

## Differences between Task, Exercise, and Drill in L2 Education: A Systems-thinking Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

The present study considered the definitions of and differences between the concepts of task, exercise, and drill in the related literature on L2 practices. The concept of task has been commonly differentiated from the exercise and drill with respect to certain criteria. Task is, in the main, meaning-based, goal-oriented, and purposeful with a nonlinguistic and communicative outcome. Based on Long (2016), task demands the L2 use in the real world. Also, as said by Swales (1990), tasks are more relatable to the genre than the other two language practices. Moreover, the task performance endows L2 learners with higher degrees of freedom than the accomplishment of the exercise and drilling, respectively. Furthermore, this study examined and supported a systems-thinking perspective on task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Finch, 2001). However, considering the task phase as a complex system seems to be still under debate and thus needs more research and analysis.

### INTRODUCTION

The communicative language teaching (CLT) has its origins in understanding the complexity of communication interfaces (Chastain, 1988). The theory of language underpinning the communicative approach (CA) to L2 education has its origin in' (1972) conceptualization of communicative competence as well as the Firthian linguists' systemic functional linguistics (SFL) on the basis of which language as a system principally serves communicative purposes (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Thus, CLT considers the L2 learners as L2 users who actively engage in the negotiation of/for meaning during certain discourse practices to exchange messages (Brown, 2001). That is, CLT attempts at activating the L2 learners' competence and utilization of both language forms and language functions while putting greater emphasis on the functional role of language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). As Ellis (2009) acknowledged, CLT is traced back to the constructivist theory of learning motivated by Dewey's (1916, 1933) philosophy of education.

The task-based language teaching (TBLT), as Nunan (2004) put it, represents the operationalization of the

philosophy behind CLT at echelons of syllabus design and methodology. TBLT as the panacea of language education suggests the concept of task for both curriculum development and instruction. Therefore, the critical appraisal of TBLT demands explicating what articulates a task (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

A brief tour in the theoretical background of TBLT reveals miscellaneous and contradictory understandings of what task is and in what ways it differs from the other two L2 teaching practices, namely, the exercise and drill. Thus, the present study firstly presented a review of the common definitions given for the concept of task in L2 education based on multivariate as well as genre-based perspectives to distinguish it from the exercise and drill. Also, it took account of task from the perspective of systems thinking to see whether it can be viewed as a complex system in its own right and to put the three common types of L2 practices on a continuum.

### ON DEFINING TASK

The concept of task has been commonly identified as a practice that keeps a focus on meaning. For example, Nunan (1989) believed that through tasks L2 language learners

communicate with the L2 whilst they primarily attend to meaning rather than the linguistic structure. Similarly, Nunan (2001) regarded each task as an act of communication that goes beyond concentrating on one particular language form and thus has a nonlinguistic and communicative outcome.

In the same vein, Willis (1996) regarded task as an objective-oriented activity. Willis' trio of task-based learning (TBL) framework comprises the phases of pretask, the task-cycle, and the language focus that reverses the traditional presentation, practice, and production (PPP) framework. The pretask phase accounts for giving an introduction to both the topic and the task. The task cycle involves performing the task itself, planning to move on to the following stage, and presenting reports on the manner of task performance as well as on its final product. The language focus phase includes analysis and practice.

Likewise, Ellis considered each task as a work plan that predominantly attends to meaningfulness and thus engages the L2 learners in processing and exploiting the L2 in the natural flow of L2 use to attain a communicative aim. Similar to exercises, it may entail the L2 learners' utilization of any of the four productive or receptive language skills. Moreover, it demands the L2 learners' exploitation of cognitive processes, say, problem-solving, reasoning, and the like. Ellis (2003, p. 16) also stated that a task demands the L2 learners' pragmatic competence for the negotiation of/for meaning to obtain a communicative upshot, and the appraisal of its outcome pertains to the degree of the relevance of the transmitted content in and through the written or spoken milieu. Therefore, it is essentially meaning-based although its design predisposes L2 learners to use certain linguistic structures. Based on the criteria specified by Ellis (2009), each task is both meaning-focused and outcome-oriented. Also, it entails a gap and thus its performance demands the deployment of the L2 learners' linguistic and nonlinguistic repertoire.

In line with foregoing arguments, Searle (2008) referred to the impracticality of the radical separation of process from product during the task cycle given that the L2 learners have shown inclination to fulfill visible performances via using the L2. Thus, the focus on the linguistic structures or forms is required. Also, Searle asserted that doing tasks helps the L2 learners to sound more academic in expressing comparable perspectives and emotions.

According to Long (2016), tasks are the communicative functions in real-life interactions that require the L2 learners to use the L2 outside the classroom walls. The task syllabus operates on its own and does not comprise "one strand in a hybrid of some kind" (p. 6). Tasks in this sense of the term account for miscellaneous undertakings that are done either to fulfill academic, vocational training, and occupational aims or for the sake of life purposes. For example, tasks referred to by Long to manage daily life affairs cover the L2 learners' ability or skill of getting things done in the real world with the L2, such as commuting via the public transportation, making an appointment with a medic, registering students for classes, and the like.

In this regard, Nunan (2004) distinguished target and pedagogical tasks. He held that the function of the first type

of tasks is to get the L2 learners engaged in communication in the natural context of situation away from the school barriers. However, the second task type is performed within the classroom environment.

From a genre-based perspective, Swales (1990) argued that tasks resemble genres and discourse communities in having communicative ends, and thus the task design accounts for both genre and SLA processes. To Swales, tasks as outcome-oriented activities can be also related to acquiring pregenre and genre skills suitable for predicted or emergent sociocultural contexts of situations. Thus, Swales' definition goes beyond considering task in terms of its commonly attached features including the negotiation of/for meaning, cooperative collaboration, gap-filling, and the like. At the risk of oversimplification, this may endow task designers with freedom to work with different registers within the context of culture. Also, Taboada (2004) referred to task-oriented dialogues that pursue practical goals other than establishing ties or retaining social contacts. Accordingly, Khatib and Sabah (2012) supported the use of the process drama as a speech genre that meets the criteria of task-oriented conversations for the L2 acquisition.

### Task Versus Exercise

Nunan (1999) clarified the basic difference between tasks and exercises and argued that the outcome of the task is essentially nonlinguistic whereas that of the exercise is basically a linguistic one. Also, he debated that the task design surpasses the restrictive focus on rehearsing one grammatical item and instead accounts for the authenticity principle, the form-function principle, and the task dependency principle. Authentic materials, as Nunan put it, comprise spoken or written pieces of language that are not originally intended for instructional purposes. To him, the form-function principle deals with raising the L2 learners' consciousness of language use, namely, the knowledge of how and when to use certain forms for the negotiation of/for meaning. The task dependency principle is concerned with the problem of selecting, sequencing, and integrating tasks.

In the same vein, Dagnell (2017) distinguished tasks from exercises in terms of the degree of control over L2 learners' rejoinders during performing tasks in comparison with doing exercises. That is, exercises echo a sense of structure, well-formedness, and grammatical accuracy that seem to involve L2 teachers along with L2 learners in correctly reviewing and rehearsing the target L2 lesson, whereas tasks are less structured and controlled. Although Dagnell set activity, task, and exercise on a continuum with varying degrees of parallel features, he asserted that the various L2 practice types cannot be precisely put on a scale for all traits.

### Drilling

Paulston and Bruder (1976) identified a trio of drills. They debated that mechanical drills strictly control L2 learners' responses and are fine-tuned for choral practicing because there is only a single correct response. Kendrick, Kim, Richards, and Schmidt (2002) acknowledged that repetition,

substitution, and transformation drill types require the L2 teacher to present certain vocabulary items and sentence patterns as cues, and the L2 learners' primary function is to reiterate, replace, or change the given stimuli, respectively. Thus, these drills do not engage the L2 learners in meaningful interactions.

As Paulston and Bruder (1976) put it, meaningful drills limit the L2 learners' agency to a lesser degree than mechanical drills as they allow the pluralism of possible right answers. Although there are various ways through which L2 learners can express the utterance responses, the L2 teacher is always aware of what the L2 learner is supposed to reply. In meaningful drilling, the L2 learners are provided with the information required for giving the right answers, and their rejoinders are accepted if they meet the criteria of grammatical well-formedness as well as the conformity to the given pieces of information. However, L2 learners are not still involved in the real-life communication during meaningful drilling. Reading comprehension questions based on the assigned passage fall in this class of drills.

According to Paulston and Bruder (1976), in communicative drilling the L2 learners are expected to negotiate for meaning through transferring their linguistic repertory to the right communicative interfaces. Thus, L2 learners gain an opportunity to make contributions to the ongoing discourse practice through the open exchange of their personal thoughts, ideas, and perspectives with the L2. Although the L2 learners are free in their choices of lexis, the control of their linguistic structures is still retained. Techniques used in communicative drilling include role-playing, making a phone call, drawing inferences from a reading passage, and the like. Paulston and Bruder argued that this class of drills do not engage L2 learners in the natural flow of communicative interactions as "we are still within the realm of the cue-response pattern" (p. 9). Meaningful and communicative drills seem to conform to exercises and pedagogical tasks, respectively.

### Task Versus Drill

Tritt (2000) elaborated on the basic difference between drilling and TBLT and stated that drills exemplify the PPP framework while the task cycle demonstrates the reverse. Namely, production comes before presentation during the task performance. Also, drills being concerned with practicing a single language skill or component out of context mostly lack authenticity and are not meaning-based. Another distinction between tasks and drills lies in the degree of the L2 learners' freedom to do tasks and the L2 teachers' control over L2 learners' responses. Drills restrict the functional role of L2 learners as they are strictly controlled and immediately corrected by the L2 teacher as authority. Thus, the L2 learners are quite passive while drilling.

### Dynamic Systems Perspectives on TBLT

Chaos and complexity theory (C/CT) attempts to clarify the behavior of complex adaptive systems (CASs) and thus is applicable to SLA. The characteristics of these systems are cha-

os, complexity, dynamicity, nonlinearity, strange attractors, fractality, unpredictability, sensitivity to initial conditions, openness, self-organizing behavior, feedback-sensitivity, and adaptiveness (see Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2002; Levy, 2000; Rickles, Hawe, & Shiell, 2007). These features are briefly explained subsequently.

Chaos in complex systems demonstrates full randomness (Crutchfield, Palmer, Packard, & Shaw, 1986, cited in Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Dynamicity makes reference to the point that these systems transform in the course of time. Complexity entails that various constituent factors act together, and their interactions amount to the emergent network behavior. Nonlinearity or the camel's back effect means that the outcomes of the systems are not proportionate to the causes. Strange attractors reveal that complex systems are attracted to trace a specific path in space. Albeit the cycle recurs, the pursued routes are never exactly identical. Fractality of the structure of strange attractors demonstrates its self-similarity at dissimilar scale levels (Larsen-Freeman, 1997). Sensitivity to initial conditions or the butterfly effect makes the ongoing behavior of chaotic systems predictably unpredictable (Levy, 2000). Openness to energy effects the defilement of the second law of thermodynamics by complex systems, and the exhibition of a self-organizing behavior helps them to reach new echelons of order and complexity (Larsen-Freeman, 2002). Adaptiveness shows the adjustment of complex systems to environmental changes. Sensitivity to feedback shows that these systems are susceptible to feedback mechanisms. The positive feedback boosts the rapidity of a component's transformation in a certain direction, whereas the negative feedback inverses the direction of the change in constituents (Rickles, Hawe, & Shiell, 2007).

C/CT can explain the way L2 learners, L2 teachers, and L2 classrooms operate (Finch, 2001, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 1997). However, whether tasks as the core of CLT practices enjoy all of the features commonly associated with CASs is still a matter of debate. For example, Finch's (2001) task-based model of L2 education holistically looks upon the L2 classroom environment as a complex system with various components that is open to the new input. This model attributes no predetermined order, linear connections, predictability, or specific roles to its constituent elements and instead attempts to foster a sensitive and dynamic environ as well as humanized L2 instruction, affective factors, autonomy, mutual trust, and constructive feedback. Also, it leads to the rise of complex relationships between the interactants along with unanticipated proceedings. The elements' self-organization amounts to the achievements of predictable upshots at the global level. The primary global goal of the model is captured in the troika of confidence, motivation, and independence (CMI) and its primary local goal is realized in the triad of consciousness, meaning, and interaction (CMI). The two CMI trios function as the strange attractors of the model for appraisal purposes. The secondary aim of the model is the enhancement of the L2 learners' communicative competence. Overall, the identified upshots of this model include positively changing the attitudes of L2 learners/teachers, promoting L2 learners' communica-

tive competence, and raising L2 learners' consciousness of L2 acquisition for life purposes. The long-term goals of the model provide self-similar directions for the L2 learning process to follow during a course of study at different levels and thus seem to enjoy fractality.

Following this line of argument, Lopez (2015) examined the task phase through the lens of the C/CT to confirm the subsistence of CAS traits in this phase. Fourteen L2 learners were involved in doing L2 tasks in the classroom, and their performances during the task phase were video-recorded and then analyzed by the L2 teacher researcher. The findings of this study demonstrated that the task phase enjoys chaos, unpredictability, nonlinearity, adaptiveness, complexity, and sensitivity to initial conditions but lacks dynamicity, openness, feedback sensitivity, and self-organizing behavior. However, this research can be criticized for being based on eliciting task performances from the L2 learners within the classroom environment. This counteracts Long's (2016) sense of what the term task denotes.

Based on C/CT, tasks are supposed to be different from drills and exercises given that they enjoy all or some of the CAS features. Also, tasks giving much more freedom to L2 learners promote them to agents with a further active role in the L2 use. During the task performance, the L2 participants shift in and out of their double roles as both L2 learners and L2 users across a continuum in the communication process.

## CONCLUSION

The present study examined the definitions of and differences between the concepts of task, exercise, and drill in L2 education to distinguish task from the other two language practices. Tasks are commonly defined as meaning-based, purposeful, goal-oriented, and communicative acts with a nonlinguistic outcome (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Nunan, 2001; Willis, 1996). Long (2016) viewed tasks as the very communicative functions for which L2 learners use the L2.

Also, this study took account of Swales' (1990) genre-based definition of task. From this perspective, tasks bear a resemblance to genres as they are slanted in favor of achieving communicative goals and thus pursue further practical outcomes. The genre-based approach to task helps to further differentiate it from doing exercises and drills as its accomplishment demands the acquisition of genre-oriented skills.

Moreover, the present study drew on the systems-thinking perspective on task and L2 practicing based on which the term practice in L2 education is look upon in terms of a continuum with varying degrees of control over L2 learners' responses and the intended upshots. Tasks allow the L2 learners to freely engage in everyday communication interfaces, whereas exercises and especially drills restrict L2 learners' reactions. Thus, it can be argued that the task accomplishment entails the utilization of the L2 learners' interactional competence, which, in its own right, seems to demonstrate the CAS features (see Sabah, 2017). However, considering task as a CAS is still under debate and requires further studies.

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