Task Planning and Task-Readiness

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Framing the Issue

There has been a rapid development in task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the past 30 years. TBLT differentiates itself from other conventional and communicative teaching approaches by putting the learner center-stage, focusing on meaning with practical relevance, and being highly research-informed. As a researched pedagogy, TBLT has established a close connection with neighboring disciplines, particularly psycholinguistics, in order to account for manifest or latent mechanisms underlying second language (L2) performance and development. For example, a tremendously influential psycholinguistic model for L2 speaking task performance is Levelt’s (1989) model of speech production. It includes three major stages in speaking, namely conceptualization, formulation, and articulation. The first stage, conceptualization, is where one conceives an intention, gathers information, and produces a preverbal message. In the formulation stage, the speaker picks up the message and forms a linguistic plan for the intended content. In doing so, they select appropriate lexical items, organize them into constituents in accordance with established syntactic rules in a language, and encode all constituents into a phonetic plan. This plan will then be executed as overt speech in the last stage, articulation. While Levelt’s original model aims to describe speech making in one’s first language, it has been proven equally useful in explaining L2 speaking processes. It has been argued that there is no fundamental difference between L1 and L2 speakers in terms of conceptualization because it does not involve language-specific subprocesses. However, L2 learners often encounter difficulties in the other two stages, especially during formulation where lexical, syntactic, and phonological encoding often pose great challenges to L2 learners.

A fundamental problem for L2 speakers is their processing limitations (Skehan, 1998, 2014). Native speakers are capable of handling language processing in a parallel manner and attending to the three Leveltian stages as well as many of their substages simultaneously. In contrast, L2 learners usually approach language input and output in a serial manner. That is, they may have to process speech planning (conceptualization), linguistic encoding (formulation), and the actual
speaking (articulation) separately and successively, often leading to dysfluency and hesitation (Bui & Huang, 2018). Then, during formulation and articulation, they may have to focus on some, but not all, aspects of their performance, in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) (Bui & Skehan, 2018). Such selective attention on only a fraction of L2 linguistic information will manifest itself more prominently when language comes in flux with real-time processing pressure. Low proficiency and the lack of contextual, as well as interlocutor support, may worsen the situation (Bui, 2019b; Bui & Teng, 2018). There is, therefore, a pressing need to “explore methods of mitigating these difficulties, and even trying to nurture improved performance in all dimensions, through effective use of task choice and task conditions which overcome attentional limitations” (Skehan, 2014, p. 3).

In response to such a need, prior TBLT literature has featured various types of task planning to facilitate learners to overcome their limited attentional capacity. Ellis (2009), for example, introduced rehearsal (synonymous with task repetition in his article), pre-task planning, and within-task planning as the three most frequently researched pedagogical methods that may contribute to better task performance. Bui (2014) pointed out that the scope of task planning as a means of preparing learners for a language learning task is a bit limited. He argued that task planning only involves extra preparation time offered to the L2 learners, either before or during a task; learners’ unintentional preparedness for a task, such as familiarity with a topic, works as another type of natural planning. He also differentiated rote rehearsal from task repetition. Bui (2014, 2019b) proposed task-readiness as an extension of task planning and as an umbrella term for both task-external (extra preparation time, such as pre-task planning) and task-internal (natural preparedness, such as familiarity with certain subjects or procedures) planning. The next section will explain these concepts in a modified version of Bui’s (2014) task-readiness framework.

**Making the Case**

The revised framework of task-readiness (see Figure 1) consists of two major types of preparedness for a task: task-external readiness and task-internal readiness. “Task-external” in Bui (2014) means that extra preparatory opportunities, such as additional time prior to or during a task, is available. In contrast, “task-internal” denotes a natural preparedness inherent in the task’s topic or design, including one’s familiarity with a certain topic or task procedure; task-internal readiness facilitates learner’s task performance without supplementary time or extra assistance.

Task-internal readiness consists of topic familiarity, schematic familiarity, and task repetition, which are task-preparedness without an extra preparatory option. Such preparedness arises from the natural match between the learner’s own experience and the task design (e.g., the topic and the procedure). Topic familiarity derives from one’s prior specific knowledge of a certain subject, such as a Chinese learner’s understanding of the Spring Festival (Chinese Lunar New Year), as
Task Planning and Task-Readiness

compared with that of a Brazilian student. Bui (2014) found that topic familiarity raised fluency and accuracy, but not complexity. Bui (2019a) further discovered that it also helped learners with greater lexical diversity and lexical sophistication.

The second type of task-internal readiness is schematic familiarity, which pertains to one’s knowledge of the structures or the procedures of an event (such as a task), but not necessarily of content-specific details. A case in point is a learner’s general idea of the floor plan at a mall, which allows him or her to find a particular shop quickly without having to search every floor in the building. Schematic familiarity usually promotes fluency (Skehan & Foster, 1999). Schematic knowledge of procedures is another example. Bygate (2001) investigated the possibility that even without knowledge of the topic, familiarity with task types could be transferred between tasks. However, he did not find positive task type effects in a new task.

The third area in task-internal readiness concerns task repetition, which constitutes an interesting comparison with task rehearsal as a type of task-external readiness. The two constructs appear very similar to each other since both entail practicing a task at least once before the “real” performance. However, Bui’s (2014) distinction is that future performance is anticipated in task rehearsal whereas learners are unwitting participants in task repetition. In other words, having repeated a task serves as implicit planning in contrast to the overt planning opportunity of a rehearsal. Unfortunately, “Bui’s (2014) suggestion that we should distinguish between ‘rehearsal’ and ‘repetition’ has not been acted on to date” (Ellis, 2019, p. 17), though it is a “potentially important distinction” (Ellis, 2019, p. 18). Furthermore, Bui, Ahmadian, and Hunter’s (2019) study appears to be the first to investigate the specific effects of different interval conditions between the initial and the repeated task on CAF. They were able to show that varying the lengths between two repeated tasks impacts the performance of fluency and syntactic complexity, but not the accuracy or lexical diversity.
Task-external readiness includes various types of explicit planning that have been extensively researched in the task literature (see Ellis, 2009). The first type of task-external readiness is **strategic** planning, in which learners consider the content they will need to encode and how they can convey this content effectively prior to a task. Strategic planning is typically operationalized as giving learners time (e.g., 5 to 10 minutes) to plan, but any notes they make while planning will be taken away during task performance. It often helps raise fluency and complexity in L2 performance, though the results for accuracy are mixed.

**Within-task** planning, the second category in task-external readiness, allows learners to plan “on the fly” during their task performance. It has been found to increase accuracy, but decrease fluency (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). The last type of task-external readiness, **rehearsal**, has already been discussed in comparison with task repetition. Task rehearsal has been shown to promote fluency and complexity (Bygate, 2001) and even accuracy (Skehan, Bei, Li, & Wang, 2012).

Three differences characterize task-internal and task-external readiness. The first difference lies in the learners’ **awareness**. With task-internal readiness, learners may not clearly notice that they have already engaged in tasks with advantageous conditions. In stark contrast, because task-external readiness appears in overt forms (e.g., extra planning time), learners may anticipate beneficial outcomes. The second difference is the degree of **naturalness** in task-preparation. For example, though both content familiarity and pre-task planning boost L2 fluency (Bui & Huang, 2018), giving learners a familiar topic to speak on does not require any extra preparation time, but could result in greater fluency and possibly better confidence in task performance. The first two differentiating characteristics lead to the third difference, resemblance to **real-world** communication. Task-external readiness makes viable pedagogical means for improving task performance, but it is often lacking in real life. In comparison, most of us have the experience of speaking on topics with which we have different degrees of familiarity or on those we have talked about previously. It would therefore appear that the use of task-internal readiness may help to transfer skills acquired from pedagogical tasks into daily L2 uses.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Task-readiness conditions (both internal and external) have received considerable attention in the task-based language teaching literature. As Ellis (2019) indicates, pedagogically these conditions are important because they can be easily implemented in a normal classroom context. As such, this entry will not belabor the obvious by suggesting pedagogical interventions, such as “letting L2 learners repeat a task several times for better fluency,” but rather discuss issues related to equipping learners with task-readiness.

The first issue concerns the objectives of adopting task-readiness conditions in the classroom. As discussed in the beginning, the limited attention capacity of L2 learners justifies the use of task-readiness. Providing L2 speakers with planning
opportunities, be they implicit (task-internal) or explicit (task-external), offers them preparedness for task performance, hence improving one or more areas of their CAF. Bui (2014), for instance, suggests that strategic planning reduces the need for online conceptualization during a task, and, at the same time, helps learners formulate more complex ideas. Therefore, it results in higher fluency and complexity. In comparison, topic familiarity serves as implicit planning both before and during the task performance. Hence, it can influence both the conceptualization and the formulation stages, which helps with greater fluency and accuracy. It appears that the general findings from the literature are that task-readiness conditions can facilitate learners to overcome the limitations of their working memory and achieve more balanced CAF performance. It follows that teachers should create conditions based on the needs of the students, taking into consideration their proficiency levels (e.g., less task-readiness conditions for the more advanced learners), prior knowledge, attention span (e.g., boredom and fatigue in planning time longer than needed, or in the frequency of rehearsal and repetition), and motivation.

The second consideration in implementing task-readiness pertains to task sequencing in curriculum. The task-readiness framework proposed in Figure 1 is worth noting when teachers decide the order of different tasks in lesson planning. Bui and Huang (2018) recommended an example of task sequencing based on the task-readiness framework: (1) familiar topic + planning time in a task, (2) unfamiliar topic + planning time, (3) familiar topic + no planning time, to finally (4) unfamiliar topic + no planning time. It becomes apparent that the rationale lies largely in the sequence of assumed task difficulty and its demand on learners, with the first task involving both task-internal and task-external readiness and the last one with no task-readiness. Bui and Huang (2018) explained,

Pre-task planning in the first two phases encourages students to gain readiness for the actual task through overt preparations. Content [topic] familiarity, on the other hand, provides an opportunity, without explicit rehearsal or strategic planning, for learners to achieve more fluent speech from familiarity. Therefore, the latter two combinations of task conditions could be thought of as bridging classroom tasks and real-world communication. (pp. 110–11)

The last issue is related to test fairness. The importance of assessment cannot be overstressed in L2 teaching. Equally, if not more important, is test fairness, which has been broadly defined as the “equitable treatment of all test-takers during the testing process, absence of measurement bias, equitable access to the constructs being measured, and justifiable validity of test score interpretation for the intended purpose(s)” (Banerjee, 2016, p. 54). However, test fairness would be easily violated when task-readiness conditions, especially task-internal readiness conditions, are ignored in test designs. If task-external readiness such as controlling the same amount of planning time prior to a task among all test-takers is an obvious consideration for most teachers, task-internal readiness is more likely to be overlooked in setting exam questions and requirements. For a high-stakes public examination that involves a large number of students with varying backgrounds, the topic of a
Task Planning and Task-Readiness

task in a test, for example, needs to be equitable and accessible to all students. Otherwise, while the task-external conditions seem to be fair across the board, the implicit task-internal readiness is still at play and at stake.

This list of concerns is not meant to be exhaustive but includes some important considerations in the use of task-readiness in L2 teaching classrooms. As Bui and Skehan (2018) argued, language teachers face the challenges of identifying aspects of performance that warrant attention, and then selecting from a range of task-readiness conditions which would be most effective for realizing the pre-set goals. Given the research on task-readiness conducted to date, L2 teachers would be able to make pedagogical decisions with some degree of confidence.

SEE ALSO: Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency; Task-Based Language Assessment; Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT); Tasks Versus Exercises

References


Suggested Readings