# Task-based Performance and Task-based Instruction: Research Contributions

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# The Background

- The challenges instruction faces
    - Development and change
    - Control and Performance
- Traditional teaching
    - Teachers, syllabuses, materials choose and present language for development and change
    - Classroom activities 'lead to' control and performance
- It didn't work especially well, at least in the U.K!

# An earlier response

- Communicative language teaching, where meaning and the need to communicate are fundamental

- Language development arises out of the need to mean

- Performance and control 'therefore' happen naturally, assisted by conversational feedback

# A response to this response

- CLT now seems to have become TBLT
  - TBLT is perhaps more psycholinguistic and SLA in orientation whereas CLT is more meaning based
  - TBLT perhaps connects more naturally with research
  - TBLT comes in strong (there is only the task, and nothing but the task) and weak (tasks are useful, perhaps piecemeal adjuncts) forms, and the strong form has to wrestle with issues of syllabus
- But a central issue: Are tasks all you need?
- NO!! because:
  - New language is an issue
  - How control is developed can be complex
  - Form can easily be forgotten as communication dominates

# So: Dump tasks?

Again, NO! Because:

- First, the ability to use language would have problems (Language Use)

- Second, because tasks enable individually-based learning

    - They generate a need to mean. Then something good needs to happen to respond to this need to mean

    - Tasks capitalise on salience and timeliness (Language development)

# What will this talk do?

- Look at the evidence on tasks, on task characteristics, on influences on performance

- Look at the conditions under which tasks are done, the before, the during, and the after

- It will take a research perspective – and try to ground claims in what research has found

- That means there will a lot left out! And I won't say anything about syllabus or evaluation.

# A researcher's digression: Measurement

Task researchers obsess about measuring performance, in particular areas

* (Structural) Complexity        New, more advanced language
* Lexis                          New words, more advanced words
* Accuracy                       Control: avoiding error
* Fluency                        Control: Real time communication

# What do these dimensions mean?

- These are performance areas, which are distinct from one another statistically

- Yet there is a pedagogic sequence here: Slow, new language (structures and words), leading to difficult, attention-demanding control and avoidance of error, leading to fluent control and easy access to well established language

# Things (cognitive) task researchers look at

- Pre-task work: e.g. planning, earlier engagement
- During task factors:
  - task difficulty
  - task characteristics and task selection
    - Robinson and resource direction
    - Skehan and Trade-off claims
    - NoM and recasting-promoting tasks
  - task conditions (time pressure, surprise information)
- Post-task work:
  - e.g. post-task activities intended to influence (earlier) task performance
  - post-task 'exploitation' of salient language

# Tasks and Task Choice

- A note on Peter Robinson, Aoyama Gakuin
    - The Cognition Hypothesis: Attention is not limited
    - Resource directing tasks, (time perspective, no. of elements, reasoning demands) push for greater complexity and greater accuracy, for better feedback, and better development
    - Task complexity pushes language to respond to these pressures, free of attentional limitations
    - It can be the basis for syllabus design

# I'd like to believe, but . . . . .

- The evidence (of jointly raised accuracy and complexity through task complexity) is not strong

- I don't buy the theory of unlimited attention

- Nor do I understand how tasks are analysed as being more or less complex

- So, . . . . .

# My approach to tasks 1

- Learners have limited attention, so tasks which are too complex stretch learners too much, and things might fall apart

- Doing better in one area, complexity say, might lower performance elsewhere

- Try and choose tasks of the right (intermediate) level of difficulty for your learners' proficiency level

- Engage learners, but give them a reasonable chance to achieve complexity, accuracy, and fluency (supported by conditions)

# My approach to tasks 2

- Tasks can have selective influences on performance, raising, e.g. complexity or fluency

- Choose tasks which draw upon research to achieve what you would like to achieve, pedagogically

- If you want to engage new language, choose tasks to raise complexity

- If you want to nurture control, choose tasks to raise accuracy and/or fluency

# A Personal Task

In this task you have to talk about the ways life in Britain is different from your country. Talk to your partner and see how similar your ideas are about these differences.

*These are some things you could talk about:*

What things surprise you:

What things do you like? Dislike?

You could think about areas like:

Clothes          Food and drink          Pets

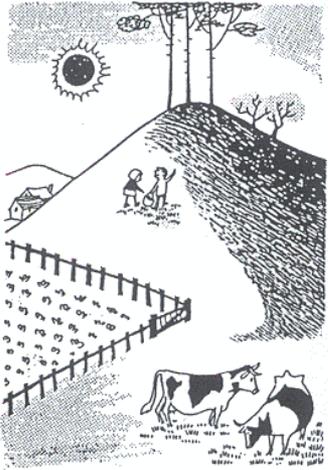The way people behave          Children          Young people

Attitude to foreigners

Or any other area that  you find interesting

# Picnic



Assess the degree of structure in these pictures
4 = very structured
3 = structured
2 = slightly structured
1 = unstructured

# Cobuild tasks (Randon order: Can you sequence them?)

**Task One**: Find out in your group who works the longest hours each day.

**Task Two**: Find the differences between two pictures

**Task Three**: Find out the best house your partner has lived in.

**Task Four**: Take a picture containing people.  Ask Ss to write a story from the point of view of one of the people in the picture.  Other people have to guess "who they are".

**Task Five**: Find out your partner's family tree.

**Task Six**: In pairs, find out if you and your partner's paths will cross in the next week.

**Task Seven**: Find out what your partner's morning routine is.  Who is the quickest to leave the house in the morning?

**Task Eight**: Find out, from your partner, the best time to phone them at home: usually/ tomorrow/ next Saturday/ next Sunday

**Task Nine**: Find out, in  group of four, who left school first.

**Task Ten**: Find out what object both you and your partner have with you.

**Task Eleven**: Tell your partner how to get to your home from the nearest bus stop.  Your partner should draw a map without you seeing it.

**Task Twelve**: Find out if you have friends or relatives who:
- have the same job            - work at the same place
- have the same first name  - have the same birthday

# Task Thirteen: Peter, Mary, and John all went away last weekend.  One of them went to Birmingham, one to Manchester, and one to London.  One of them went to the theatre, one went to see a relative, and one went to buy a computer.  Who did what?
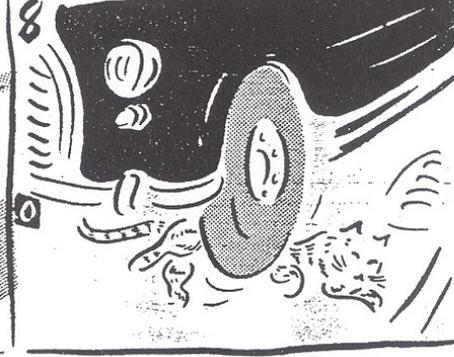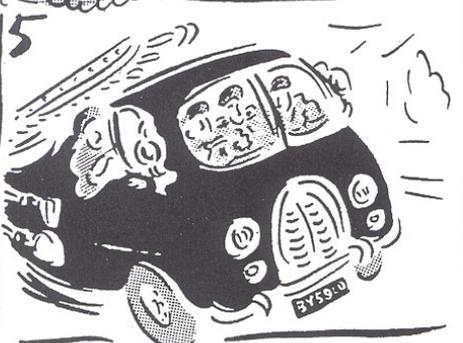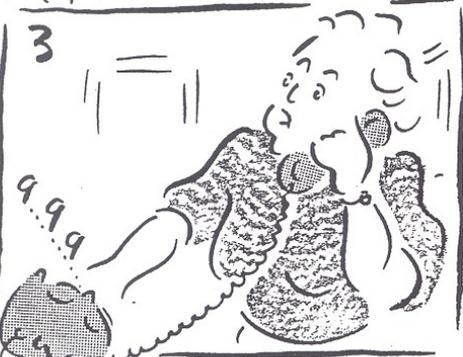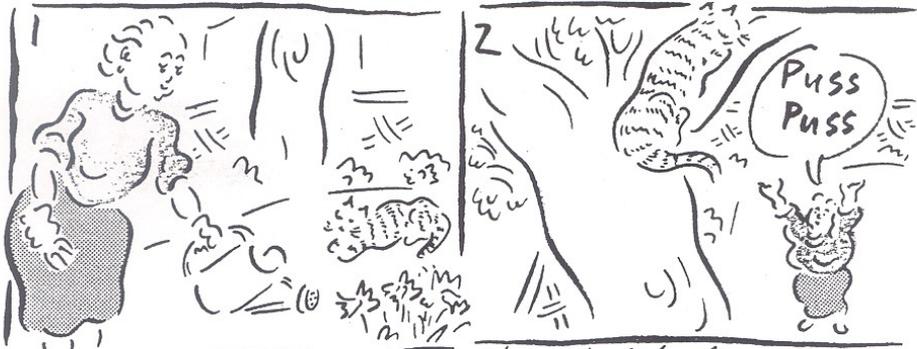*Clues: One of them went to London to visit her mother. John bought a computer, but not in Manchester.*
Can you explain how you did the puzzle?

**Task Fourteen**: Find out the types of school that your partner went to.  Which did he like the most?

The dead cat story

# Tasks and Selective Influence

|  | Complexity | Accuracy | Fluency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Familiarity Personal relevance |  | √ | √ |
| Linking information | √ |  |  |
| Transformation of information | √ |  |  |

# How far does this take us?

- If you have clear pedagogic goals, in terms of complexity, accuracy, fluency, then:
  - Task research can help you 'nudge' performance in the way that you want
  - This can be helpful, and can push learners towards not forgetting form
- BUT!!!
  - This doesn't clarify difficulty
  - It's no basis for sequencing either
  - It's how you use tasks that is more important

Next we turn to conditions for using tasks

# Preparation and pre-task activity: What could it be?

- A pre-task task
- An orientation of some sort
- Native speakers doing the task as a model
- Non-native speakers doing the task
- Group preparation
- Constructing a splash diagram, say
- Planning time

# So: What have researchers done?

- They haven't looked at most of the things from the previous slide
- They have studied planning.
- Extensively
- Repeatedly
- With planning defined almost always as having ten minutes preparation time
- **Mea culpa!** But, I claim, it's been worth it!

# A moment's thought

- If people have planning time, what do you think will be the effects on each of:
    - Complexity (structural, lexical)
    - Accuracy
    - Fluency
- What will make these effects stronger? weaker?

# Planning: General Findings

- Raised complexity: Large and consistent effect: There's more subordination, a wider range of language, e.g. tenses, and more complex clauses

- All effects are greater with more complex tasks

- The effects on lexical complexity are there, but not so strong

- Increased fluency, (fewer pauses, faster speech, greater length of run): Large and consistent effects

- Sometimes, increased accuracy, and the effects are not large

# So: Is planning good?

- Absolutely. It is not harmful, and it is almost always good, so it can be recommended as a teaching option

- Most (but not all) participants like it, and, slightly surprisingly, ten minutes is often welcomed, though maybe 8 would be better

- Planning may enable learners to be themselves more in a task, by drawing on their own ideas

# Complication 1: Rod Ellis and On-line Planning

- Ellis distinguishes between pre-task planning and on-line planning

- On-line planning is when relaxed speaking conditions enable people to plan for new speaking while they are speaking

- Ellis argued (and provided some supportive evidence) that on-line planning (through monitoring) is what produces greater accuracy

# Zhan Wang's Replication

- Wang worried about Ellis' operationalisation of on-line planning (Ellis gave people more time than they used)

- Using slowed video narratives she controlled for this, and standardised the time

- She showed no effect for on-line planning under these more careful conditions

- But: If on-line planning was preceded by strategic planning, then performance was much better – more accurate and complex

- You need things to say (greater complexity) and time to say them (greater accuracy). Time alone isn't enough

# Complication 2: Pang and Skehan

- Almost all planning research is quantitative
- We, following Lourdes Ortega, decided to take a different approach
- First we asked people what they had done while they were planning
- Then we categorised the things they said
- Finally we related what they said to their actual performances to see which planning behaviours make a difference

# General Results

- Planning is good, but it is two edged – sometimes people plan their way into trouble

- Research-wise, planning always works, at a group level, but individually . . . . .

- Pedagogically, there may be scope for teachers to work with students so that the planning they do is most effective – they use planning time to do the good things and avoid the bad things

# Precepts for Planning

- Build your own structure
- Avoid trouble, and be realistic
- Have strategies for handling trouble when it occurs
- Plan small and specific (vs. plan general)
- Avoid a focus on grammar, and concentrate on ideas

*These will almost certainly give you clearly more complex and fluent language, and probably more accurate, too.*

# Complication 3: Repetition

- Maybe I can hear groans! But:
  - We do repeat in our real lives, (even non-politicians) and what we say, anyway, follows from previous life
  - So repetition is not as unnatural as all that
  - Repetition doesn't have to be exact repetition
  - It's worth asking students: do you like repetition?
- (Even so, endless, predictable repetition would be soul-destroying)

# Zhan Wang (again)

- Used an immediate repetition condition
- It produced spectacular results
  - Higher complexity
  - Higher accuracy
  - Higher fluency
  - Curious, little change in vocabulary

So we have to take it seriously

# Why does repetition work?

- Planning leads to preparation of (possibly) a superficial sort: general word meaning or phonology is got ready. This can be limited, and only the surface.

- Actually doing a task (prior to repetition) forces a deeper level than that: the word has to be used, the syntax around it organised (even if incorrectly), the detailed phonology attempted, collocations perhaps activated

# Why does repetition work? (cont.)

- This depth is much better remembered
- The repeated performance is enhanced much more
- The repeated performance benefits from the first performance even when the first performance wasn't perfect – the wrestling with problems pays dividends later
- All this avoids, somewhat, the dangers of planning

# Some theory

- Levelt talks about Conceptualisation, Formulation and Articulation in speech production

- Formulation means retrieving lemmas (not words) in all their richness and then building syntax

- Repetition prepares the ground for this Formulation much better than planning because it pushes for greater depth

# Summary for Preparation

- Pre-task planning is a good thing!!

- It 'naturally' raises complexity and fluency

- Accuracy is less natural, but it can be achieved through (a) a combination of pre-task and on-line planning, (b) learners planning in 'good' ways

- Pre-task and on-line planning work well together

- The potential for training planning and avoiding its pitfalls is huge

- Repetition, as a form of preparation, is also very very promising

# The conditions under which a task is done

- What decisions can teachers make about how to implement a task, whatever that task is?

- Are there choices that can 'fine tune' a task, e.g. for difficulty? for performance balance?

# Conditions: Time Pressure in Performance

- Pressure (or lack of on-line planning opportunities), usually through introducing time limits. This lowers performance all round, including fluency sometimes!
  - But this may be natural, as a preparation for real-life
  - It can also influence other conditions unpredictably, e.g. swamping possible effects of planning

# Conditions 2: Where can pressure come from?

- Input dominance, quantity
  - Similar to time pressure
  - Important to use other influences, such as planning, structured tasks
  - BUT: input dominance reduces the impact of these other variables
  - SO: use with care!

# Conditions 3: Interactive (vs. monologic) tasks

- First, I mean not just interactive, but actually engaged in the interaction
- Then, mostly, performance is enhanced, sometimes a lot
- In addition, other influences, e.g. planning, post-task effects, are stronger
- Why?

# Interactive effects

- Time while your interlocutor is speaking to pretend to listen, but in fact to plan

- The immediacy of an interlocutor and the push to precision

- The opportunity to steal good stuff, deliberately ('Ah, I'll have a bit of that!') or without knowing (alignment, and natural recycling)

- (Sociocultural theory): to jointly reach places you wouldn't otherwise

- All along, note the contrast with e.g. narrative

# Finally!! Post-task Work

- This comes in two forms
  - Sneakiness and manipulating attention during the actual task through pushing learners to anticipate what will come later
  - Building on language which emerges (or learners would have liked to use) in a task, through a focus on that salient language, but afterwards

# The effects of anticipation
## Three research studies

- Skehan and Foster 1997
    - Participants did tasks, but they were told that after the task some pairs of students would be required to re-do the task publicly in front of the class and the teacher
    - We predicted that anticipating this possibility would change the focus of attention while the task was being done, to become more accurate
    - We were right, but only for one of three tasks, the decision making (interactive) task

# Foster and Skehan 2013: Stubborn researchers!

- In this study, learners were recorded during a task. Then, post-task, they had to transcribe some of their own performance. They knew this.

- Same prediction: though more personal awareness of form, and greater accuracy

- Result: Both tasks (narrative and decision-making) were significantly more accurate. The decision-making was also more complex

- So, a better result, a better operationalisation

- Also, participants loved transcribing themselves!

# Li (2014)

- Christina Li liked our research, but thought more could be done

- She also looked at:
  - single vs. pair based transcribing
  - 'simple' transcription vs. transcription with revision

- Confirmed Foster and Skehan, plus:

- Pair based transcription raised complexity

- Revision increased accuracy even more, but complexity suffered a little

# Post-task anticipation activities: Reflection

- It is good to show learners that getting the task done is not the only thing

- What is attended to during the task can be influenced without compromising naturalness of communication

- Form is brought into focus. Not just accuracy, but complexity too

- You are also creating a record of the task which can be used later

# Post-task Type 2: Building

- Here we are dealing with  actually teaching, work that only becomes possible after a task is done

- Dick Schmidt talked about noticing, in input, and then Merrill Swain extended this to 'noticing the hole' in output. That's what I mean!

# What is special about this approach?

- The task has made some language salient, so this means that the language has emerged from the learners themselves

- Probably different language will emerge for different learners

- Not all that language may be timely, in relation to language development (cf. second language acquisition)

- The teacher can make a decision about which language to exploit, to work on, to be explicit about if need be

# Building: 2

Assumptions

- A task is done

- The task creates a 'need to mean': sometimes this is straightforward (and performance ability is enhanced), and sometimes it brings the learner up against problems (new language is needed, old language needs reorganisation or repair)

- There is some sort of record of the task performance (cellphone, memory, notes, creeping-around teacher)

# How would it work?

- Actually, with any sort of focussed language work:
    - Consciousness-raising and implicit work
    - Explanation, Extension, Reorganisation
    - Explicit teaching
    - Corpus work
    - Practice activities even
- The key issue is that the teacher has to know enough to improvise as needed, and to find relevant resources very quickly

# For example: Asking questions

- Pienemann has a scale of development for asking questions, where each new stage builds on the previous one

- If a teacher, or students, notice difficulty with question formation, they could relate this to Pienemann's scale

- The focus would come from the students, but the response could be guided by acquisition theory

# For example: Conditionals

- Again, it starts with problems which emerge in doing a task

- Then, the teacher might select this for work

- This could be clarifying something that was almost achieved

- Or it could be relating different conditional forms to each other, to bring out their differences

- The 'crime' would be to notice an area of difficulty in the task and then do nothing!

# Reflections on research and task-based instruction

- Especially with tasks themselves, it has its limits!
  - What we have learned about tasks is interesting, but unsystematic
  - We only know about different features of tasks and how they are somewhat predictable in their effects
  - This is good, but it doesn't yet solve syllabus or sequencing problems

# Reflections (cont.)

- Research into conditions is much more useful
  - Results about planning are already interesting
  - There is lots of scope to do more research
    - Into fine-tuning planning
    - Into training planning
  - The pre-task stage, more generally, looks interesting, to think of more broadly, and definitely to incorporate and research repetition

# Conditions (cont.)

- During task conditions are also interesting
  - To understand what causes pressure, and what its effect are
  - To show the usefulness of interactivity
- Post-task conditions are for me the most exciting aspect of all
  - By trying to manipulate attention, e.g. transcription
  - By learning how to exploit what is made salient by a task, and teach responsively

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