



# Exploring the potential of second/foreign language writing for language learning: The effects of task factors and learner variables

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## Abstract

This investigation aimed at examining the potential of second/foreign language (L2/FL) writing for language learning through the manipulation of task complexity and learner-related variables, including L2 proficiency levels and performance levels on task. It focused on task complexity in essay writing and measures of syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy, and fluency (CAF). Analysis was based on the data from two separate studies the author conducted on this topic with undergraduate FL learners of Spanish in an American university at two distinct levels of language proficiency: advanced and intermediate. Findings indicated that task complexity in L2/FL writing as determined by familiarity of topic, genre, and/or task type, and reasoning demands seemed to have an impact on writing as a possible context for language learning, namely on CAF measures, in two ways: First, within given levels of language proficiency, results showed a tendency towards a trade-off effect among measures of linguistic production in writing affected by task complexity. Second, findings also suggest that the relationship between task complexity in L2/FL writing and the effect on attentional resources and CAF measures may be associated with the language proficiency level (Norris & Ortega, 2009) *in conjunction with* the level of expertise in writing of the learner. These findings shed further light on the connection between L2/FL writing and task-based language teaching (TBLT) (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014). Limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research are stated.

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## Introduction

The research reported here intends to contribute further understanding to the interplay between second/foreign language (L2/FL) writing and task-based language teaching (TBLT) through the lens of current issues in L2 writing theory and research. As Byrnes and Manchón (2014) indicated, theoretical tenets and empirical evidence in TBLT has tended “to be dominated by a focus on oral production” (Carless, 2012, p. 348) thus placing writing in a weaker, almost neglected, position in the TBLT framework and as an extension in the L2/FL writing-second language acquisition (SLA) interfaces (Ortega, 2012). To help expand the literature base in this area, this investigation explores the constructs of *task* and *task complexity* in the domain of writing and their connection with the language-learning

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potential of writing through the written output produced by FL learners of Spanish at the college level in the United States. The rationale for this exploration lies on the role of writing as a possible source for language learning and development (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014; Manchón, 2011; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2011; Ortega, 2012; Williams, 2012), and on the effect of tasks on language production (Kormos, 2011; Kuiken & Vedder, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012; Ong & Zhang, 2013; Ruiz-Funes, 2013, 2014). Thus, this study looks closely at the contributions made by pushed output in writing in SLA and the manipulation of task complexity in linguistic production in order to help further build the knowledge base on “. . . what it is about writing itself that enables it to function as a language learning context and tool, so as to begin to theorize and research the nature of L2 writing through a repositioned task construct” (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014, p. 5).

Following Byrnes and Manchón’s (2014) orientation, this investigation views writing as a complex, meaning-making, cognitive phenomenon in which multiple factors are at play including the learner, the instructor, the task, the availability of resources, to mention a few. The interaction among these factors has been explored to some extent and is helping us comprehend how L2/FL writing comes to be (Manchón, 2011; Manchón, 2014; Ortega, 2012). Two factors that seem to play an intricate role in the potential of writing for language learning and development are task characteristics, particularly task complexity (Kormos, 2011) and the *proficiency level* of the learners (Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; Manchón, 2014; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007b; Ortega, 2012). The effect of task complexity is crucial for understanding how students balance their attention to meet the demands of written tasks in terms of both their cognitive dimension (Kormos, 2011) and the interaction between L2/FL writing and language performance and development. In regards to L2 proficiency levels, drawing from Leki et al.’s (2008) findings, Ortega (2012) remarks that for the development of L2 writing, L2 proficiency is a needed yet “not sufficient condition . . . [and] that after a certain threshold, L2 proficiency becomes less predictive of L2 writing expertise” (p. 412). Moreover, she states that high language proficiency levels allow learners to pay attention to higher-level cognitive operations during composing. Along this line, Manchón and Roca de Larios’s (2007b) empirical findings emphasized the “proficiency dependency of many aspects of writing behavior” (p. 579). However, little is still known about the interfaces between L2 language proficiency and attention to form in writing induced by task complexity. Research on this interplay is needed to shed further light onto “. . . whether the individual engagement with complex writing tasks can lead to advancing language competence, what factors may mediate such learning, and what learning outcomes may result” (Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2011, p. 183).

The investigation reported here takes into account the effect of task complexity on written linguistic output as well as the role of learner-related variables in written task performance, including L2 proficiency levels and performance levels on task. Specifically, it focuses on the data and results from two separate yet related studies I conducted on this topic with two groups of university learners of Spanish as a foreign language at two distinct levels of language proficiency based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012a, 2012b): Study one (S1) with learners at the advanced level (Ruiz-Funes, 2014); study two (S2) with a group at the intermediate level (Ruiz-Funes, 2013). Both studies also include levels of performance on task, which refers to the quality of the essays the students wrote based on the assessment done by two raters using a set of rubrics. Level of performance on task in this investigation is considered as an indicator of the learners’ overall level of expertise in writing (see Methodology section).

Both studies followed the same experimental design in terms of types of analysis conducted and linguistic measures computed (see Fig. 1). For each study, the participating learners were assigned two tasks appropriate for their respective language proficiency yet of different levels of cognitive complexity in relation to familiarity of topic, genre, and/or task type, and reasoning demands. The resulting written products were analyzed for syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy, and fluency (CAF).

The tasks were individual essay writing tasks common in most FL programs at the university level in the United States. As such, they were academic writing tasks within the advanced-level range in S1, and the intermediate level in S2 according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines Writing, 2012 (ACTFL, 2012b). These writing tasks were genre-based and emphasized context, audience, purpose, and culturally and socially determined rhetorical and discourse patterns. This notion of task aligns with and expands on the conceptualization of task used in the TBLT literature (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014). Thus a task is defined as a work plan that involves some kind of input and instructions for the outcome (Ellis, 2009), is meaningful, has a goal to achieve, an outcome to be evaluated, is of real-world value (Skehan, 1998b), and leads to the development of both linguistic abilities (Widdowson, 1998) and cultural content knowledge (Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010). The notion of complexity refers to task characteristics that are manipulated to affect the cognitive demands in attention, memory, reasoning or other mental processing placed on

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