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Language Learners' and Teachers' Perceptions of Task Repetition

This study examined how English language learners and teachers perceive and interpret task repetition (TR) and whether teachers' and learners' views about this pedagogic practice correspond to one another. In addition, the study explored learners' cognitive and affective engagement with task repetition. We asked eight experienced language teachers to use a structured picture description task in their classes and then to repeat it with a one-week interval. Immediately after the second occasion of task performance, all eight language teachers and 21 language learners who had performed the task participated in semi-structured interviews. The results of thematic analysis revealed that although students' and teachers' views about TR were similar in many respects, there were important aspects where teachers' and learners' perceptions and interpretations differed widely. Also, we found evidence demonstrating *that learners were cognitively and affectively engaged in TR.*

Introduction

Tasks have a primary focus on meaning, induce learners to draw on their linguistic and cognitive resources, and are outcome oriented (Samuda and Bygate 2008). These qualities have rendered tasks enormously resourceful instruments for not only teaching and assessing languages but also for researching into language learning processes. In addition, tasks could be performed and enacted in a variety of ways using a range of methodological options. Repetition is a task-based pedagogical procedure which has attracted researchers' attention during the past two decades (Bygate 2001; Ahmadian and Tavakoli 2011). Broadly, it is argued that repeating the same (or a slightly altered) task at intervals of, say, one or two weeks frees up learners' attentional resources and could help them channel more cognitive resources to different dimensions of L2 performance than they might otherwise do (Samuda and Bygate ibid).

However, tasks and task-based implementation variables (e.g. repetition) are open to interpretation on the part of second language (L2) learners; that is, the purposes that teachers or materials developers have in mind do not necessarily correspond to those that language learners strive towards. This is relevant to the distinction that Breen (1989) drew between "task-as-workplan" and "task-as-process". The former refers to teachers' (rather subjective) judgements, plans, and objectives for a given task/task-based implementation variable and the latter pertains to the way in which a task is actually performed by learners in the classroom. During this phase, Breen argued, learners are likely to revise and redraw the task plan and objectives with reference to 'their own "frames" and their own knowledge and experience of past workplans' (p. 190). This distinction is an important one in that it is sometimes assumed that a task workplan and objectives will be automatically and impeccably realized in the classroom. According to Breen (ibid.: 190-191), learners' '*reinterpretations*' of a given task may morph it in different ways: for example, in the case of task repetition, learners could 'superimpose' their own purposes and interpretations (i.e. repetition for repetition's sake without seeing the bigger picture) upon planned objectives and rubrics (i.e. teachers' assumption that through TR cognitive resources might be freed

up and thereby students' performance could improve). Similarly, although as it is widely acknowledged the onus is on teachers to design interesting, challenging, doable and engaging tasks for language learners, whether or not learners find a given task interesting and whether and how they *engage in* the second performance of the same task is an empirical question which has not yet been addressed (Philp and Duchesne 2016). In order to cover this lacuna, the study reported in this paper attempted to answer the following research questions:

1- How do learners and teachers perceive TR?
2- Do teachers' and` learners' interpretations, expectations and perceptions of TR correspond to one another?
3- Do language learners engage in task repetition cognitively and/or affectively?

Background
Task repetition
Much of the literature on TR is underpinned by processing perspectives on L2 learning and production. Based on this view, our attentional and processing resources are inherently limited and selective and therefore we cannot pay due attention to both language *form* and *meaning* simultaneously. In the light of this view of L2 performance and in a series of pioneering studies, Bygate (2001) postulated that when learners perform a task for the first time, owing to the meaning-focused and outcome-oriented nature of tasks, their focus is more likely to be on meaning (i.e. conveyance of the message and getting the job done) rather than on form. However, on subsequent occasions, learners will be able to draw on their experience and memory of their first encounter with the task and will not only produce language more smoothly and fluently but may also allocate their processing resources to grammatical and morphosyntactic features of language and thereby produce more accurate and complex language.

In most TR studies, Levelt's (1989) oft-cited speech production model has been drawn on as a psycholinguistic frame of reference for explaining and interpreting the results. According to Levelt (1989), speech production involves three overlapping stages: (1) conceptualization, during which the overall message which is to be communicated is conceived and, as a result, a conceptual non-linguistic message which Levelt labels *pre-verbal message* is produced; (2) formulation, in which the appropriate lexical and syntactic elements are selected and are mapped onto the preverbal message; and (3) articulation, during which the overt speech is produced. Conceptualization is a fully conscious and cognitively demanding process for both L1 and L2 speakers – we all think about what we want to say. But, whereas formulation and articulation stages are fairly automatic and effortless for L1 speakers (Levelt 1989), it requires tremendous amount of effort and attentional resources for L2 speakers to find the relevant lexical and syntactic elements to map onto their intended message and then to articulate it. Therefore, L2 speakers have to divide their limited attentional resources among the three stages of speech production. Since tasks are by definition meaning-centred, during their first encounter with a task learners tend to prioritize the conceptualization stage (i.e. determining what to say) over formulation and articulation. However, if learners do a task once, in the second encounter with the same task they will be able to somehow skip through conceptualization as they

already know what the task is all about and therefore will have ample attentional and processing resources to devote to formulation and articulation stages. This could result in more fluent, accurate, and complex language.

Research findings lend support to this explanation. Bygate (2001) found that repetition of the same task after 10 weeks enhanced complexity and fluency of L2 speech. Given the relatively long interval between the two task performance occasions, this was a very important and astounding finding. Nevertheless, he found no effects on accuracy which he attributed to the conservative nature of the particular measure that he had used to assess accuracy. Lynch and Maclean (2001) examined the impact of immediate task repetition on complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) in the context of English for Specific Purposes. They found that task repetition, with very short intervals (in the order of three minutes), positively affected accuracy and fluency of L2 oral production. In addition, the results of their study showed that participants did not find task repetition boring and disinteresting because they had not "perceived the task to be repetitious" (p. 159). In another study, [Author] found that repeating oral narrative tasks with one-week interval resulted in improvements in fluency and complexity of L2 oral production – a finding which is very similar to that of Bygate (2001). Finally, Garcia Mayo, Imaz and Azkarai (in press) investigated the effects of TR on CAF in child interaction and found that repetition positively affected fluency and accuracy (it should be noted that there is a need for further empirical research to demonstrate that TR for all groups of learners (young and adults) and in all contexts). In addition to this line of research focusing on the CAF triad, there is empirical evidence indicating that TR could direct L2 learners' attention towards systemic aspects of language. For example, using both qualitative and quantitative data, Fukuta (2016) showed that, at the second encounter with a task, learners tend to primarily focus on syntactic processing and less on conceptualizing their message.

Task Engagement
Task engagement is defined as 'a state of heightened attention and involvement' while doing a task (Philp and Duchesne 2016: 51). In essence, engagement is a multifaceted and complex construct which could be construed as entailing cognitive, affective and social/behavioural dimensions (Svalberg 2009). In this paper, however, we have decided to concentrate on cognitive and affective dimensions of engagement for two reasons. First, the task that learners were required to perform involved narrating the story of a series of pictures to an interlocutor rather than actually interacting and negotiating with a partner. Second, as Reschly and Christenson (2012) argue, cognitive and affective engagement mediate behavioural/social engagement and, therefore, engaging learners cognitively and affectively precedes any kind of behavioural engagement. Differentiating and defining different types of engagement is a difficult undertaking as cognitive, affective and social engagement are quite intertwined and interconnected; but, they could be characterised as follows:

- Behavioural/social engagement comprises "participation in academic, social, or extracurricular activities" (Reschly and Christenson 2012: 10-11). In other words, "being 'on-task' is synonymous with behavioural engagement" (Philp and Deschenes 2016: 55);

- Skinner, Kindermann, and Furrer (2009 cited in Philp and Deschenes 2016: 56) identify "enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment as key indicators of emotional engagement, and at the other end of the scale, anxiety, frustration, and boredom as indicators of negative emotional engagement";
- Cognitive engagement is "rooted in personal investment, self-regulation, and striving for mastery" (Reschly and Christenson 2012: 10-11).

Although the positive effects of TR on L2 performance reported above indirectly support the assumption that learners are, at least, cognitively engaged with TR, there is a dearth of qualitative research looking into this issue taking into account both cognitive and affective dimensions. Whilst researchers claim (based on empirical evidence) that TR is a worthwhile pedagogic practice, language teachers might argue (based on either intuition or experience) that learners get bored by repetition and as a result do not engage with the second occasion of task performance. This, however, needs to be explored systematically.

As it will be discussed in the results section, we have adapted Svalberg's (2009: 245-246) categorisation of different components of engagement for our deductive qualitative analysis as follows:

a. Cognitive engagement
- Cognitive alertness with regard to task performance
- Focused attention on producing accurate, complex, and fluent language as well as completing the task
b. Affective engagement
- Positive attitude towards task repetition and not getting bored
- Purposefulness (i.e. knowing the purpose of task repetition)
- Willingness to repeat a task and to interact with the language or with the interlocutors

This categorization will guide our analysis throughout this paper.

The study
Context and participants
This study was conducted in an Iranian private language centre (in Isfahan) where the language programme involves passing through 10 terms. Each term lasts for about 8 weeks and there are three 1.5 hours sessions per week. Although teachers have plenty of leeway in their approach to teaching, they tend to adopt a communicative approach but are obliged to use a combination of three main textbooks (Top Notch series, Summit series, and Speak Now series) depending on learners' level of proficiency. Eight language teachers participated in this study who ranged in age from 24 to 32 and held MA degrees in TEFL. They all had between 5-8 years of teaching experience in various language centres. Language learners' (n = 21; 10 males – 11 females) age range was between 20-24 and they had been learning English for 9-10 months. Their proficiency level was fairly homogeneous (intermediate to upper-intermediate) as they had all started off the programme at roughly the same time. All language learners were either BA/BS or MA/MS students in various fields of study and were highly motivated to learn English and ultimately pass either TOEFL

or IELTS examinations to pursue their academic aspirations abroad. Both language learners and teachers signed informed consent forms. For reasons of anonymity teachers are called T1-T2-T3, etc. and learners (students) are called S1, S2, S3, etc.

Procedure, data collection, and data analysis
Task repetition was operationally defined as repeating the same task with a one-week interval. We chose a picture description task (Appendix A) which had been piloted and used in another study that the first author had conducted back in 2014. The task had a clear timeline and organization and therefore could be considered as fairly structured and clear. Teachers agreed to include the task as part of their usual speaking practice (with a focus on fluency and accuracy) and were asked to pair up participants and then provide them with clear instructions for doing the task. We had told teachers that participants need to look at pictures and think about and plan the story for two minutes and then start narrating the story of the task to their neighbours. They were not allowed to take notes[i] and were not provided with any further scaffolding, but they could hold on to the picture and look at it while describing the story. There were no time restrictions for task performance and therefore participants could take as long as they wanted to describe the picture. Learners were not aware that they were going to repeat the same task and a week later the same procedure was repeated but with different interlocutors.

Immediately after completing the second task performance, participants (both teachers and learners) took part in one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted and audio-recorded by the researchers. Each interview took about 7-9 minutes during which the interviewer asked questions about whether learners knew what the purpose of TR was, how they perceived it, what aspects of L2 performance and/or learning they think repetition could affect (both negatively and positively). Teachers' semi-structured interviews revolved around their understanding and perception of repetition. They were also asked about their expectations with regard to students' attitudes towards repetition and about what aspects of language they believed repetition was more likely to impact. Ostensibly, in an interview like this, moving from specific to general would be much easier for language teachers (who might have previous experience of using TR) than for learners (who may have never contemplated the advantages and disadvantages of TR 'in general'). Therefore, whilst learners' comments, in all probability, pertain to this specific instance of repeating a task, teachers' responses might derive from both this particular occasion of TR plus their previous experience with and reflections on this pedagogic practice[ii].

Interviews were conducted in participants' L1 (Farsi) to make sure that they comfortably answer questions without any language-related hindrance. All interviews were then transcribed and translated into English for thematic analysis. Translations were checked for reliability by an independent translator. In the process of identifying themes, we used both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive approach is basically data-driven and is not guided by any preconceived and predetermined theme, code, or theory held by the analyst. Themes simply emerge as a result of reading, analysing, and diverse coding of the data. We used this approach to address our first research question as we were interested to explore our participants' understanding, feelings, perceptions of task repetition. A deductive approach, however, is guided by pre-determined concepts, constructs, and

themes and provides 'a more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 84). In order to answer the second research question, we used this latter approach because we were keen to find themes around cognitive and affective engagement.

Findings and discussion

Perceptions and views about TR
Our inductive analysis yielded patterns regarding:
- *overall usefulness of task repetition;*
- *the facilitative effects of TR on accuracy and fluency; and*
- *disparities and similarities between teachers' and learners' perceptions of TR*

All in all, both learners and teachers were of the opinion that TR constitutes a worthwhile pedagogic practice which could foster more efficient use of L2. For instance, T1 believed that "if learners do a task once they will have more <u>self-confidence</u> to do it a week after" and T3 noted that "TR could be a useful technique in that the first performance leaves some <u>traces in learners' memory</u> and therefore they may be able to do it more efficiently on the second occasion because they know more about the content". Likewise, learners were very positive about TR. S5 stated that "repetition ensures <u>consolidation</u> of what we already know" and S17 said that "although initially I did not know what the purpose of TR was, it helped me a lot in that I could state the sentences that I had produced last week in a more <u>fluent</u>, <u>organized</u>, and <u>accurate</u> fashion". S9 noted that "in the first performance, I struggled to figure out what I should say about pictures and how I should put ideas together, but this time <u>I had something in my mind</u> and could repeat the same content <u>with a better structure</u>". These comments, and others of this kind which were made by 18 out of 21 learner participants, are clearly in alignment with Levelt's speech production model and are in accord with Bygate's (2001) idea that on the first occasion of task performance much of learners attentional resources is allocated to the conceptualization stage (i.e. deciding what to say); but on the second occasion, by virtue of knowing what the story is all about, learners can attend, more carefully, to the formulation and articulation stages which in turn leads to more fluent and accurate production.

Fluency was the most recurrent concept in both learners' and teachers' responses. Learners made such comments as "I was <u>quicker</u> on the second occasion" (S2), "I could speak <u>faster</u>" (S9), "I did not have <u>too many pauses</u> on the second occasion" (S20). All learners and teachers strongly believed that TR enhances fluency but whilst 6 out of 8 teachers thought that the impact of TR is limited to fluency, 16 out of 21 learner participants argued that it could have positive effects on both fluency and accuracy. T1 stated that "I believe task repetition affects fluency but I think it pretty much depends on teachers' goal setting". Learner participants recounted their experience of using vocabulary items and grammatical structures more accurately on the second occasion of task performance. For instance, S6 said that "I am not sure if I used the word *assignment* correctly last week, but this time I am pretty confident that I used it in the right sentence and, overall, could use <u>more accurate</u> sentences". S8, claimed that she had produced more complex language on the second occasion (defining complexity as long sentences entailing difficult structure). Obviously, these comments about accuracy, fluency and complexity corroborate the results of previous empirical studies on task repetition (Bygate 2001;

Author; García Mayo, et al. in press) and are paramount in that they are based on task performance in 'authentic language classrooms' rather than laboratory settings.

One of the most interesting disparities that we detected between teachers' and learners' views pertained to the notion of *boredom* and *fatigue*. Whereas virtually all teachers (7 out of 8) believed that TR is boring and disinteresting to learners, 18 out of 21 of our learner participants maintained that TR is "not" boring and the other 3 participants did not turn down the idea of repetition altogether but suggested that doing 'slightly altered versions' of the same task could be interesting and beneficial. As part of a recent study, Lambert, Kormos, and Minn (2016) administer a questionnaire and came up with similar findings (i.e. students do not think repetition is boring). Therefore, it seems that teachers' and learners' views with regard to the benefits of TR (i.e. its effects on accuracy, fluency, complexity) and the levels of enjoyment/boredom associated with it do not always correspond. Another interesting finding was that whereas objectives of TR were obvious and straightforward to teachers from the very beginning, none of our learner participants originally knew what the purpose of TR was and some learners believed that it would be very productive to clearly explain the objectives of TR and to enumerate the benefits that may accrue from it. This would, as S8 suggests, "render repetition a goal-oriented practice in the classroom". All in all, except for these two latter areas (i.e. lucidity of the objectives and boredom), teachers' and learners' views generally corresponded to one another.

Engagement with TR
We found some evidence indicating that learners were engaged with TR both affectively/emotionally and cognitively. As it was suggested earlier, we sifted through the interviews and searched for responses and reactions to TR which could be mapped onto the descriptors of cognitive and affective engagement stated by Svalberg's (2009: 247) (see Table 1). As the evidence reported in Table 1 indicates, learners were not bored and were fairly eager to do the task again (despite what teachers and some teacher educators might assume) and they seemed to be attentive to the language they produce. Philp and Duchesne (2016) remind us that that if learners are bored and disinterested in a task they are basically disengaged with the task and therefore we cannot expect learning outcomes. Learner engagement with a task could be conceived of as "the glue, or mediator" (Raschley and Christenson 2012: 3) that links task, learner, interlocutors, and teacher. In addition, and more importantly, the second task performance has not been construed as a simple repetition practice by learners and it seems that they have been engaged with drawing cognitive comparisons between their first and second performance in terms of fluency and accuracy. This points to the fact that learners have been fully aware of their language use not only in their first encounter with the task but also in the second performance a week later.
Table 1 about here

Conclusion
Our findings showed that language learners found task repetition very useful for fluency and accuracy of L2 speech and that teachers' and learners' beliefs and opinions about TR do not necessary correspond (e.g. with regard to boredom). However, it should be noted that the results of this study do not provide evidence as to the effectiveness of TR. Our analyses also revealed that learners were engaged with the second occasion of task performance

both cognitively and affectively. The notion of task engagement has been somewhat neglected in SLA and ELT circles but, as Winne and Marx (1989: 225) assert, in order for instruction to be effective, teachers must make sure that students engage in cognitive activities. This, as Winne and Marx argue, happens to be one of the few prescriptions on which contemporary research on learning converges. According to Bygate (2015: xix), "task is not a mechanism which operates unfailingly on learners: on the contrary, it requires their interpretation, and their enquiring engagement to drive their active construals and constructive reasoning". Therefore, there is a need for further research into the notion of task engagement. There are also a number of implications which could be of use for language teachers. First and foremost, it is important that learners clearly know what the propose of TR is. At times, teachers may overestimate what learners know about their teaching practices and decisions in the classroom. A clear goal setting will enable learners to devote their attention to the area/aspect of language which is relevant to the objectives of the lesson. Second, it might be better, as both learners and teachers suggested, to repeat slightly altered tasks rather than exactly the same tasks. For example, in a slightly altered version of a narrative task, learners will be asked to recount the story of video sets or series of pictures which revolve around the same topic but take place in different contexts and therefore learners will be pushed to repeat more or less similar content in different contexts (e.g. in Tom and Jerry cartoon chasing and escaping is a central theme) (see Bygate 2001). This will ensure repetition of content but at the same time enhances creativity in use of language and will be more engaging (both cognitively and affectively) for learners.

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Appendix A: Interview questions (English Translation)
Questions for teachers:
1- What do you think the purpose of task repetition is?
2- Do you ever use/have you ever used task repetition in your teaching?
3- What do/did you expect to happen?
4- Do you think your expectations are usually fulfilled?
5- What do you think your students think and feel about task repetition?
6- What aspects of language do you think task repetition is more likely to affect?
7- What strength and weaknesses do you see in task repetition?

Questions for students:
1- Did you notice that you repeated a task from previous session today?
2- How do you feel about repeating a task?
3- Why do you think your teacher repeated the same task today?
4- How do you think repeating the same task affected your performance?

5- What aspects of your production do you think are improved/regressed as a result of repeating the same task today?
6- What strength and weaknesses do you see in task repetition?

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[i] The reason why learners were not allowed to take notes was to replicate previous TR studies and to make sure that learners' engagement has been with task repetition not with their note taking practice. However, as the anonymous reviewers of ELT Journal have rightly implied, task repetition could be very well complemented and consolidated by note taking activities.
[ii] We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of ELT Journal for bringing this interesting point to our attention.