



Task type and linguistic performance in school-based assessment situation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining how learner L2 oral performance may vary across two different task types in the current school-based assessment initiative being implemented across secondary schools in Hong Kong. The study is innovative in that the tasks in this study involve speaking in a high-stakes language assessment context but they also build on a regular reading and viewing programme integrated into the school curriculum. An in-depth analysis of learner oral linguistic performance on two different task types, i.e., group interaction and individual presentation, from 30 ESL secondary school students, was conducted using a wide range of linguistic measures of accuracy, fluency and complexity derived from previous L2 speaking studies. The analysis shows generally systematic variation in performance dimensions across the two task types, suggesting a trend in the direction of less accuracy, lower fluency and less complex language being associated with the group discussion task. In addition, differences on rater assessments also appeared in the same direction across the two tasks as those differences on the linguistic measures. The results of this study appear to offer little support to the existing categorization of interactive tasks producing greater L2 complexity and accuracy than non-interactive tasks. Implications of the results for both test task development and classroom task design are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Studying task characteristics and the effect they have on language learning and language performance has become a burgeoning area of research within second language acquisition (SLA), pedagogy, and assessment. Previous studies have examined the effects of one or another aspect of second language (L2) task demands, such as the nature and extent of participation on tasks (e.g., Duff, 1993; Van Lier & Matsu, 2000), the availability of planning time and task output (Wigglesworth, 1997), the effect of task design and performance conditions on language performance (e.g., Tavakoli, 2009; Tavakoli & Foster, 2008), and task difficulty (e.g., Elder, Iwashita, & McNamara, 2002; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Bonk, 2002). L2 acquisition and pedagogy researchers are interested in task-based learner performance because learner language output during task performance can inform us about the impact of tasks on emerging or partially internalized target language rules (Samuda, 2001), and because tasks are seen as important vehicles for fostering or steering L2 learning and L2 development. In L2 assessment, although the notion of task in task-based language performance assessment is of relatively recent lineage, deriving much of its impetus from research in SLA and pedagogy (Bachman, 2002), it has been recognized that understanding the effects of assessment tasks on test performance and how test-takers interact with these tasks is “the most pressing issue facing language performance assessment” (p. 471). More explicitly, Fulcher and Marquez-Reiter (2003) suggest that learner

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Table 1Definitions of fluency, complexity, and accuracy (based on [Housen & Kuiken, 2009](#); [Pallotti, 2009](#)).

Aspect	Definition
Fluency	The capacity to produce speech at normal rate and without interruption or as the production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation.
Complexity	The size, elaborateness, richness, and diversity of the learner's linguistic L2 system.
Accuracy	The degree of deviancy from a particular norm.

task-based oral language performance, at least to some extent, reflects test-takers' language ability plus some construct-irrelevant variance triggered by the impact of task characteristics (see also [Tavakoli, 2009](#)). Fulcher's argument is thus that task variability may well constitute a source of variance in the test-takers' oral linguistic performance. In other words, there is likely to be variation in test-taker performance by task characteristics and that this variation may influence the type of discourse and interaction elicited, which in turn probably impacts upon the final assessment of a candidate. Consequently, research identifying the catalysing features of tasks that impact on a learner's language processing should provide empirically sound principles for both classroom materials design and test task development, and thus have practical value ([Bygate, 1999](#); [Tavakoli & Foster, 2008](#)).

Prominently, in many SLA and L2 pedagogy contexts, variable performance by task and task characteristics or conditions has been the object of a rich research programme adopting a cognitive approach that focuses on the interplay of various aspects of task demandingness and language performance, as displayed by its fluency, accuracy, complexity. Theoretical models proposed by [Skehan \(1998, 2001, 2009\)](#) and [Robinson \(2001, 2005, 2007\)](#) represent good examples of such efforts. Drawing on [Levitt's \(1989\)](#) model of speech production process, [Skehan \(2001, 2009\)](#) argues that performing in an imperfectly learned L2 imposes a large burden on the learner's attention as attending to one area may drain attention from other areas, due to the inherent limited attentional and reasoning resources that humans can invest in solving a task. In contrast to Skehan's limited-attention model, Robinson's Triadic Componential Framework (2001, 2007; [Robinson, Cadierno, & Shirai, 2009](#)) specifies that language learners can access multiple attentional pools that do not compete, and depletion of attention in one pool has no effect on the amount remaining in another. This suggests that language learners can prioritize, for example, both accuracy and complexity. Robinson argues that the more demanding a task is in terms of its content, the more complex and accurate its linguistic performance will be. Again, this is somewhat different from [Skehan's \(2001, 2009\)](#) proposal that more complex tasks direct learners' attention to content and divert attention away from form, generate more complex speech at the expense of accuracy and fluency.

One of the ways in which learner linguistic performance has been typically examined by task-based researchers adopting a cognitive approach is to analyse the transcripts of the real performance data for evidence of particular linguistic characteristics or features. These researchers, in particular, tend to explain and evaluate learner language with measures of accuracy, fluency and complexity which are seen as constituting a learner's language proficiency. According to [Robinson, Cadierno, and Shirai \(2009\)](#), one advantage of using measures of accuracy, fluency and complexity is that they enable comparison of findings for the effects of task demands on learner language production across a wide variety of task conditions, although operational definitions have varied considerably, making comparisons across studies difficult in some instances ([Ellis, 2009](#)). For the purpose of this study, drawing on [Pallotti \(2009\)](#) and [Housen and Kuiken \(2009\)](#), accuracy, fluency, and complexity are defined as follows (see [Table 1](#)):

Importantly, [Skehan \(2009\)](#) suggests that more needs to be said about the precise ways in which the performance areas (i.e., accuracy, complexity, and fluency) enter into competition, and what influences there are which mediate this competition. [Robinson et al. \(2009\)](#) also highlight that further research into differences in the language learners produce in response to complex L2 task demands is warranted for both theoretical and practical reasons. Clearly more empirical research needs to be undertaken before we are able to conclude which of the above theoretical models on task-based L2 performance is the most convincing. This article attempts to address the question of how task type impacts on oral linguistic performance, as displayed by its fluency, accuracy, complexity. It will briefly review the research literature on task type and task-based L2 performance. The current research study in which the effects of task type on L2 performance were examined will then be reported and the implications the findings of the study have for both test task development and classroom task design will be discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining tasks

In spite of a global interest in task-based pedagogy and the growing body of research work on task characteristics and L2 performance, the notion of task remains a somewhat fuzzy one, although various attempts have been made to define it ([Richards, 2006](#)). [Richards \(2006, p. 32\)](#) outlines the main characteristics of a task in the pedagogic context:

- It is something learners do and carry out using their existing language resources.
- It has an outcome that is not simply linked to learning language, though language acquisition may occur as the learner carries out the task.

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