



Language Teaching Research Quarterly

2023, Vol. 34, 19–34



Task Design Features and Pragmatics Learning: A Systematic Review of Recent Research

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Received 02 April 2023

Accepted 14 July 2023

Abstract

The learning effects of task-based interaction is an emerging topic in the field of instructed pragmatics for ESL learners. Specifically, researchers are exploring the impact of different task features on pragmatics learning. This article reports a review of the extant research. First, the review aimed to identify specific task design and implementation characteristics that appeared to enhance learners' use of pragmatic features during task performance. Inter alia, the review indicated greater benefits from tasks which learners completed collaboratively versus individually and tasks which presented learners with relatively complex versus relatively simple cognitive demands. Secondly, the review aimed to assess evidence of learning across this body of research. The review could not establish whether the enhanced pragmatic language use observed during task performance equated with long-term learning as very few studies included delayed post-tests, an obvious lacuna in the body of research to date.

Keywords: *Task Design, Pragmatics, Pragmatics Learning, Systematic Review*

Introduction

The use of tasks, such as role plays and simulations, to develop learners' pragmatic competence is common in second language classrooms (L2) around the world. A task as an instructional activity that engages learners in using language to achieve a communicative goal, such as solving a problem or reaching a decision (Ellis, 2003). Tasks can be used for researching and teaching L2 pragmatics (Taguchi & Kim, 2019).

In L2 classrooms, tasks are often used to create meaningful contexts for learners to practise a targeted pragmatic feature, such as a speech act, communicatively following meta-pragmatic instruction (Kim, 2022). But, to what extent do pragmatics-focused tasks lead to learning and

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<https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2023.34.02>

what kind of task design and implementation features appear to be the most effective for learning? Tasks can have various design and implementation features (Cobb, 2010). Information is needed on which specific task design and implementation features are most conducive to learning. This paper responds to calls for research to develop understanding of the learning effects of task-based instruction in L2 pragmatics (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2019; 2022; Taguchi & Kim, 2019).

The term *task* has been used relatively inconsistently in L2 pragmatics research, often without being defined and sometimes without fulfilling the defining characteristics of tasks set out in the language teaching literature (Kim, 2022; Kim & Taguchi, 2015; also see Boers & Faez, 2023 for a similar discussion of the problematic use of the term *task* in several instructed second language acquisition studies). For example, the term may be used wrongly to describe practice activities where the primary focus is on accuracy rather than communication, or metalinguistic activities where learners discuss a pragmatic feature rather than use the feature to achieve a communicative outcome.

Nearly all task-based L2 pragmatics literature to date is in the form of primary studies. Reviews of research into tasks in L2 pragmatics are scant. Gonzalez-Lloret (2019) examined task features, such as modality (e.g., oral versus written tasks), design (e.g., individual versus collaborative) and complexity (e.g., with versus without reasoning demands) and a further study (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2022) examined the use of technology in teaching pragmatics, such as telecollaboration and virtual games. However, not all of the so-called tasks included in these two reviews meet task criteria. For example, virtual games where learners interact with non-player characters by choosing from a list of given expressions would not fulfil the commonly accepted task criteria that learners draw on their own linguistic and interactional resources. Kim (2022) reviewed task-based teaching materials in the L2 pragmatics literature. Kim's (2022) aim was to evaluate the task-like nature of the materials rather than identify task features that appeared to aid pragmatics learning, which is a focus of the present review.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature highlights the importance of research that aims to identify which task design and implementation features are most conducive to learning (Ellis et al., 2019; Lambert et al., 2023). The present paper extends this aim to the field of L2 pragmatics. The paper presents a systematic review of task-based studies in L2 pragmatics. The review addressed three questions:

RQ1: What task design and implementation characteristics have been examined in L2 pragmatics research?

RQ2: How do the above task design and implementation characteristics affect L2 pragmatic performance?

RQ3: How do the above task design and implementation characteristics contribute to L2 pragmatic development?

Methods

Identifying Primary Studies

We first conducted a literature search to locate all primary studies related to the use of tasks in L2 pragmatics (published up to August 2022). We searched for journals, theses, conference proceedings and book chapters through the databases of ERIC ProQuest, Scopus, WoS and Google Scholar. To locate relevant studies, we used a combination of different keywords, such

as “task-based” plus “second language pragmatics”, “interlanguage pragmatics” or “pragmatic competence”. We also searched review articles and handbooks for relevant studies. The database search uncovered 58 primary studies. We identified 31 more studies from state-of-the-art articles and handbooks, many of which overlapped with those identified by the database search. We then read each reference for further screening using four selection criteria adapted from previous studies (e.g., Plonsky & Kim, 2016; Taguchi, 2015):

1. The study must include sufficient information on the tasks used.
2. The tasks meet all four defining criteria discussed in the literature (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019):
 - the primary focus is on meaning (e.g., metapragmatic activities such as politeness ratings are not counted as tasks)
 - there is some sort of a communication gap (e.g., role plays where learners can see each other’s role cards are not counted as tasks)
 - learners are allowed to use their own language and/ or other interactional resources (e.g., scripted role-plays and digital games involving multiple choice responses rather than free language use are not counted as tasks)
 - there is a communicative outcome not simply display of language (e.g., free flow conversations are not counted as tasks)
3. The study must include task design and implementation features (e.g., cognitive and interactional demands of the task) as an independent variable.
4. The study must include an analysis of learner production during tasks or analysis of learning outcomes resulting from teaching using tasks. In the case of studies focusing on learning outcomes, the study must include sufficient data that showed the effect of the tasks (e.g., statistical results, analysis of interactional features).

Studies in the Review

From the literature search, we identified thirteen studies that focused on either task-based performance, task-based learning outcomes, or both. Following Plonsky & Kim (2016), studies on task-based learner performance analysed learner language and interaction during task performance, examining features such as types and number of pragmatic strategies and discourse moves produced, appropriateness of responses, as well as interactional features that contribute to L2 development such as language-related and pragmatics-related episodes. Meanwhile, task-based learning outcome studies investigated the impact of task implementation on learning, often measured through a post-test. If a study on task-based learning outcomes also aimed to analyse learner interaction, it was classified as a study with dual focus. Table 1 presents an overview of these studies.

Overall, the studies primarily focused on examining learners’ performance and/or learning of a discrete pragmatic feature, such as an individual speech act, or pragmlinguistic forms in task-based settings. The majority of the tasks investigated in these studies could be categorised as focused tasks, designed to elicit specific pragmatic features, such as modal expressions, persuasive language, and speech acts, and enable learners to practise them in meaningful sociocultural contexts. Collaborative tasks, such as decision-making and collaborative writing, were the most common types of tasks examined (11 out of 13 studies), while individual tasks, such as email writing, were much less prevalent (4 out of 13 studies). Collaborative tasks were

often used to facilitate interaction, and most of them involved a convergent goal where participants worked towards a common outcome (10 out of 11 studies), rather than a divergent goal where participants had to resolve different or conflicting interests (1 out of 11 studies).

Table 1

Summary of the Studies Included in the Review

Focus	Studies	Pragmatic features	Task types used
Task-based performance	Gilabert & Barón (2013)	Requests & suggestions	Problem-solving & decision-making
	Gomez-Laich & Taguchi (2019)	Rhetorical moves & forms	Persuasive writing
	Kim & Taguchi (2016)	Requests	Drama script writing
	Neary-Sundquist (2013)	Pragmatic markers	Passing information, leaving a phone message, giving opinion, giving personal anecdotes
	Taguchi (2007) Tang (2020)	Requests & refusals Interactional sequences	Closed role plays Decision-making
Task-based learning outcome	Gilabert & Barón (2019)	Thanking, apologies, requests, advice	Email writing
	Levkina (2019)	Apologies	Email writing
	Tang (2019)	Modal verbs	Decision-making
	Reagan & Payant (2019)	Requests	Story telling
Dual focus	Alcón-Soler (2019)	Requests	Email writing
	Kim & Taguchi (2015)	Requests	Drama script writing
	Taguchi & Kim (2016)	Requests	Drama script writing

Classifying the Task Design and Implementation Features

Tasks can vary in regard to the nature of the gap (e.g., information gap versus opinion gap), the direction of the information flow (e.g., one-way versus two-way exchanges), the nature of the topic (e.g., familiar versus unfamiliar) and outcome (e.g., open versus closed), task structure, cognitive demands, participant roles, familiarity, working memory and so on (Ellis et al., 2019; Robinson, 2001, 2007, 2011).

Robinson (2001, 2007) summarised these variables under cognitive, interactive and learner factors. Cognitive factors are related to the complexity of the concepts that learners are required to express in task performance, for example, whether learners need to work with few or many elements and demands, single or multiple perspectives, structured and familiar or unstructured and unfamiliar information, go through single or multiple steps, make use of few or many reasoning processes, or engage in pre-task planning. Interactive factors are related to task conditions that affect opportunities for interaction, for example whether the task involves participants resolving a close or open outcome, whether the exchange between them is one-way or reciprocal, whether participants have a common or conflicting goal, and dimensions of their interpersonal relationship (e.g., familiarity, power, shared cultural knowledge). Finally, learner factors refer to cognitive abilities and affective states that are required for effective task performance such as working memory, aptitude, openness, self-efficacy and so on.

L2 pragmatics studies, motivated by task-based language teaching research discussed above, primarily focus on investigating the effects of task complexity and task condition on L2 pragmatic performance and development. In this line of research, task complexity refers to

cognitive characteristics of pragmatic tasks such as the amount of reasoning required in carrying out the target act, or task structure. Task conditions encompass interactional characteristics and pragmatic demands, for example, whether the pragmatic task is performed individually or collaboratively, whether task-based interaction is led by the learner or by the teacher, or interaction and participant variables such as power (P), distance (D) and imposition ranking (R). A few studies have also investigated the effects of task modality on task performance by comparing face-to-face (FTF) interactions to computer-mediated communication (CMC). Task modality can be related to both cognitive and interactive factors in Robinson's (2001, 2007) model discussed above. For example, CMC may provide participants with additional processing time during task performance, hence lessening their cognitive load, while spontaneous FTF interaction often places greater processing demands on participants (Tang, 2019). Furthermore, the conditions in which FTF and CMC tasks are implemented can differ significantly, potentially placing different interactional demands on participants (Tang, 2020). Section "Task design and implementation characteristics examined" below reports on the features of task complexity, condition, and modality examined in the L2 pragmatics research. These features are summarised in Table 2 below.

Findings

Task Design and Implementation Characteristics Examined

Task complexity

Task complexity, or the cognitive demand of tasks, was examined in seven out of thirteen studies, with reasoning demands being the most commonly studied feature (six out of seven studies). For example, Kim & Taguchi (2016) investigated task complexity through collaborative writing tasks involving TV drama scripts. The cognitively simpler version of the task provided learners with key contextual information such as the power dynamic between the characters, their social distance, and the level of imposition required for the speech act involved. This information helped learners to choose appropriate linguistic forms to convey the desired meaning within the given social context. On the other hand, the more complex version did not provide this information, hence requiring learners to reason it out before deciding on language use.

In Gilabert and Barón (2013), task complexity was examined in terms of the number of cognitive processes required for task performance. For example, in the fire chief task, learners were asked to collaboratively work out the best way to evacuate people from a building on fire. In the simpler version of the task, learners faced fewer challenges, such as having more resources available and facing less risk, while the complex version presented greater challenges, such as having fewer resources available and facing greater risk. As a result, the simple version required fewer cognitive processes than the complex version. Similarly, in the party task, learners were asked to act out a scenario in which three flatmates wanted to hold a party. In planning the party, the learners had to take into account not only their own preferences for food, music, number of guests and so on, but also those of a third flatmate who was not present in the conversation. In the simpler version of the task, the requirements of the learners were not too different from the requirements of their flatmate (e.g., the flatmate wanted only five friends to come as a maximum, while one of the learners wanted to bring three friends and the other two friends). In the more complex version, however, there was a conflict of interests

(e.g., one learner wanted to bring seven friends while the other wanted to bring four and the third flatmate only wanted five friends to come). The simpler version had a convergent goal while the more complex version had a divergent goal, hence requiring learners to use more reasoning in order to achieve a resolution of the problem.

Task complexity was also occasionally studied in terms of reasoning demands in combination with other task characteristics. For example, in Gilabert and Barón (2019), tasks involved writing responses to email messages at different levels of complexity. In the simplest version of the task, the input contained known expressions and few instructions, the learners were asked to reply to an email message sent by someone they were familiar with, and the message they received was quite straightforward. In the most complex version, however, the input contained less familiar language but multiple instructions for the learners to follow; the learners were asked to reply to a high status interlocutor whom they did not know well; the interlocutor's message was not straightforward and it was hard to figure out their intention; the learners were asked not only to transmit information but also make justification and persuade the interlocutor to help them.

Finally, task complexity was also evaluated based on the level of structure of the information learners are required to relay in task performance. In Neary-Sundquist (2013), for example, tasks included, in the order from highest to lowest level of information structure: leaving a short message for a colleague on their voicemail; passing on information to another person who has no knowledge of it (e.g., passing on information on a job vacancy to someone who the learner believed might apply for the job); sharing personal experience (e.g., how they learned English) in response to an open ended question; and giving opinions on a news item they just read.

It is worth noting that most of the studies discussed above only drew on theoretical concepts of task complexity in designing tasks and then relied on task performance and/ or learning outcomes as evidence of the varying levels of complexity. However, this approach may lead to circular reasoning, as some scholars have pointed out (Gilabert & Barón, 2013). Only two studies to date have used independent measures to empirically establish the levels of cognitive complexity of the tasks. For example, in Gilabert and Barón (2013), task complexity was established based on learners' ratings of task difficulty and estimated time on task. In Gilabert and Barón (2019), experts' judgements were used to verify task difficulty and cognitive loads.

Task condition

Task condition refers to the interactional and pragmatic demands of the task, and it was examined in four out of thirteen studies. In Kim and Taguchi (2016) and Taguchi (2017), these task demands were operationalised based on contextual variables as low- versus high-stake contexts of interaction. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, high-stake contexts were defined as situations involving unequal power, socially distant participants as well as a high degree of imposition involved in performing the act required by the task (e.g., asking a teacher to change the test time). Low-stake contexts, on the other hand, involved equal power, familiar participants and a low degree of imposition in producing the communicative act (e.g., asking a friend to lend you a pen). Because higher stake situations typically require the use of more sophisticated language to mitigate potential face threats, they can be more

challenging for learners. As a result, pragmatics researchers have used this distinction to design tasks with different levels of task demands.

Other studies examined task conditions based on interaction variables, such as whether the task was carried out individually or collaboratively, or whether it involved student-led or teacher-led interaction. In Taguchi & Kim (2016), for example, learners who completed drama script writing tasks individually were compared with those completing them in pairs. In Alcón-Soler (2019), the performance of learners who engaged in student-led task completion on a collaborative email writing task was compared with that of learners whose task completion was led by the teacher. Both studies aimed to examine the benefits of task-based collaboration on task performance.

Task modality

Task modality was examined in only three studies (e.g., Reagan & Payant, 2019; Tang, 2019; 2020). Reagan & Payant (2019) compared learners who completed an oral story task with those completing a written story task that was designed to elicit requests and suggestions. Each task involved learners taking turns to describe their pictures to identify the correct sequence of the pictures and create a story. Tang (2019, 2020) compared learners who performed decision-making tasks in face-to-face versus computer-mediated interactions. The tasks involved making a travel plan based on a budget and developing a seating plan for a dinner party based on the personality and relationships of the guests. Both tasks were designed to induce learners to use modality and interactional strategies (e.g., orienting to ask, suggesting actions and evaluating suggestions).

Table 2

Task Features under Inquiry

Study	Task types	Task features under inquiry
Gilabert & Barón (2013)	Problem-solving & decision making	+/- reasoning demands
Gomez-Laich & Taguchi (2019)	Persuasive writing	+/- reasoning demands
Kim & Taguchi (2016)	Drama script writing	+/- reasoning demands +/- PDR
Neary-Sundquist (2013)	Passing information, leaving a phone message, giving opinion, giving personal anecdotes	+/- structured information
Taguchi (2007)	Closed role plays	+/- PDR
Tang (2020)	Decision-making	face-to-face vs. CMC
Gilabert & Barón (2019)	Email writing	+/- reasoning demands +/- input frequency +/- familiarity with interlocutors +/- few elements +/- dual task
Levkina (2019)	Email writing	+/- reasoning demands
Reagan & Payant (2019)	Story-telling	oral vs. written
Alcón-Soler (2019)	Email writing	student-led vs. teacher-led
Kim & Taguchi (2015)	Drama script writing	+/- reasoning demands
Taguchi & Kim (2016)	Drama script writing	individual vs. collaborative
Tang (2019)	Decision-making	face-to-face vs. CMC

Effects of Task Design and Implementation Characteristics on L2 Pragmatic Performance

The effects of task complexity

Studies into the effects of task complexity on L2 pragmatic performance have been influenced by SLA theories such as Skehan's (1998) Limited Capacity Hypothesis and Robinson's (2001)'s Cognition Hypothesis. According to the Limited Capacity Hypothesis, our working memory and attention are limited. This means that focusing on one performance area, such as accurate language use, may negatively affect other areas like fluent language use. Moreover, increasing task complexity may require more attention, which can constrain language production during task performance. On the other hand, according to the Cognition Hypothesis proposed by Robinson (2001), learners have the ability to tap into multiple and non-competing attentional resources. Therefore, there is no trade-off between different performance areas as the Limited Capacity Hypothesis predicts. On the contrary, increasing cognitive complexity of the task can promote interaction and negotiation of meaning as well as noticing and incorporation of the noticed form. Increased cognitive demands can also push learners to produce more accurate and complex language forms to express the more complex concepts required by the task.

When studying the effects of task complexity on task performance in pragmatics, researchers often explore two distinct areas of inquiry. The first one is the effects of task demands on opportunities for pragmatics learning through interaction such as attention to pragmatics-related information (e.g., pragmalinguistic forms, politeness norms, and contextual variables), feedback, and negotiation around targeted pragmatic features. The second area is the effects of task demands on the production of targeted pragmatic features. Regarding the first area of inquiry, findings of the review indicate that generally different task demands can lead to different interaction patterns, and consequently, different learning opportunities. Specifically, tasks that require learners to engage in more reasoning processes tend to generate more negotiation and as a result, more extended interactional sequences and heightened attention to pragmatics, while the opposite is true for tasks with lower cognitive demands. For example, in Gilabert and Barón (2013), the complex version of the fire chief and party tasks required participants to consider more perspectives and solutions to resolve challenges, resulting in the use of more pragmatic moves than the simple version of the tasks. Gomez-Laich and Taguchi (2019) investigated learners co-constructing a persuasive essay in pairs. The simpler version of the task provided both content and linguistic support, while the complex version only offered content ideas, requiring learners to reorganise the ideas and decide on linguistic forms to use. The study found that the complex task triggered more trouble sources, leading to more negotiation around the target features and turn taking. Similarly, in Kim and Taguchi (2015, 2016), the lack of support in the complex task (i.e., lack of contextual information) led to greater discussion around social variables (i.e., power, distance, and imposition) and the target forms (e.g., request head acts and pre-sequences) in pragmatics-related episodes (PREs) than the simple task.

Overall, the studies suggest that increased task demands can create more learning opportunities by prompting learners to attend to pragmatics and engage in extended negotiation and turn-taking sequences. These findings support the Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001), which predicts that increasing the cognitive demands of the task can create more interaction-driven language learning opportunities, as discussed earlier. However, the relationship between

increased task complexity and the use of task-induced pragmatic features is less consistent. For example, Gilabert and Barón (2013) found that higher task demands did not necessarily lead to learners producing more varied pragmatic moves. Nevertheless, learners tended to use more conditional constructions in the complex version of the fire chief task, and more probability/possibility expressions in the complex version of the party task due to the need for more reasoning and negotiation. These findings suggest that while increasing task complexity alone may not be enough to push learners to attempt more diverse language forms, it can affect the use of task-specific features.

Neary-Sundquist (2013) investigated the relationship between task structure and the use of pragmatic markers to test Skehan's (1998) Limited Capacity Hypothesis, which posits that more structured tasks lead to more accurate and fluent language production. Pragmatic markers, which are a type of formulaic language that contributes to fluent speech production, were expected to be used more frequently in more structured tasks, which are generally associated with increased fluency. However, the study found no relationship between the level of task structure and the use of pragmatic markers, particularly in the case of high proficiency learners and native speakers. Task structure appeared to have more of an impact on the performance of low proficiency learners. Moreover, the study found that the use of pragmatic markers was more sensitive to the type of task content, such as relaying information versus sharing personal anecdotes, rather than the level of structured information that learners had to convey during task performance.

The effects of task condition

Studies on the impact of task conditions on interaction patterns and task-induced pragmatic features have drawn on several pragmatics and SLA theories. Kim and Taguchi (2016) and Taguchi (2007), for example, used Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to examine how pragmatic task demands, defined by PDR factors, influence task performance. Kim and Taguchi (2016) analysed learners' interaction when engaging in collaborative writing of TV drama scripts based on PDR-low and high request-eliciting scenarios. The task had two versions: a simpler one that provided learners with PRD information, and a more complex one that withheld this information. The study found that task conditions based on PDR factors had a weaker effect than task complexity. Specifically, regardless of the situation types, tasks requiring learners to reason about pertinent PDR tended to trigger greater attention to pragmatics than tasks without such reasoning demands.

On the other hand, Taguchi (2007) compared learners' performance on a closed role-play task that elicited requests and refusals in PRD-high versus PDR-low situations. The study showed that the low PDR task led to higher appropriateness, shorter planning time, and higher speech rate than the high PDR task. Moreover, low-proficiency learners faced more difficulties in processing and performing the PDR-high speech acts than their high-proficiency peers. Taguchi suggested that high PDR situations, which are high-stakes and require the use of more pragmatic moves and sophisticated pragmalinguistic forms, pose more challenges to learners, particularly those with lower proficiency levels.

Other studies examined task conditions using the theoretical concept of collaborative dialogue. For example, Taguchi and Kim (2016) compared the performance of two groups of learners on a TV drama script writing task: those who completed the task individually and those

who completed it collaboratively. The study revealed that the collaborative task generated and resolved more PREs than the individual task, leading to learners' more accurate use of pragmalinguistic forms during task performance. These findings attest to the cognitive benefits of collaborative dialogue for language learning as discussed in SLA research. In particular, the opportunities for attention to pragmatics and negotiation of pragmatic forms and their meaning afforded by the collaborative dialogue have contributed to enhancing learners' pragmatic awareness and ultimately led to better task performance.

Alcón-Soler (2019) investigated the effects of learner-led versus teacher-led interaction on students' attention to pragmatic features during an email writing task. The findings demonstrated that both types of participation structure resulted in PREs, but learner-led interaction offered more opportunities for learners to extensively discuss pragmatics. In learner-led discussion, students asked more questions, initiated and attempted to resolve more PREs. In contrast, in teacher-led discussion, the teacher was usually the one who initiated PREs, and the students merely responded to the teacher's questions and integrated the teacher's input into their task performance. Similar to the findings of Taguchi and Kim (2016), this study highlights the advantages of collaborative dialogue as a tool for metapragmatic discussion and pragmatics learning.

The effects of task modality

Because they require different levels of cognitive and interactional efforts, different task modalities may affect pragmatic performance differently. For example, in Tang (2019), learners' use of modals during collaborative decision-making tasks was examined in both FTF oral and CMC written chats. Participants were asked to plan a trip based on a budget and develop a seating plan for a party based on guests' personalities and relationships. Results showed that due to the slower typing pace in CMC, learners tended to rely more on abbreviated expressions and symbols than proper linguistic forms such as modal constructions for meaning negotiation. Conversely, the FTF group used more modal verbs to express their intended meaning. Tang concluded that CMC might limit learners' opportunity to learn how to use modals for pragmatic performance because of frequent use of abbreviations and symbols.

In a follow-up study by Tang (2020) using the same tasks, interactional strategies used in decision-making sequences by the CMC and FTF groups were analysed. The findings indicated that the two task modalities led to different interactional patterns. Since paralinguistic cues like eye gaze, tone, and gestures were not available in CMC, learners relied more on explicit linguistic forms to convey their meaning. They also used more overt task management strategies to explicitly manage task progress than the FTF group. Furthermore, frequent interruptions in online communication and learners' inability to respond quickly to their partner's statements led them to use direct disagreement more often to maintain control of the conversation and gain attention. Finally, similarly to Tang (2019), this study also found that CMC interactions contained more speech fragments while FTF interactions induced more elaborate and extended speeches.

Effects of Task Design and Implementation Characteristics on L2 Pragmatic Development

Studies investigating the effects of using tasks as a pedagogical intervention on learners' pragmatic development have used pretest/posttest designs to examine task-based pragmatic

learning outcomes. It is important to note that most of these studies adopted a task-supported approach where tasks were used as a means for practising pragmatic features following metapragmatic instruction (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2019; Kim & Taguchi, 2015; Reagan & Payant, 2019; Taguchi & Kim, 2016; Tang, 2019). This approach differs from a task-based approach where there is no explicit language instruction, and attention to form arises out of task performance (Ellis, 2017).

The effects of task complexity

As discussed earlier, the reviewed studies have shown that using tasks can facilitate interaction and attention to pragmatics. Increased task demands, for example, can result in longer negotiation and turn-taking sequences as well as more extensive discussions around task-induced pragmatic features. But how does increasing task complexity affect subsequent pragmatic learning, that is, pragmatic development?

Kim and Taguchi (2015) compared the performance and learning outcomes of two groups of learners: one completing the simpler version of the TV drama script writing task, and the other the more complex version. During the 90 minute treatment, the learners were first provided direct metapragmatic information on the target speech act (i.e., requests), and then collaboratively co-constructed the drama scripts based on a PDR-low and PDR-high scenario. Learning outcomes were measured using a pre- and post-test written discourse completion task (DCT). Results showed that the more complex task not only resulted in significantly more target-like request forms produced by learners but also led to long-term retention of pre-to-posttest gains. Furthermore, the complex task generated a greater number of PREs, indicating heightened attention to pragmatics. As pointed out by Kim and Taguchi, this increased attention to pragmatics might have contributed to the long-term effects on learning of the complex task. Notably, this study is the only one to date that has examined the impact of varying cognitive demands of tasks on subsequent learning of task-induced forms.

Another important question in task-based teaching of pragmatics is how tasks should be sequenced in order to maximise learning opportunities and outcomes. SLA scholars such as Long and Crookes (1993), Robinson (2007) argue that tasks should be sequenced by complexity so that they increasingly approximate real-world target tasks. To date, however, only two studies have investigated the effect of task sequencing on pragmatics learning, but they present conflicting results.

In Levkina (2019), task complexity was manipulated based on reasoning demands, and the tasks were presented in increasing order of complexity (e.g., from writing an email of apology for a minor offence, which required little reasoning, to writing an email of apology for a series of very serious mistakes made, which required more justifications and reasoning). The treatment was conducted over one and a half hours, where learners were first provided with sample emails containing the target speech acts (i.e., thanking, apologising and justifying), followed by identifying expressions for carrying them out, and receiving feedback from the teacher. After this, the learners completed four email writing tasks, individually and collaboratively, starting from the simplest and moving towards the most complex versions. The learning outcomes were measured by comparing pre and post-test email writing tasks. The results showed that exposing learners to simpler tasks before more complex ones had a positive impact on their pragmatic appropriateness and grammatical accuracy. However, it is important

to consider that the study lacked a control group and a delayed post-test, and therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Gillabert and Barón's (2019) study compared the learning outcomes of learners who completed tasks in a sequence from simple to complex with those performing tasks in a randomised sequence. The simplest task involved responding to a familiar interlocutor's email that contained simple language and clear intent, while the most complex task involved responding to an unfamiliar interlocutor's email that contained complex language and ambiguous intent. During the pre-task instruction, learners were presented with sample emails containing the target speech acts (e.g., requests, apologies, thanking, and giving advice) and guided to analyse the emails in terms of purpose, audience and tone, and identify speech act types used in the emails. Then, for task performance, learners completed three email writing tasks, in pairs and individually, either in the order of complexity or randomised sequence. Learning outcome was measured by a post-test task, which represented the highest level of complexity. Unlike Levkina (2019), Gillabert and Barón found no advantage for the simple to complex group, suggesting that task sequencing had no effect on learning outcomes. However, it should be noted that this study, like Levkina (2019), did not include a delayed post-test, so it is uncertain whether the results would differ over the long term.

The effects of task condition

Two studies investigated the impact of task participation on pragmatic knowledge development, specifically comparing individual versus collaborative and student-led versus teacher-led task performance following metapragmatic instruction. Both studies showed that learners' engagement in collaborative dialogue triggered metapragmatic discussion, which in turn increased the learners' pragmatic awareness and contributed to the development of their pragmatic competence. Taguchi and Kim (2016) found that the collaborative task resulted in greater immediate post-test performance improvement compared to the individual task, due to increased attention to pragmatics. However, this advantage was not sustained by the time of the delayed post-test, possibly due to the short instruction period of only two class sessions.

Similarly, Alcón-Soler (2019) demonstrated that learner-led interaction led to more extensive discussion of pragmatics than teacher-led interaction, resulting in higher immediate gains in pragmatic knowledge. However, like Taguchi and Kim (2016), the gains were only short-term for most targeted features, likely due to the brief treatment period of two class sessions.

The effects of task modality

The effects of task modality on pragmatics learning outcomes were examined in two studies. In Reagan and Payant's (2019) research, learners who completed an oral story task were compared to those who completed a written story task based on pictures. It was hypothesised that the written modality would produce stronger effects because learners could plan and edit their language more carefully. Prior to task performance, the learners engaged in a parallel task and received a brief metapragmatic explanation of the target speech act (i.e., requests). In the main task phase, learners completed a two-way information gap task in which they worked with a partner to sequence their images and create a story with dialogues containing the target speech act, either orally or in writing. Learners' progress was assessed using an oral and written

DCT in a pre-, intermediate, and delayed post-test. The study showed that both groups demonstrated improvement in their post-test performance and most of the gains were retained in the long term. However, contrary to the hypothesis, no significant difference was observed between the two groups. Qualitative analysis of the learner interactions during the task performance identified patterns of interaction, such as repetition of the target expressions (in the oral group) and LREs (in the written group), that were considered beneficial and might have contributed to these learning outcomes.

Tang (2019) compared learners' performance on two decision-making tasks in FTF interactions and CMC following metapragmatic instruction. Learners' pragmatic performance was assessed using a production and recognition task on three occasions: before the treatment, immediately after the treatment, and two weeks later. Tang found that the FTF tasks afforded more opportunities for gap noticing and negotiation of forms and hence led to better results in both short and long terms compared to the CMC tasks. Additionally, the FTF group frequently self-corrected their use of the targeted feature (i.e., modality), which did not occur in the CMC interaction. These findings suggest that the FTF modality provided learners with more opportunities to notice and restructure their knowledge of this target form.

Discussion

Despite the widespread use of tasks in researching and teaching pragmatics, the explicit discussion on the role of tasks in pragmatics literature has only recently emerged. The aim of this review was to identify task design and implementation characteristics that likely enhance learners' use of pragmatic features during task performance. Overall, the findings indicated that such characteristics do impact the quality of L2 pragmatic performance and interaction-driven learning opportunities. Specific characteristics that appeared most conducive to improved pragmatic performance were indicated. For example, collaborative tasks appeared to be more effective in promoting pragmatic language use compared to individual tasks. This is because collaborative tasks provide learners with opportunities to engage in metapragmatic discussions, leading to heightened pragmatic awareness. These findings highlight the cognitive benefits of collaborative dialogue in language learning discussed in SLA literature.

Additionally, the review findings appear to show that tasks with relatively complex cognitive demands are more beneficial to learning than those with simpler demands. By increasing the cognitive complexity of the task, learners are more likely to engage in interaction, negotiate meaning, notice relevant forms, and effectively incorporate them into their language use. Furthermore, increased cognitive demands can push learners to use language forms that are more precise and intricate in order to effectively express the complex concepts required by the task.

The review also aimed to evaluate evidence of learning. The review findings generally showed improvement in how learners used pragmatic features during task performance. However, whether such short-term learning benefits lead to long-term learning is uncertain due to inconsistent findings across the studies and the fact that only very few of the studies had included delayed post-tests. It is essential that future research studies include delayed post-tests of learning.

Given the findings of the review, it may be premature at this stage to provide recommendations for teachers regarding which task features contribute to long-term pragmatic

development. However, one observation when screening studies for this review is that many of the so-called tasks in pragmatics studies do not meet task criteria. This echoes Kim's (2022) findings that 60% of instructional materials in pragmatics are not task-like. For instance, group discussions may not be tasks if they lack a defined outcome, while scripted role plays may not qualify as tasks since learners are not allowed free language use. Therefore, teachers who aim to incorporate tasks to engage learners in meaning-based interaction may need to consider carefully how to identify pragmatic tasks and adapt non-task-like materials to suit their purposes. For example, a discussion question can be converted to a task if an observable outcome is specified for learners. Role plays should be unscripted to allow learners to draw on their own linguistic and interactional resources when performing roles.

When designing or adapting tasks, it is important for teachers to consider task features that may promote interaction and attention to pragmatics. As discussed above, collaborative pragmatic tasks, especially those involving high reasoning demands may be used to encourage learners to discuss and negotiate pragmatics. One way of increasing reasoning demands is to manipulate the amount of contextual information provided in task input (see examples in Kim & Taguchi, 2016). Complications, such as a conflict of interest, can also be added to the situation to prompt learners to pursue the task goal (see examples in Gilabert & Barón, 2013).

Finally, teachers should be mindful that task features can impact their difficulty levels. For example, the PDR factors and linguistic input presented in a task may make it more or less demanding to perform than another (Gilabert and Barón, 2019; Taguchi, 2007). Therefore, these features should be carefully considered based on the learners' proficiency level.

Conclusion

In the field of L2 pragmatics, there has been an increasing emphasis on employing task-based instruction as an approach to teaching pragmatics. However, our review reveals that there is still a limited amount of research available on the effects of this approach. Therefore, it is crucial to gather further evidence before confidently implementing this research into classroom practices. Replication studies are necessary to validate the existing evidence. Moreover, future research should explore a broader range of task design features under inquiry. For example, investigating the relative effectiveness of tasks with convergent versus divergent goals, tasks with close versus open outcomes, and task performance using the same proficiency grouping versus mixed proficiency grouping can provide valuable insights for pragmatics teaching and assessment. It is important to note that the current research primarily focuses on output-based tasks, neglecting input-based tasks such as recognising implied pragmatic meanings. This aspect warrants further investigation. Given the limited number of studies on task modality such as CMC versus FTF task-based interaction, this area should also be explored in future research.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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