

Book Reviews

Investigating Tasks in Formal Language Learning

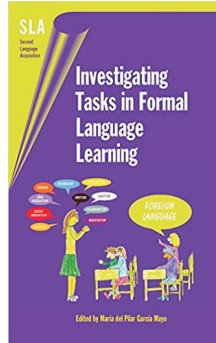
Clevedon Hall:
Multilingual Matters
(267 pages)

Marie del Pilar Garcia
Mayo (Ed.) (2007).

Series Editor: David
Singleton

ISBN: 1-85359-926-3 (Pbk)

Reviewed by: Geetha Durairajan



Tasks have been used in English classrooms in some parts of the world for more than twenty five years. But as teachers in schools and colleges in most SAARC countries we use them only once in a while, to get students to engage with texts in an authentic manner or write something that is genuine and closer to what they would do with such language in their lives. Most teachers, particularly in the Indian context, would state that they spend a lot of their time teaching prescribed content.

A relevant question for us teachers is raised by Robinson in the first chapter of this book. He asks whether it is possible for a whole syllabus to be covered only through tasks. His answer is a resounding yes, with a reference to an Indian project. “The Bangalore Project described by Prabhu, (1987) was the first large scale attempt to operationalise an answer to this question

following a syllabus based entirely on tasks”. In that project, however, according to him, the teacher's 'sense of plausibility' was the basis on which tasks were selected and used in the classroom. Grading and sequencing of tasks was based on the teachers' judgement about the challenge it would pose to students. The original set of tasks, that was the complete resource book of tasks, was designed with the existing syllabus (at that point it was the structural syllabus) in mind but one has to accept that the actual tasks that were used in any particular class was learner capability and teacher choice oriented.

From a research perspective, Robinson points out that this is not enough and that a rationale is needed for task categorization in a task-based syllabus/curriculum. The rest of the chapter provides the criteria for such task classification and discusses how these tasks can be used in class, along with the constraints in using them. This serves as an excellent framework for the remaining chapters.

Each of the other chapters focuses on different features of task categorization. Pedagogic tasks have been classified in the literature by focusing either on cognitive complexity, or nature of interactiveness or difficulty level of the task for the learner. The nature of planning time that students get to finish a task, the nature of collaboration between students and the support provided by more abled peers are some other features used for classification.

Each of these features have been researched and presented by a range of authors, across three continents, in the remaining chapters of the book. The editor must have strived hard to collect and present articles in such a comprehensive manner. The areas covered within task based research and the levels of proficiency are matched by the research methods employed which spans both paradigms, the empirical and the ethnographic. Some chapters are also devoted to tasks that can be used to enable only lexical growth, or examine the link between vocabulary and reading.

There are many takeaways in this book for researchers interested in the area. A budding researcher will get a very good sense of the various aspects related to task based teaching and the literature reviews in the individual articles will furnish a wide range of references. It is easily possible to get a very good sense of what can be researched from these articles. Researchers can easily decide to replicate a study in a different context, (as a small project) or adapt or modify an existing design for a larger piece of work. Most of the writers who have contributed to this volume have taken great pains to explicitly describe their research methods. Care has also been taken, in some articles, to provide the tasks, rubrics and checklists that have been used as research instruments in an appendix.

If I had to teach a doctoral course for students working in this area, I would use this book as a base for a course in Research Methodology. At the same time, while I am aware that this book was not written for the practicing teacher, I am forced to ask the

question: What will the practicing teacher get out of this book? Are there clear takeaways or do they have to be gleaned?

The answer is a tentative yes, for the takeaways are there, and can be identified, but only after careful reading, searching and collating. In the twenty first century, there is a huge demand for pedagogic classroom tasks. There is also immense pressure on teachers to take up projects and to grow and develop professionally. Such books, (edited volumes that present a range of research work done in a particular area) are a good beginning and should help teachers with their professional development. These books begin very well by setting the scene. They ought to end, however, with one afterword chapter, a pedagogic post script of useful ideas for practice and suggestions for small projects. If teachers would like to improve themselves, and that is what we teacher educators want them to do, it is unfair to expect them to read and understand such research based articles which are not written in the 'I have tried this, it works, you too try it out' format and then, also identify the tasks/experiments that are likely to be useful. Books such as these, with a wealth of information could also provide an appendix at the end of the book, with the tasks used in the articles, classified according to proficiency levels and language skills. A little scaffolding could also be provided in this appendix in the form of sample texts, instructions for using the tasks, and some guidance on possible modifications.

In his blurb on the book, Professor Michael Long says that the book has contributed to

'pedagogic task design". For this to become a reality, teachers also need to be factored in as readers.

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Second Language Learning in a Foreign Language Environment: A Pragma-Discoursal Account

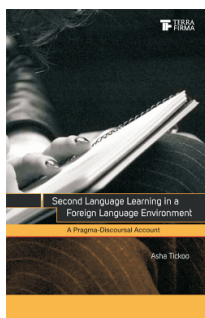
Bangalore: Terra Firma.
(264 pages).

Asha Tickoo (2016).

ISBN 978 81 920475 9 1

Reviewed by: Iqbal Judge

This erudite book opens with a deceptively simple introduction in which the author puts forth the prospect of treating prose compositions as “unique modes of packaging” which present differences in information structure/design that resultantly produce varied pragma-discoursal effects. In this compilation of nine well-researched papers published in international journals from 2001 onwards, Asha Tickoo, explores a gamut of composing skills such as indefinite reference framing, marking of temporal passage and the structure of enumeration, that often present a challenge to the EFL learner.



In keeping with the title, six out of the nine papers comprise studies conducted on L1 users of Cantonese and Vietnamese, ranging from Form 3 level (age 12) to University. The subject of the seventh paper however, is L1 users of Spanish, Mandarin and Swedish. The eighth and ninth papers are more general in scope, being discussions on the design principle and message “undercoding” strategies that come into play in the composition tasks of high-intermediate level EFL learners. The pedagogical implications that emerge from the findings of the research undertaken have been further discussed in each paper.

In the first paper, the author focuses on the use of indefinite reference framing in narrative prose pieces. The hypothesis for this is that while ESL learners can successfully frame direct reference, they are unable to effectively execute indirect reference based on shared knowledge and economy principles. This hypothesis is based on an analysis of prose essays of 60 Cantonese speaking freshmen studying humanities at a university in Hong Kong. Most of these students studied English as a foreign language from age 3 or 4 to age 12, following which they received almost all of their education in English. They were asked to summarize *The Dream*, a short story by Somerset Maugham. Tickoo studied the learners' attempts at first-time reference with regard to the principal protagonist of Maugham's story. The findings showed that in the presentation of new referents, 87 per cent were judged to be “unacceptable” by users of standard academic English. Tickoo suggests that