

THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENT TASK TYPES ON L2
LEARNERS' INTAKE AND ACQUISITION OF TWO
GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES

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A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, 2005
DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED LANGUAGE STUDIES
AND LINGUISTICS

ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the role of tasks in second language acquisition. A substantial body of research now exists investigating the effects of different task types and their accompanying instructions on learning. Less is known about how tasks affect intake and the relationship between intake and acquisition.

This study investigated the effects of 1) implicit and explicit inductive instructions and 2) various task types on both intake and acquisition of two English grammatical structures. Fifty adult ESL learners enrolled in private language schools in New Zealand were pretested with the help of a timed and an untimed grammaticality judgement test for prior knowledge of negative adverbs and adverb placement and were randomly assigned to either a dictation, an individual reconstruction, or a collaborative reconstruction treatment. Treatments were accompanied by either implicit instructions (containing only practical instructions on how to perform the task) or explicit instructions (drawing participants' attention to the target structures and giving an example of them). Performance on the treatments was taken as a measure of intake, and talk-aloud reports were obtained to gauge participants' awareness during task completion. Gain scores from pretest to posttest and to delayed posttest were taken as an indication of learning effects.

The results show that the explicit instructions of the inductive type used in this study were unable to affect participants' intake and acquisition in comparison with the implicit instructions. Also, the three types of treatments did not have an effect on acquisition in many cases. Where there was an effect, the treatments differentially

affected intake and acquisition. Dictation led to high intake, but less acquisition, and the individual reconstruction treatment led to low intake, but greater acquisition. The collaborative reconstruction treatment was the most consistent of the three. The cognitively more demanding reconstruction treatments (i.e. those involving the retention of larger amounts of texts over longer periods of time) resulted in greater acquisition than the dictation treatment.

The main theoretical implications of the results are that the type of inductive and low-level explicit instructions used in this study were not sufficient to differentially affect intake and acquisition. Other, more explicit types of treatments may be necessary. The results also indicate that task types that are relatively easy, affect intake to a greater extent than more demanding tasks, but that more demanding tasks are more likely to affect acquisition.

On a methodological level, the concept of intake was found to be very difficult to operationalise, and it is suggested that additional measures be developed. Finally, the implications for teaching practice are that for relatively complex structures such as negative adverbs and adverb placement exposure to the input with minimal pedagogic intervention may not be sufficient. Teachers may also want to consider the effects of different task types on both intake and acquisition and both teachers and researchers need to be careful in drawing conclusions on the basis of immediate task performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It depends on what your definition of is is

(Bill Clinton)

Acknowledgements can be a bit boring. Mostly it's the usual suspects: family, friends, children, one's pet goldfish. I have yet to come across one that says 'Thanks to MYSELF for being such a great person and hard worker'. Probably that is because PhD theses are not created in isolation. And even if one did do all the work by yourself, somewhere, somehow, the thing needs to relate to someone to have any value at all. My list of acknowledgements could be as long as this thesis. I would have never had the qualifications to embark on a PhD study, nor been at this particular University, and certainly not been able to complete my thesis, without the help of many good souls. Thank you, dear reader, for giving this thesis its meaning.

First thanks are due to my parents for supporting me over the years in many, many ways. For this I am forever grateful. This thesis is in part your work. Sorry for drilling a hole in that door when I was five.

More than thanks are due to Youn Soo Kim – love of my life. Chop. Chop.

Thanks are due to Rod for more than just his supervision of my research (for which, at times when he sent me back to the drawing board for the seventh time, I felt like doing

anything but thanking him ;-). I owe him a debt of gratitude for first offering me a job at the University of Auckland and for encouraging me to apply for a Bright Futures Scholarship. I still remember his reaction when I first came into his office, elated, after having received notification that I had been awarded the Scholarship: 'I knew you would' he replied coolly.

Thanks are due to Marilyn for that first brainstorm session in her office when the application for the Scholarship was whipped up (carefully constructed), and for her ongoing support over the years. Also, for encouraging me to start writing books, a wonderful pastime indeed.

To Shawn for his proofreading and statistical advice, for the joint trips and conference visits and more importantly, for asking the waitress in a Singaporean Jazz Café for a Blowjob¹. Priceless.

Thanks to the University and especially ELSAC for keeping me off the streets (i.e. in a job), providing opportunities for research and professional development, facilitating conference attendance, and most importantly, supporting me during my PhD studies by letting me work reduced hours (and for still recognising me when I occasionally did come in to work) .

¹ For the uninitiated, this is the name of a cocktail. What were you thinking?

The Foundation for Science, Research and Technology for providing me with a Bright Futures scholarship, allowing me to concentrate on my vegetable garden and my goat-keeping... I mean my doctoral studies, of course.

To Languages International for allowing to do my research there, to the teachers for helping me coerce (=encourage) the students into completing their tests, and especially to Darren Conway, Nick Moore and Sally Logan for providing lots of practical help, and to the assistants in helping collect the data.

Finally, to Supa (RIP), to the S.P.A. Association, to the factory that makes M&M's, to Abu Tech for nearly making it to the end, and to Abu Majnun for taking over.

All hail to the Queen, Alexa de Paris.

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March 2005

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