The Effects of Task Complexity on Written Production in L2 English

This study explores the relationship between causal reasoning demands of tasks and the performance dimensions of complexity, accuracy, and fluency in the written production of L2 English learners. The study was motivated by Robinson’s Cognition Hypothesis (2007) and Skehan’s Trade-Off Hypothesis (1998) as well as previous studies investigating the relationships between task complexity and second language production.

Task complexity was operationalized by manipulating one independent variable – causal reasoning demands - in a video-retelling task. The dependent variables were the participants’ output complexity, accuracy, and fluency. The participants’ responses were screened for functional adequacy. The results show that causal reasoning demands in the study were found to have an effect for syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy, depending on the proficiency of the participants, degree of task complexity, and the measures employed to operationalize complexity and accuracy. As task complexity increased from the threshold of no causal reasoning demands to some causal reasoning demands, syntactic complexity increased while accuracy decreased when assessed through certain measures. Other patterns emerged when examining different degrees of task complexity and when employing other measures. No effect for fluency was found for task complexity in this study. The findings have implications for TBLT research and pedagogical task sequencing.

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