

Effects of task complexity and task repetition in second language writing

What this research was about and why it is important

Second language (L2) learners are argued to have limited attentional capacities that prevent them from attending to both the meaning and language of their productions. To help L2 learners to balance their attention, scholars recommend repeating meaningful tasks. The argument is that task repetition helps learners to focus easily on language during the performance of tasks by relieving the burden on L2 learners' attentional capacity. Our study aimed to investigate how the repetition of argumentative writing tasks which also differed in their difficulty level (simple vs. complex) could help L2 learners produce essays with appropriate levels of writing complexity (in other words helped them to focus on form which was syntactic complexity in our study). This study showed that when learners repeated the complex writing tasks, they were better able to produce syntactically complex essays.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 96 L2 English learners at a high-intermediate level at a private university in the U.S.
- Learners performed two argumentative writing tasks: simple vs. complex.
- The complex task required the learners to engage in more reasoning about the task and complete more steps.
- The simple task needed less reasoning and included fewer elements.
- The tasks were completed from week 6 through week 10 of a 12-week writing program.
- Half of the students (n = 48) performed a simple and a complex task and then repeated the same tasks while the other half (n = 48) performed a complex and a simple task and then repeated them in the opposite order.
- All the collected essays were then analyzed for their syntactic complexity features.
- Syntactic complexity was measured as verb argument construction (VAC) which means linguistic structures including a main verb and all direct dependents of that verb.

What the researchers found

- Neither task complexity nor task repetition could push learners to use infrequent and thus complex verbs in their texts.
- Task complexity and task repetition were also unsuccessful in helping learners improve the constructions in their essays.
- But, when the combination of verbs and constructions was analyzed together, improvements were found in the essays produced by learners in all groups of the study.
- Only the learners who repeated complex writing tasks could learn the verb slots and infrequent verbs in their texts which showed their ability to produce syntactically complex essays.

Things to consider

- Simple vs. complex argumentative writing tasks encourage the use of different linguistic constructions.
- Our results stress the importance of providing more repetition opportunities with complex tasks to help learners focus their attention on the use of more target-like, diverse academic constructions.
- Test raters are encouraged to note that when they measure the low frequency of verb-constructions in texts, they are likely to come up with greater scores in the argumentative writing tasks.
- The combinatory use of verbs and constructions is important because results could differ from when they are measured separately.
- Our results are limited to the argumentative task and we encourage future studies to examine different genres such as description or narration that are commonly used in L2 writing classrooms.

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