

# Effects of task repetition on learner motivation

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## Reference data:

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In an effort to move away from a presentation-practice-production (PPP) methodology, a task-based approach was introduced to a junior high oral communication course. However, learners reacted negatively to doing tasks before a language focus stage, feeling a lack of satisfaction with their task performance. This could be a significant demotivating factor. In response, the task-based sequence was modified to include repetition of the main task after the language focus stage. Recordings were made of learners doing the main and repeat tasks to see if their performance improved at the second attempt. Results indicated that learners were not only more successful in producing target language in the repeat task, but also in meeting task goals. Responses to a questionnaire showed that learners reacted favourably towards a task-based framework that included repetition. These findings suggest that task repetition could be used to successfully implement task-based learning into secondary school contexts.

発表—練習—生産 (PPP) 方法論から離れるための方策として、タスクを基にしたアプローチが中学校でのオーラルコミュニケーションコースに導入されてきた。しかしながら、タスクを使った言語運用に自信が持てないことから、学習者は言語に焦点をあてた段階なしにタスクを行うことに否定的な対応をすることが多い。この現象は、学習者のモチベーションを下げる主な原因となりうる。これに対応するために、タスク活動の時間配列を、言語に焦点をあてた段階の後でも主要タスクの反復を含むものとして変更した。レコーディングは学習者の言語運用が2回目では向上していることが確認できるよう、学習者のメインの活動と反復された活動の2つを含んでいる。結果では、学習者のターゲット言語における運用が2回目では向上しているのみならず、タスク目標に合致していることが読み取れる。また、アンケート結果では、学習者は反復を含むタスクに基づいた方法を好むことを示している。これらの結果より、タスク反復は、中学校におけるタスクに基づいた学習でうまく使用される手段として活用されるのではないかと考えられる。

**T**HE PRESENTATION-PRACTICE-PRODUCTION (PPP) methodology, in which learners first practise specific language forms and are then expected to produce them in some kind of communicative activity, is still widely used in ESL/EFL classes. However, PPP is not without its critics. Willis and Willis (2007, p. 17) have claimed that if learners are taught specific forms before doing a communicative activity, there are two possible outcomes. The first sees the learners merely reproducing these target forms, which may negatively affect fluency and divert attention away from the exchange of meaning. The second possibility has the learners simply ignoring the language forms introduced by the instructor, thus making the language practice stage irrelevant. To combat this, they have proposed that a task-based



approach, which allows learners a greater focus on meaning, should be used.

Task-based learning, in which learners engage in communicative tasks, has gained popularity over the last two decades. Skehan (1996) discussed how, unlike with PPP, findings in SLA (second language acquisition) research have supported the use of task-based instruction for language learning. In task-based learning, a fundamental factor that various descriptions of a task share is that the primary focus should be on meaning (Ellis, 2003, pp. 4-5). However, Skehan (1998, p. 125) has pointed out that too much emphasis on meaning may be to the detriment of accuracy. Moreover, even though he is a strong proponent of task-based learning, Willis (1996, p. 55) has warned that learners may not actually use the target language and only become skilled at task completion strategies. Consequently, somewhere within the task sequence, a focus on form is generally seen as a necessary constituent. This leads to a question of sequencing and where to position such a form focus stage. Nunan (2004, pp. 19-39) has outlined his position in his framework for task-based teaching. Significantly, he placed the form focus stage before a freer practice stage and the main task. As discussed above, Willis and Willis (2007, p. 17) have suggested that this will direct attention away from meaning, and they firmly believe the form focus stage should follow the main communicative task.

Based on these theories, I conducted an investigation that compared two groups of learners who were taught using different arrangements of task sequencing. Group A followed a typical PPP sequence with a form focus stage before the main communicative task. For Group B, who followed the type of task-based sequence advocated by Willis and Willis, this was reversed.

Analysis of the task interaction showed that Group A was more successful in terms of performance (manifested in higher fluency and accuracy scores) and the ability to meet task goals.

Moreover, when asked, learners from Group B intimated that they were not able to use “correct” English to complete the task, and left the classroom with a feeling of failure. Dornyei (2001) identified *learner satisfaction* and the *expectancy of success* as playing an important role in learner motivation. Therefore, it follows that if learners become accustomed to a feeling of dissatisfaction and failure when doing tasks, they will become unmotivated.

The results of this study suggested that a traditional PPP methodology may have been more appropriate for this context. However, a closer qualitative look at the interaction between the learners in Group A revealed that it was, in a sense, less satisfactory. It seemed scripted with learners not really responding to, and interacting with, their partner. They were simply reproducing language from the form focus stage, which resembled controlled practice rather than a task, and it was questionable whether there was much focus on meaning. Therefore, while task-based sequencing was difficult to justify, the qualitative data suggested the PPP structure was also lacking. Taking these findings into consideration, I decided to conduct a follow-up study that, in order to provide both an opportunity to initially focus on meaning, and also try to give learners a feeling of success, incorporated a task-repetition stage into the sequence. That is, students were asked to complete a repeat performance of the main task at the end of the sequence (see Figure 1).

Task repetition is the situation where learners have the opportunity to do a repeat performance of a task after a certain length of time has elapsed, either during the same lesson or in a later one. There have been several studies of task repetition (Bygate, 1996; Lynch & Maclean, 2001; Pinter, 2005) which have reported improvements in the repeat performance in terms of the output factors of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, as well as task success. These largely positive findings have been accompanied by a few words of caution. Lynch and Maclean have warned that repetition does not sound like an interesting pro-

pect for learners; therefore tasks must be carefully designed so that they are not tedious. Plough and Gass (1993) reported that learners reacted negatively when required to repeat a task, and that they might have been bored. Consequently, it is essential to consider learner responses to task repetition when considering its implementation. However, as long as task repetition is not accompanied by feelings of boredom, it could be a useful part of a framework for the introduction of task-based learning into the language classroom.

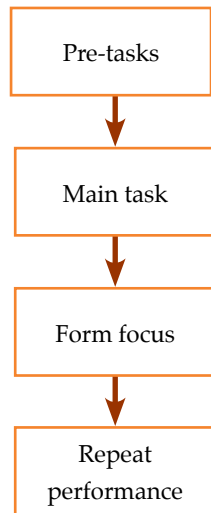


Figure 1. The task sequence under investigation in this paper

The context of current study was the second grade of a private junior high school in Japan. Two of the learners' six weekly English lessons had a focus on oral communication. For this paper,

the effects of an additional repeat performance stage, shown in Figure 1, were investigated. After looking at some useful language in the form focus stage, learners could then practice this language, and perhaps be more successful in using the target language and meeting the task goals in the repeat performance. This could lead to a greater sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, allowing them to expect success in future lessons, and in turn have a positive effect on motivation. By looking at how successful the learners were with the target language and in meeting the task goals, and whether learners were aware of any improvements, the effects of task repetition on motivation were investigated.

## Methods

### Research goals

The research questions were as follows:

1. Were learners more successful in the repeat performance?
2. Did learners feel that repeating a task was worthwhile and not boring?
3. Did learners feel a sense of achievement after the repeat performance?

To try to answer the first research question, recordings of learners doing tasks were collected and transcribed. A learner questionnaire was used to address questions two and three.

### Data collection

Four classes of 18 second-grade junior high school learners participated in the study. At the beginning of the investigation a simple explanation was given regarding the purpose of the study and the need for making recordings of task interaction. All four classes followed the same syllabus in which three les-

sons featuring different task types were completed in pairs. For task A, five dyads of usable data were collected and for tasks B and C, four dyads were collected.

### Data analysis

A largely qualitative approach was taken towards the analysis to look for patterns that might indicate that learners were more successful in producing the target language and meeting the task goals. Rather than a holistic measure of accuracy as used in some studies of repetition, a qualitative analysis looking specifically at the use of the target forms was conducted. The aim was to see whether learners were using items from the form focus stage, and if so, how successful they were. Each dyad's performance was then analysed to see how well they achieved the task goals both before and after the form focus stage. With the use of L1 being a particular problem in monolingual secondary school contexts, one of the goals was to have students use English to complete the tasks.

### The task sequence

A task sequencing model such as the one shown in Figure 1 was used to evaluate the three lessons. The first stage consisted of one or more pre-tasks to introduce the topic and provide mining opportunities for learners to identify potentially useful structures and vocabulary. The final pre-task was a listening task, which involved two native speakers modelling the same task as the learners were to do. The main task was followed by the form focus stage, where some useful structures or lexis were highlighted and practised, and the final stage in the task sequence was a repeat performance of the main task, which was done exactly the same way as the first time, with learners having the same partner. Learners were not allowed to use any notes from the form focus stage. For each dyad, audio recordings were

made of both the main task and the repeat performance. Details of the three tasks can be found in Appendix 1.

### Results

To address research question 1, the transcribed task interaction was analysed to investigate the use of target forms and task success. Five sets of useable data were collected for task A, and four sets for tasks B and C. In the examples shown, pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants. A guide to the transcription symbols can be found in Appendix 2.

### Task A

Task A was an opinion exchange task in which learners discussed their favourite fast food restaurants. Most of the learners had some experience with much of the target language. However, with the exception of giving opinions, which most learners seemed confident with, there were only limited attempts to use the target language in the main task. In the repeat performance, as might be expected after a form focus stage, there were several more attempts at using the target language, and fewer errors when doing so. This is illustrated by the use of the comparatives in [1] and [2] from the repeat performance, which were mostly avoided in the main task.

- [1] **Naoya:** er (.) I think McDonald is (.) more delicious than KFC.  
 [2] **Wataru:** er::: because (1.0) McDonald staff is (.) kind than (.) KFC

In comparing the two tasks, it is also evident that learners felt more confident using language to agree and disagree. Exam-

ple [3] shows how in the main task, although their opinions differed, Rina and Michi avoided using any language which expressed this. In the repeat performance, shown in [4], they seemed more confident to do so.

- [3] **Michi:** McDonalds (.) is the (2.0) best (4.0) fast food restaurant...I like (..) bacon (.) potato (.) pie  
**Rina:** oh really? (..) I like I::: (1.0) I like like Mos (.) Burger  
**Michi:** I went to (.) Mos Burger but (.) Mos Burger is (.) expensive.
- [4] **Michi:** ah::: (1.5) er McDo (.) McDonald hamburger is not delicious.  
**Rina:** hmm::: I disagree.  
**Michi:** why?  
**Rina:** I hmm (2.5) McDonalds is cheap taste (..) but (.) delicious.

There were four goals for successful task completion for Task A:

- Goal 1: Learners give their opinion about their favourite fast food restaurant.
- Goal 2: Learners give reasons for their opinion.
- Goal 3: Learners agree or disagree with their partner.
- Goal 4: Learners complete the goals above using only English.

Table 1 shows how successful each pair was in meeting these goals. If both learners were unsuccessful a score of zero was given. Scores of one and two represent success for one or both of the learners.

**Table 1. The success of each dyad in achieving task goals for Task A**

	Goal 1		Goal 2		Goal 3		Goal 4	
	Main task	Repeat	Main task	Repeat	Main task	Repeat	Main task	Repeat
Maki & Yuka	2	2	2	2	0	2	2	2
Naoya & Wataru	1	2	1	1	0	2	1	2
Shoko & Haruna	2	2	2	2	0	1	1	1
Kenji & Tomo	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
Michi & Rina	2	2	1	2	1	2	0	1

Table 1 also shows that the learners were generally more successful in the repeat performance. For goals one, two, and four the learners were quite successful in the main task, but in the repeat performance they still managed to improve, and almost all met the goals. Goal three proved more problematic for several of the learners in the main task but it seems that with the chance to repeat the task, and with support from the form focus stage, all but one of the 10 learners were successful in the repeat performance.

### **Task B**

This task was a describe and draw task with learners describing cartoon monsters. The form focus stage consisted mainly of two groups of vocabulary items – body parts and adjectives for describing them. There was evidence of every dyad in this task using the target vocabulary more in the repeat performance, and learners seemed to find items such as *claw*, *horn*, *tail*, and *sharp* important for giving more complex descriptions of their monsters.

Also introduced in the form focus stage were frames used for describing and asking questions to elicit further information. For all four dyads there was evidence of more accurate use of these target forms. This is demonstrated by [5] from the main task, and a similar utterance, made by the same learner, from the repeat performance in [6]. The question frame *Does it have...?* was highlighted in the form focus stage.

[5] **Yukiko:** is it have hands?

[6] **Yukiko:** does it have (.) ears?

The task goal was for learners to draw a monster following their partner's description. In order to measure the success of each dyad, the number of items that were successfully described were counted. For a description to be counted it was not necessary that it was grammatically correct, as long as it could be understood and was made without resorting to L1. Table 2 clearly shows that task repetition had a significant effect on the ability of learners to describe their pictures. In all four pairs, the number of items they could describe increased in the repeat performance. This was also reflected in the significantly greater mean for the repeat performance.

**Table 2. The success of each dyad in achieving task goals for Task B**

	Number of items described	
	Main task	Repeat
Mio & Miya	9	22
Nanami & Ayaka	13	25
Yukiko & Mariko	12	13
Yu & Ryota	9	19
Mean	13	20

### Task C

Task C was a timed conversation task in which learners discussed their plans for the upcoming holidays. The target language was the use of *going to* and *might*, in both declaratives and interrogatives, to discuss future plans. In the main task, although there were no instances of *might*, there was some limited use of *what + going to*, albeit with several errors. For all the dyads from this task, the repeat performance proved more fruitful with several examples of *going to* using different question words, and with a higher level of accuracy than in the main task.

Task success was assessed by looking at how many items of information about holiday plans emerged in the conversations. As Table 3 indicates, all four pairs were fairly successful in the main task, and they did not seem to find the task particularly challenging. In the repeat performance, three of the four dyads were able to exchange more information than in the main task, with only the pair of Ai and Kanako exchanging slightly less. Overall, although the learners had success in the main task, their repeat performance was an improvement.

**Table 3. The success of each dyad in achieving task goals for Task C**

	Number of items of information	
	Main Task	Repeat
Atsuko & Yume	5	9
Junko & Yuki	6	8
Ai & Kanako	8	7
Sumire & Tomomi	3	6
Mean	6	8

Overall, results from all three tasks show that when performing a task following the form focus stage, learners did not ignore the highlighted forms as Willis and Willis (2007, p. 17) suggested they might do in a PPP sequence. Rather, they tried to incorporate the target language into their repeat performance. Furthermore, learners were generally more successful in meeting the task goals after the repeat performance. This is an encouraging result for task repetition because if the learners recognize this improvement, they may gain the sense of achievement that can help maintain motivation.

### **Learner questionnaire**

In order to answer the second and third research questions, after learners completed the three tasks, all participants were asked to complete a four-part learner questionnaire (see Appendix 3). The questionnaire consisted of open and closed questions, with the responses to the latter based on a five-point Likert scale. To encourage honest responses, they were completed anonymously.

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 54 learners. Most of the comments were written in Japanese and, in these cases, translations by the author are shown in this discussion. In cases where the responses were in English, they are shown here as they were originally written.

From the questionnaire, it was found that 74% of respondents preferred a traditional PPP sequencing while 24% preferred an approach where the task is performed before a focus on form. Of the 74%, most indicated that doing the form focus first helped them or improved their performance in the speaking task that followed. For example, one learner commented, "When I understand the grammar first, it's easier to speak." Of the learners who indicated they preferred a task first, form focus second sequence, some of the more interesting responses

were that the learners preferred to notice grammar after doing the speaking task. For example, one learner noted, "If I get used to speaking first, grammar is easier to understand." Another interesting idea was raised by one learner who pointed out that they follow a PPP approach in their Japanese teachers' classes, so, "it's better to do the [opposite] in the native teacher's classes. I think learning by speaking is good."

There was a positive reaction to repeating a task with 56% responding that repetition is useful to some degree for their language learning. A further 39% gave a neutral response with only 5% answering negatively. These results indicate that the majority of learners considered the key aspect of the proposed framework – task repetition – helpful to them.

Regarding the issue of whether it was boring to repeat a task, 62% of learners did not have an opinion either way, while significant minorities indicated both positive (20%) and negative feelings (18%). This result is very positive towards task repetition. A group of learners, especially young teenagers, might not be expected to respond particularly enthusiastically towards repeating a task they have already completed. Even allowing for the 18% that responded negatively, these results do not support Plough and Gass's (1993) suggestion that task repetition might be boring for learners.

Finally, 61% of the respondents indicated that overall they preferred the task sequence with a repeat performance stage. While a significant minority of 33% still favoured a traditional PPP style sequence, very few (4%) would rather follow a task-based sequence without a repeat chance. Those learners that preferred the PPP sequencing gave similar reasons as earlier for their choice, with comments such as "If I remember grammar first I am able to speak." Of the 61% that chose the sequence with a repeat performance, some described their thoughts about the lesson stages, with one learner responding, "The things I didn't know the first time I can practise the second time." Others described what they

considered to be the wider benefits, with one learner commenting, “I can find mistakes and my English capacity is better than before,” and another stating, “If I do it again I can understand more deeply. It’s a really good way I think.”

## Conclusions

The results of this investigation suggest that not only were learners more successful in their repeat performance, but that they also responded positively to the proposed model of task-based learning. In all three tasks there was greater use of the target forms in the repeat performance, and this was used more accurately than in the main task. In terms of meeting the task goals, a significant improvement could be seen in the repeat task. If these improvements were noticed by the learners, they may have left the classroom with a sense of achievement, which might build their expectation of success in oral communication classes. These factors are vital elements of motivation in language learning. The responses to the questionnaire suggest that learners did indeed notice an improvement in their performance, responding favourably to task repetition. The learners indicated that they welcomed the chance to repeat a task, and ultimately preferred this model to a traditional PPP approach. These findings suggest that task repetition could be a useful tool for teachers wishing to introduce task-based learning into secondary school contexts. More broadly, it also demonstrates the importance of highlighting to learners what improvements they have made in their language performance in order to give a sense of accomplishment and fuel motivation.

## Bio data

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## Appendix 1

### Tasks used in investigation

#### Task A

- Topic: Fast food restaurants.
- Task type: Open, opinion exchange / discussion task.
- Task details: From a choice of three popular fast food chains, learners discussed their favourite and gave reasons for their choice.
- Form focus: Giving and justifying opinions; language to agree and disagree; comparatives and superlatives.

#### Task B

- Topic: Monsters.
- Task type: Closed, one-way information gap (describe and draw) task.
- Task details: Each learner described a picture of a monster to their partner who drew it.
- Form focus: Body parts vocabulary; useful adjectives; frames for describing, such as *It has a ...*, or *Its ... looks like a ...*; asking questions to elicit descriptions.

#### Task C

- Topic: Winter holiday plans.
- Task type: Open, free conversation task.
- Task details: Learners talked for 2 minutes about their forthcoming winter holiday plans.
- Form focus: Talking about the future using *going to* and *might*.

## Appendix 2

### Transcription key

Falling intonation:	.
Questioning intonation:	?
Exclamatory utterance:	!
Micropause:	(.)
Half-second pause:	(..)
Longer pause:	(2.0) (indicates the number of seconds)
Sound stretching:	:::
Ellipsis:	...

## Appendix 3

### Learner questionnaire

- 1a. Which sequence is better for you?
  - i) Form focus → Speaking task
  - ii) Speaking task → Form focus
- 1b. Why do you think this?
2. Do you think the repeat speaking task is useful for you?
  - i) Very useful
  - ii) Quite useful
  - iii) It's okay
  - iv) Not very useful
  - v) Not useful at all

3. Do you think it is boring to do the task again?

- i) Very boring
- ii) Quite boring
- iii) It's okay
- iv) It's quite interesting
- v) It's very interesting

4a. Overall, which way do you like best for studying English in the native teacher classes?

- i) Form focus → Speaking task
- ii) Speaking task → Form focus
- iii) Speaking task → Form focus → Repeat speaking task

4b. Why do you think this?