coda chapter, evaluates the volume's contributions to current literature of TBLT and opens new research paths for future theoretical and empirical research.

Part I includes three chapters that examine central TBLT tenets, approaches and research methods, and findings in task-oriented theory and research within the context of writing. As an introduction, Chapter 1 by Heidi Byrnes and Rosa M. Manchón illustrates the guiding rationale for this collection, which is the belief that L2 writing constitutes an area of

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research that deserves focused attention in the framework of TBLT theory and research. This chapter concludes with a summary of the individual contributions of the following chapters.

Chapter 2 by Rosa Manchón aims to discover how an ‘internal dimension of tasks’ can re-conceptualize the relationship between task conceptualization, task performance, and learning outcomes, while shedding light on the research agenda with new empirical questions. The chapter revisits well-known TBLT views on the interplay between task factors and learner factors. It also probes the nature of learner agency in the complex problem-solving acts of writing, such as the learner’s reinterpretation of the nature and demands of the task, the goals set for the completion of the task, and the strategies to be employed in the task execution process. In addition, Manchón evaluates why and how writing contributes to the current accounts of connections between task features and task performance, and calls for future research in the connection between tasks and L2 learning.

Continuing with the analysis of the internal dimension of tasks, Chapter 3 by Ernesto Macaro brings together the field of task-based research and language learner strategies. The study examines the relationship between task, strategic behaviors, and linguistic knowledge during a French L2 written task by two lower-intermediate learners. Macaro argues that the writing process is highly influenced by an individual’s background knowledge, interpretive stance, and communicative intentions; therefore, research must consider the individual characteristics of strategic behaviors during task performance.

Based on a thorough re-examination of the current notions and tenets in TBLT literature, especially the evolution of task complexity to its current highly technicalized understanding, Chapter 4 by Heidi Byrnes promotes a functional and meaning-oriented theory of language. She suggests adopting a language- and meaning-based rather than a psycholinguistic and process-oriented notion of complexity. The chapter concludes with brief comments on how such an approach reconceptualizes assessment and how it helps foster L2 learning and L2 development in a multilingual and globalized environment.

Part II moves from theorizing to the presentation and analysis of novel empirical findings. The six chapters are framed in various theoretical perspectives, including current TBLT accounts of task complexity, Dynamic Systems Theory, models of speech and written production, and Systemic Functional Linguistics. Collectively, these chapters emphasize task performance and the educational potentials of writing.

Taking a Dynamic Systems perspective, Chapter 5 by Ryo Nitta and Kyoko Baba reports a longitudinal study exploring the effects of repeating a timed writing task over a period of 30 weeks. The participants of the study

were 46 first-year university English as a foreign language (EFL) students. They were asked to write a composition on a chosen topic for ten minutes each week, which resulted in a corpus of 1,300 compositions. Using five indices of fluency, lexis, and grammar, analysis of the data showed that the effects of specific task repetition were less marked, but task-type repetition seemed to lead to the qualitative changes of L2 writing in lexical and grammatical aspects. The study also concluded that task-type repetition did not have an identical effect on student writing development as assessed by a number of linguistic features. The authors suggest ‘the benefits of repeating the task may not show up in the short term but that repetition over an extended period would yield positive effects on students’ writing’ (p. 107).

In Chapter 6, Rebecca Adams, Sara Amani, Jonathan Newton, and Nik Aloesnita Nik Mohd Alwi discuss the role of planning in asynchronous computer-mediated task-based writing. Involved in the study were 45 Malaysian university civil engineering majors enrolled in courses focusing on English for professional communication. These participants were divided into teams of three and connected via networked computers. Each team member was given information on a civil engineering scenario and asked to write a recommendation via a wiki for the best type of equipment to use. Data for the study derived from the wiki pages. The teams were grouped into three experimental conditions: pre-task planning, on-line planning, and no planning. Analysis of the texts in terms of multiple measures of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) indicated that different types of planning promoted different aspects of written production and learning opportunities. These findings provide evidence for how and why task implementation variables influence L2 learning opportunities afforded in computer-mediated writing tasks.

The study reported by Marcela Ruiz-Funes in Chapter 7 contributes to an expanding line of research in cognitive task complexity in L2 writing. Two models are tested, including Skehan and Foster’s Limited Attentional Capacity Model (Skehan, 1998, 2001, 2003; Skehan and Foster, 1999, 2001) and Robinson’s Triadic Componential Framework or Cognitive Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005, 2007). The study explores the relationship between task complexity and several measures of syntactic complexity as applied to complex academic writing tasks among eight advanced college-level learners of Spanish. The participants were required to complete two timed written tasks of different degrees of cognitive complexity in terms of topic, discourse genre, task type, and cognitive processing, alongside their relationship to syntactic CAF. The results show diverse interactions and tensions between task complexity and measures of task performance. The chapter opens up questions concerning the

classification of task complexity in its use for L2 writing and the role of learner-related variables such as attentional resources and L2 levels of proficiency in written task performance.

The study presented by Judit Kormos in Chapter 8 probes the linguistic and discourse differences between spoken and written narrative performance in two tasks of different levels of cognitive complexity among 44 secondary school students in their second academic year of an English-Hungarian bilingual educational program in Hungary. The students' narrative task performance was assessed in terms of linguistic and operationalized discourse diversity. The linguistic diversity includes lexical diversity and variety, accuracy, and grammatical complexity, while the operationalized discourse diversity consists of spatial, temporal, intentional, and causal cohesion indices. The findings showed that the students were more accurate and used more varied vocabulary in writing than in speech, but their performance was similar in terms of syntactic complexity. Additionally, the students used significantly more positive and negative additive and causal connectives in speech than they did in writing. The study sheds new light on the intricacies of task and performance in the domain of L2 writing and illustrates the potentials of writing tasks in advancing L2 development.

Complementing the research reported by Kormos in Chapter 8, Chapter 9 by Parvaneh Tavakoli also questions the assumption that existing models of task complexity should be 'pertinent to all tasks regardless of their purpose, type or mode' (p. 217). The study aims to provide empirical data on whether cognitive complexity influences written and spoken tasks in similar ways and whether it has similar impacts on L2 written and oral performance. The research replicates a previous study (Tavakoli and Foster, 2008). It examines the effects of storyline complexity on L2 learners' written performance in terms of syntactic complexity in narrative tasks. Tavakoli found that cognitive complexity affects the syntactic complexity of speaking and writing in different ways. She cautions that it is 'difficult to assume that a single model of task complexity can uniformly account for the different cognitive demands of writing and speaking tasks' (p. 234).

From an education-oriented perspective, Chapter 10 by Heidi Byrnes examines the connection between task and writing to address the question of how L2 writing development to advanced ability levels might best be fostered through genre-oriented TBLT instruction. The present chapter serves as a companion to the theoretical treatment of task and writing offered in Chapter 4, and it reinterprets language development as an increase in textual meaning-making capacity through the notion of genre-based written tasks, and explores that approach through a longitudinal study about how L2 writing develops within a curricular context. Specifically,

this chapter reshapes “complexity” in terms of choices in textual meaning-making, and puts forth textually oriented parameters for operationalizing complexification. Byrnes uses grammatical metaphor (GM) as theorized in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) for tracing critical aspects of L2 writing development. The focal area of analysis and interpretation is formal aspects of GM as realized through nominalization and their implications for a developing textual meaning-making ability.

The coda chapter by Heidi Byrnes and Rosa M. Manchón assesses the contribution of the present volume to TBLT-oriented theory and research. They point out new directions for exploring TBLT issues and research agendas. Byrnes and Manchón rightfully perceive the book’s overall contribution lies in the connection between the psycholinguistic and the textual and meaning-making nature of writing in TBLT scholarship, as well as in the combination of the theoretical and empirical contributions involving a dual analytic manner that benefits both writing and TBLT literature.

In *Task-Based Language Learning – Insights from and for L2 Writing*, Heidi Byrnes and Rosa M. Manchón bring forward a collection of theoretical and empirical research representing a wide range of perspectives to the use of TBLT notions for the development of L2 writing. The theoretical explorations and research findings presented in the chapters make this volume a valuable contribution to the field of theories of language, foreign language education, second language acquisition, and language processing. It should be of particular interest to educators or researchers interested in exploring the language learning potentials of TBLT.

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