



Book Review

Researching L2 Task Performance and Pedagogy: In honor of Peter Skehan, by Zhisheng Wen & Mohammad Javad Ahmadian (Eds.), John Benjamins, 2019, XXIII + 328 pp., 36.00€ (Paperback), ISBN 978-90-272-0336-6

This book is a festschrift dedicated to Peter Skehan, a renowned scholar and researcher, to honor his academic achievements as well as his contributions to task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the broad area of applied linguistics. The book, with a foreword by Michael Long and an epilogue by Brian MacWhinney, is composed of thirteen chapters, including one introduction and overview chapter and twelve main chapters. The introduction and overview chapter, written by the two editors, summarizes Skehan's contributions in research, research supervision, teaching, and community service. Contributed by Skehan's associates, colleagues and students, the twelve main chapters, in coherence with Skehan's thematic lines of research within TBLT, are organized in three parts, and will be reviewed following their order in the book.

Part I (Chapters 1-4) mainly addresses the important constructs and the emerging perspectives in TBLT research. Rod Ellis in Chapter 1 first extends his notion of planning to Skehan's construct of preparedness. He then distinguishes different types of planning (e.g., online, strategic and guided planning), introduces other forms of preparedness (e.g., pre-task grammar teaching), and reviewed the empirical studies that examined the effects of different types of planning and preparedness on task performance as measured by language complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF). Chapter 2, authored by Parvaneh Tavakoli, examines the relationship between automaticity and fluency, on the basis of which the author discusses the measurement of fluency and argues that fluency is a multidimensional and complex construct, and therefore, individual and socio-cultural factors should be incorporated in researching fluency in task performance.

Coherent with Chapter 2, Zoltan Dornyei in Chapter 3 expands the individual factor of task motivation to task engagement, which is a unified construct of individual motivation and its manifestation in task participation. In light of the theory of directed motivational currents (i.e., goal-oriented automatized actions), the author identifies the characteristics of task engagement. In Chapter 4, Qiong Wang and Shaofeng Li investigated the underlying construct of task motivation and its relationship with L2 motivation. Task motivation was measured by in-depth interviews and a questionnaire on Chinese EFL learners, while L2 motivation by a questionnaire based on Dornyei's L2 Self System. The results revealed that task motivation and L2 motivation were two distinct constructs, suggesting that task motivation should be regarded as an independent construct.

Part II (Chapters 5-8) focuses on task complexity and language performance. Chapters 5 to 7 draw on Skehan's (1998) Limited Attentional Capacity Model. Based on Japanese EFL learners' performances and perceptions of four picture-based oral narration tasks, Shoko Sasayama and John Norris in Chapter 5 discovered the factors attributing to task complexity, identified distinct types of cognitive complexity and explored how students' perception of complexity affected their task performances. In Chapter 6, Marije Michel and associates report a study that investigated the effect of task type (decision-making, route description vs. picture description), task demands (less vs. more complex) and speaker status (L1 vs. L2) on linguistic complexity and accuracy, as well as the correlations between various measures of linguistic

complexity and accuracy. The study revealed that the impact of task demands on linguistic complexity and accuracy varied according to task type and speaker status. Jiaxin Xing and Shaoqian Luo in Chapter 7 studied the effects of reasoning demands/task complexity on Chinese EFL learners' oral performance and cognitive processes. By analyzing the learners' production in two picture retelling tasks of different complexity and their self-report of the thought processes in doing the tasks, the researchers noted that task complexity did not have a significant effect on the complexity, accuracy, lexis, and fluency (CALF) of learners' oral performance. However, a slight effect of task complexity on such cognitive processes as comprehension, formulation and conceptualization was obtained. The results were then discussed in relation to Skehan (2009), whose far-reaching influence was confirmed in Chapter 8. In this chapter, Liping Wang and Lawrence Zhang, through a bibliometric analysis of the studies on task difficulty in the past 40 years, found that Skehan (2009) was the most cited reference, because his discussions on CALF and the cognitive processes in L2 task performance have laid the foundation for further studies in this area.

Part III (Chapters 9-12) addresses task pedagogy and language development in different task conditions. In Chapter 9, Raquel D'Ely and associates returned to the constructs of strategic planning and repetition as reviewed in Chapter 1, and related the two constructs with EFL learners' performance of a video-based narrative task as measured by CALF under four pre-task conditions, demonstrating an advantage of combining strategic planning and repetition in speech training. Unlike Chapter 9 that focuses on output-based tasks, the study reported by Rosemary Erlam in Chapter 10 explored the effectiveness of input-based tasks for the comprehension and production of target language, suggesting the benefits of a primary focus on meaning and form-meaning connections. In Chapter 11, Gavin Bui studied the correlations between the CALF variables as mediated by topic familiarity and proficiency levels, and detected a reduced trade-off effect; that is, learners with higher proficiency tended to produce speeches on unfamiliar topics with a higher parallel level of complexity, accuracy, lexis and fluency. Meanwhile, the researcher found linguistic complexity was a multifaceted construct that included syntactic complexity and lexical complexity as two distinct dimensions. Chapter 12, by Craig Lambert, presents a case study on task-induced L2 development. Through a microgenetic analysis of a task sequence, the researcher showed a destabilization and variability process of L2 use in performing tasks with different referential demands.

Finally, in the epilogue Brian MacWhinney reviewed Skehan's CALF framework and the Competition Model, and suggested the overlapping and interaction between the two models both theoretically and methodologically.

As is showcased in the chapters, the book covers theoretical constructs, empirical studies and task pedagogy, and sheds light on new venues of conducting TBLT research and practice, for instance, a new perspective on task motivation, the micro-developmental approach and the multiple measurements of complexity. As such, the significance of the volume has gone far beyond being a festschrift.

In addition, the book is reader-friendly. The introduction and overview chapter provides readers with a quick access to the content of the book, and each chapter starts with an easy-to-read abstract and concludes with a concise summary. For beginning researchers, however, it would be helpful to read Skehan's works (e.g., Skehan, 1998, 2009) to get familiar with his theoretical and conceptual framework before coming to this book.

All in all, the book will definitely interest those who want to have a quick grasp of the theoretical and practical developments in applied linguistics, the pivotal topics in TBLT research and the seminal work done by Skehan and other prominent scholars in this area. Foreign language teachers and researchers will find this book offering valuable instructional inspirations and research possibilities in terms of TBLT pedagogy and scholarship.

References

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(Received May 18, 2020; Reviewed August 11, 2020; Accepted September 10, 2020)