Task repetition in ELT

Mohammad Javad Ahmadian

A ‘task’ can be defined as a meaning-focused pedagogic activity in which learners need to rely on their linguistic and non-linguistic resources in order to achieve a communicative outcome (Ellis 2009a). Since the early 1980s, the notion of task has been widely used in ELT circles, and previous Key Concept articles on task (Rubdy 1998) and task-based language teaching (Foster 1999) note that initial debates centred around: (a) providing a working definition for a task, (b) designing classificatory schemes for grading and sequencing tasks, and (c) examining the effects of different types of tasks on L2 development. In addition to these themes, researchers and practitioners have also been concerned with task design and implementation, implementation being considered in terms of pre- and post-task activities. One of the implementation variables that has attracted researchers’ interest is ‘task repetition’.

Task repetition involves asking language learners to repeat the same or slightly altered tasks at intervals of, for example, one or two weeks (Bygate and Samuda 2005: 43). In task repetition, the first performance of the task is regarded as preparation for (or a pre-task activity before) further performances (Ellis 2005). At first glance, this might seem reminiscent of behaviourist drills that are based on the assumption that language learning occurs via a process of habit formation through repetition. (For instance, Paulston and Bruder (1976: 12) identified different types of repetition drills and defined them as ‘plain repetition of the cue’.) However, in its new conceptualization, task repetition does not at all refer to ‘verbatim’ repetitions of the cues in the L2 classroom; rather it involves the repetition of familiar form and content (Bygate 2006). This new conceptualization is in part informed by the view that our attentional and processing capacity during communication activities is inherently restricted in some important ways, for instance, L2 learners cannot focus on both meaning and form simultaneously. By repeating the same or similar tasks, therefore, learners might be able to build upon what they have already done in order to ‘buy time’ not only to do mental work on what they are about to communicate but also to access and (re)formulate words and grammatical structures more efficiently, effectively, and accurately.

The effects of task repetition on L2 oral production have been examined in a number of studies. For example, Bygate (1996, 2001) documented the positive effects of task repetition on the fluency and accuracy of L2 output. Gass, Mackey, Fernandez, and Alvarez-Torres (1999) found similar patterns regarding the effects of task repetition with L2 learners of Spanish, while the
study by Lynch and Maclean (2000) revealed that recycling had positive effects on both accuracy and fluency in an English for Specific Purposes context. Similarly, Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) reported the positive effect of task repetition on the complexity and fluency of L2 speech and, more recently, Hawkes (2011) found that task repetition could be used as a pedagogic tool to direct L2 learners’ attention towards form.

Despite these positive findings, empirical evidence regarding the extension of the effects of task repetition to a new task is still relatively scarce. Arguably, if the benefits of repeating the same task do not transfer when a new task is performed, one may conclude that task repetition does not assist L2 acquisition and that the effects of task repetition are limited to immediate L2 performance (Ellis 2009b; Larsen-Freeman 2009). Thus, regarding the effects of task repetition on acquisition, there are, at least, two additional possibilities that need to be (re)examined: (a) in order for task repetition to have beneficial effects on acquisition, learners may need to receive feedback on their initial performance of the task (Sheppard 2006, cited in Ellis 2009b), and (b) as Bygate (2001) hypothesizes, it may be that massed repetition practice is required for acquisition to take place, i.e. repeating the same or a slightly altered task a large number of times over a short period of time. However, further rigorous empirical investigation is necessary before any solid claims about effects of (massed) task repetition on L2 acquisition can be confirmed.

The concept of task repetition has clear implications for pedagogy. Research into task repetition provides insights into how teachers might develop the pre-, while-, and post-task phases of lessons. Research also explores the ways in which tasks might be linked within lessons (and across sequences of lessons) to provide learners with opportunities to work repeatedly with similar linguistic content. Thus, instead of focusing upon the performance of tasks in isolation (which characterizes much research to date), the concept of task repetition moves the focus of debate clearly towards the pedagogic use of tasks within lessons.

References


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The author

Mohammad Javad Ahmadian holds a PhD in applied linguistics and is a Lecturer at the University of Isfahan, Iran. His recent and forthcoming articles on task-based language learning and teaching appear in Language Teaching Research, International Journal of Applied Linguistics, and TESOL Quarterly. He is primarily interested in cognitive approaches to second language acquisition.

Email: Ahmadian.edu@gmail.com