

Review of Wen, Z. & Ahmadian, M. J. (Eds.). (2019). Researching L2 task performance and pedagogy: In honour of Peter Skehan. Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Eva Kartchava

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Wen, Z. & Ahmadian, M. J. (Eds.). (2019). *Researching L2 task performance and pedagogy: In honour of Peter Skehan*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tblt.13>

Reviewer: Eva Kartchava, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

It is not often that we, as a field, are presented with an opportunity to celebrate one of our greats and to do so during their lifetime. This volume, aptly dubbed “Festschrift” by the Series and volume editors, is dedicated to celebrating the work and landmark contributions of Peter Skehan in the areas of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and second language (L2) research more broadly. Spanning a spectrum of key theoretical and methodological designs in TBLT, the book brings together cutting-edge research and state-of-the-art syntheses that address the developments on the topic and examine their implications for L2 acquisition and instruction. Written by Professor Skehan’s colleagues, research associates, and former doctoral students, the chapters serve as a testament to the honoree’s varied, yet sustained, research program on TBLT. To this end, the 13-chapter volume is comprised of three main parts and an epilogue that reflect on, and add to, the TBLT-inspired research topics undertaken by Skehan. While Part I sets the stage for the central constructs of task pedagogy and performance, Part II examines the role of task complexity on task performance. Part III, in turn, addresses task-based language development across contexts and time. In an innovative twist, the epilogue, by McWhinney, examines ways in which Skehan’s task analytical framework interacts with and can positively affect the Competition Model in explaining the impact of complexity, accuracy, and fluency on language acquisition; it also considers how the two approaches can inform one another in terms of theoretical and methodological applications.

The chapters in Part I explain the currently established TBLT constructs of task planning (Chapter 1), automaticity, fluency, and task performance (Chapter 2) as well as point to new research directions of task engagement (Chapter 3) and task motivation in relation to general L2 motivation (Chapter 4). In Chapter 1, Ellis examines the role of planning in task-based learning, one of the central foci of Skehan’s work. He expands the notion of “planning” to that of “preparedness” to perform a task since the latter better captures how task construction, and more importantly, task administration can affect the end result in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Considering the effects of such task administration conditions - referred to as “implementation options” - Ellis is cautious about drawing any general conclusions, but is optimistic about the existing evidence that supports the positive role of task preparedness on language use. Still, he calls for additional research into task preparedness and suggests insightful directions in this regard. The focus of Chapter 2 is on fluency and its role in L2 performance. Drawing on Skehan’s seminal work in this area, Tavakoli examines how the conceptualization and assessment of fluency have evolved, ushering in investigations into the multidimensional relationships between fluency, task types, and designs as well as various aspects of language performance (e.g., automaticity in speaking). Yet, she sees a need for research that considers fluency qualitatively to determine its role in, and effects on, the socially-, culturally-, and linguistically-varied contexts and uses. Inspired by his discussions with Skehan into the role of individual differences on task performance, in Chapter 3, Dörnyei argues for the study of task motivation - a hybrid inquiry into L2 motivation and L2 tasks - which has not received much attention to date. Understanding how tasks promote learner engagement and participation, however, could, he argues, inch the field closer to explaining and

implementing the motivational factors inherent to a sustained task-based language learning process. The construct of task motivation as it relates to general L2 motivation is empirically explored by Wang and Li in Chapter 4. The results show that task motivation and L2 motivation are viewed as distinct by EFL university learners in China, suggesting that task motivation is an independent construct, not a subset of general motivation in the study of English.

Focusing on task complexity and L2 performance, the four chapters in Part II address another area of TBLT research that has benefited from Skehan's work. Chapters 5 and 6, in particular, draw on Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity Hypothesis (1998, 2001) that posits that due to the limited capacity of attentional resources, learners struggle to simultaneously attend to all aspects of an L2 task, which, in turn, impedes task performance. To counteract this, Skehan proposed intentional manipulation of various task attributes to first determine, and then control, the level and type of difficulty/complexity each yielded on learner performance. Controlling task characteristics, he argued, would promote learner attention to specific aspects of their L2 performance (e.g., focus on meaning vs. form) leading to a balanced development of all and an increased ability to successfully communicate in the L2. With the focus on how learners perceive and respond to various task manipulations and whether these affect the quality of learner-perceived L2 performance, Sasayama and Norris (Chapter 5) asked Japanese learners of English to complete and then assess the extent of difficulty and mental effort required to complete four picture-based narrative tasks that differed in cognitive and code complexities. Data analyses showed that conceptual input, code complexity, and performance factors were seen as contributors to increased task difficulty, and that while extraneous cognitive complexity exacerbated task difficulty, facilitative cognitive complexity resulted in positive effects on performance. What's more, tasks that limit extraneous complexity and at the same time enhance facilitative complexity appear to yield linguistically improved performance. Extending this line of inquiry, Michel, Révész, Shi and Li (Chapter 6) investigated relationship patterns between syntactic complexity and accuracy on linguistic performance across task types and speakers. Working with two groups of English speakers (native and learners) who completed oral tasks of varied cognitive difficulty, the authors produced evidence that linguistic complexity and accuracy in task performance is mediated by task type and speaker status. Also, correlational analyses of various syntactic complexity indices demonstrated a link between subordination and clause length measures. Chapter 7 reports on the study by Xing and Luo that (1) examined the impact of task complexity on learner performance, which was measured in terms of complexity, accuracy, lexis, and fluency (CALF), and (2) probed the participants' thought processes on task performance. While a group of EFL learners in China completed two narrative tasks that varied in difficulty, a smaller subset also participated in stimulated recall. The results show that task complexity did not significantly affect CALF-based performance, but the introspection data suggest potential differences in learner processing of task demands and point to an association between cognitive processing and final output. In the last chapter of this section (Chapter 8), Wang and Zhang report on a bibliometric analysis of studies on task difficulty/complexity published between 1990 and 2018. Having identified and visualized the topmost cited references, the authors produce evidence of the far-reaching impact of Skehan's (2009) seminal publication on task complexity, pronouncing it the most influential reference on the topic.

Part III contains four chapters that tackle the role of task pedagogy in L2 development. In Chapter 9, D'Ely, Borges Mota, and Bygate examine the effects of four pre-task planning conditions (i.e., strategic planning, repetition, strategic planning plus repetition, and strategic planning) on EFL learners' oral output. Using the CALF dimensions to assess speech production, the results point to a multi-dimensional relationship between the pre-task conditions and task performance. Specifically, the repetition condition produced the greatest effect on fluency, lexical density, and accuracy, but not on complexity. The strategic planning for repetition, in turn, positively affected all the dimensions but fluency. Lexical density was impacted only by the strategic planning plus repetition condition, whereas strategic planning had no effect on any of the dimensions. As a group, the participants valued strategic planning repetition in improving their oral production albeit learner-specific factors played a role in how they approached and performed oral tasks. Erlam, in Chapter 10, investigated the effectiveness of input-based tasks with beginner learners of French. The participants received no instruction and were not required to produce the L2 but instead completed a series of tasks that promoted form-meaning connections (FMC) for preselected grammatical and lexical targets. The results show learning gains in the learners' receptive and productive knowledge for both targets (with stronger development for the lexical targets) and highlight developmental prevalence of FMCs to lexical exposure alone. Chapter 11, by Bui, addresses the impact of task readiness (operationalized in terms of topic familiarity) and proficiency (intermediate vs. advanced) on L2 performance. Two presentations delivered by university-level EFL learners were assessed in terms of CALF. The findings show that proficiency yields variations in CALF measures and that for higher proficiency learners, in particular, accuracy correlates with complexity on unfamiliar topics. In Chapter 12, the last in the section, Lambert details an analysis of the effects of progressively more demanding oral tasks on one learner's developing L2 knowledge. The use of microgenetic analysis allowed to capture local-level changes in the learner's output as well as to determine possible sources and mechanisms for the observed variations. What's more, the recorded changes, which occurred during an hour of task performance, parallel those achieved over longer periods.

This volume has proven itself an excellent source not only on Professor Skehan's work and contributions to TBLT-specific, and more broadly, SLA research, but has also provided a comprehensive examination of theoretical and practical implications on central issues of TBLT. To this end, the book may be useful to new and established TBLT scholars and practitioners looking to understand what is currently known about task-based pedagogy and performance as well as to identify areas that need further discovery. The book is commendable for its range and depth of coverage as well as the spirit with which each chapter explores, and often challenges, the established conceptual frameworks and paradigms. The use of both established and novel methodologies may also interest researchers working on the topic, whereas the range of implemented tasks and their sequencing may appeal to a variety of language practitioners. Overall, this volume is timely and well-positioned to become a valued reference on TBLT research in general and of Skehan's beneficial influence on it, in particular.

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