

# Negotiation of Meaning in Conversational and Information Gap Activities: A Comparative Discourse Analysis

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This article reports an investigation of how meaning is negotiated in two different types of interactions between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs): a relatively unstructured conversation and a two-way information-gap task. Three NS-NNS dyads were recorded as they engaged in these two activities, and the data were examined in detail. **Negotiation exchanges**, lexical and syntactic complexity, and various pragmatic issues were examined and compared qualitatively and quantitatively. The results suggest that **conversational interaction** has the potential to offer substantial learning opportunities at multiple levels of interaction even though it offered fewer instances of *repair negotiation* in the traditional sense than did the *information gap activity*.

In addition, the NNS participants stated in subsequent interviews that they found the **conversational activity to be more challenging than** the *information-gap activity* because they had to pay attention to the entire discourse in the former but mainly focused on lexical items in the latter. This study thus raises questions about claims that conversational interactions do not provide learners with as much challenging language practice as do more highly structured interactional activities, such as information gap tasks.

## “Information Gap” Tasks: Do They Facilitate Second Language Acquisition?

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This article reports the findings of the latest of a series of studies conducted to determine the effects of task type and participation pattern on language classroom interaction. The results of this study are compared to those of an earlier investigation (Pica & Doughty, 1985a) in regard to optional and required information exchange tasks across teacher-directed, small-group, and dyad interactional patterns. The evidence suggests that **a task with a requirement for information exchange is crucial** to the generation of conversational modification of classroom interaction.

**This finding is significant in light of current theory, which argues that conversational modification occurring during interaction is instrumental in second language acquisition.** Furthermore, the finding that *group and dyad interaction patterns produced more modification than did the teacher-fronted situation* suggests that participation pattern as well as task type have an effect on the conversational modification of interaction.

# Task-based research and language pedagogy

Rod Ellis

**Two very different theoretical** accounts of task-based language use and learning are critiqued and their relevance for language pedagogy discussed.

1.) **One** account, which will be referred to as the **psycholinguistic perspective**, draws on a computational model of second language (L2) acquisition (Lantolf, 1996). According to this perspective, tasks are viewed as devices that provide learners with the data they need for learning; the design of a task is seen as potentially determining the kind of language use and opportunities for learning that arise.

Three different psycholinguistic models are discussed: Long's Interaction Hypothesis, Skehan's 'cognitive approach' and Yule's framework of communicative efficiency.

2.) The **second** theoretical account of tasks is that provided by **socio-cultural theory**. This is premised on the claim that participants co-construct the 'activity' they engage in when performing a task, in accordance with their own socio-history and locally determined goals, and that, therefore, it is difficult to make reliable predictions regarding the kinds of language use and opportunities for learning that will arise. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes the dialogic processes (such as 'scaffolding') that arise in a task performance and how these shape language use and learning.

Both theoretical approaches afford insights that are of value to task-based language pedagogy.

The *psycholinguistic approach* provides information that is of importance for **planning** task-based teaching and learning.

The *socio-cultural approach* illuminates the kinds of **improvisation** that teachers and learners need to engage in during task-based activity to promote communicative efficiency and L2 acquisition.

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## Classroom L2 vocabulary acquisition: investigating the role of pedagogical tasks and form-focused instruction

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Framed under a cognitive approach to task-based L2 learning, this study used a pedagogical approach to investigate the effects of three vocabulary lessons (one traditional and two task-based) on acquisition of basic meanings, forms and morphological aspects of Spanish words.

Quantitative analysis performed on the data suggests that the type of **pedagogical approach** had **no impact** on immediate retrieval (after treatment) of targeted word forms, **but** it had an impact on long-term retrieval (one week) of targeted forms. In particular, **task-based lessons seemed to be more effective than** the *Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP)* lesson. The analysis also suggests that *a task-based lesson with an explicit focus-on-forms*

component **was more effective than** a *task-based lesson* that did **not** incorporate this component in promoting acquisition of word morphological aspects. The results also indicate that **the explicit focus on forms component may be more effective when placed at the end of the lesson, when meaning has been acquired.** Results are explained in terms of qualitative differences in amounts of focus on form and meaning, type of form-focused instruction provided, and opportunities for on-line targeted output retrieval. The findings of **this study provide evidence for** the value of a proactive (Doughty and Williams, 1998a) **form-focused approach to Task-Based L2 vocabulary learning, especially structure-based production tasks** (Ellis, 2003). Overall, they suggest an **important role of pedagogical tasks** in teaching L2 vocabulary.

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## **Task effectiveness and word learning in a second language: The involvement load hypothesis on trial**

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This study tests the claim that word learning and retention in a second language are contingent upon a task's involvement load (i.e. the amount of need, search, and evaluation it imposes), as proposed by *Laufer and Hulstijn (2001)*. Seventy-nine beginning learners of Spanish completed one of three vocabulary learning tasks that varied in the amount of involvement (i.e. mental effort) they induced: **reading comprehension** (*no effort*), reading comprehension **plus** target word suppliance (*moderate effort*), and **sentence writing** (*strong effort*). Passive and active knowledge of the target words was assessed immediately after treatment and two weeks later. In line with the predictions of the *Involvement Load Hypothesis*, **retention was highest in the sentence writing task**, lower in the reading plus fill-in task, and lowest in the reading comprehension task.

However, when **time on task was considered, the benefit** associated with more involving tasks **faded**. The results are discussed in light of **form-focused vocabulary instruction**.

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## **Sentence Reading and Writing for Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition**

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This study compares the relative effectiveness of reading and writing sentences **for the incidental acquisition of new vocabulary in a second language**. It also examines if recall varies according to the concreteness of target words. Participants were 203 French-speaking intermediate and advanced English as second language (ESL) learners, tested for incidental acquisition of 16 rare concrete, or abstract L2 words. Immediate and delayed cued recall was used to assess acquisition. Results from immediate recall show **superior recall for writing tasks over reading tasks**, and for concrete words over abstract words. **However**, delayed recall scores suggest that this **superiority disappears over time**.

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