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Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions of pedagogical tasks designed based on task complexity

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Abstract

With reference to the Triadic Componential Framework, this study investigates Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions of pedagogical tasks with different levels of cognitive complexity and examines the learner factors influencing task performance. A descriptive qualitative design was employed involving 30 undergraduate students from the English Department of the University of Lampung, Indonesia. Participants completed three writing tasks representing low, moderate, and high levels of task complexity, followed by a structured questionnaire and open-ended responses exploring their perceptions of task difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were examined through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that learners' affective responses did not consistently correspond to the predetermined levels of task complexity. Instead, learner-related factors, particularly motivation, self-confidence, and interest, played a substantial role in shaping task performance. These findings suggest that pedagogical task design should consider not only cognitive complexity but also learner factors to better support language learning in EFL contexts.

Keywords: task complexity, task difficulty, learner factors, TBLT, and Indonesian EFL learners.

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), one of approaches to language teaching, primarily focuses on meaning in contrast to traditional methods which pay more attention on forms (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). The main communicative activity of TBLT is a task which is defined as communicative language learning activities (Skehan, 2003). Task is believed to actively involve learners in teaching learning activities as it reflects the use of language as a means of communication in real life activities (Samuda and Bygate, 2008; Van den Branden, 2006; Van den Braden, Bygate, and Norris, 2009).

Robinson (2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2022) proposes a guide as a basis to design models of pedagogical tasks as key success of language-learning activities the so-called Triadic Componential Framework. The framework comprises three factors, i.e., i) cognitive factors, which are known as task complexity, ii) interactive factors, which refer to task condition, and iii)

learner factors, which are called as task difficulty. The resource-directing and resource-depleting/dispersing dimensions are cognitive elements (task complexity). The former consists of three aspects, i.e., Tenses (present and past tense), number of elements, and reasoning demands. The latter includes three aspects in terms of planning time, prior knowledge, and task modes (single or dual). Participation and participant variables are taken into consideration by task conditions (interactive factors). The participation refers to whether the task takes the forms of monologue or dialogue, convergent or divergent. The participant is concerned with gender. Task difficulty (learner factors) refers to affective variables such as, motivation, confidence, anxiety and ability variables, such as, aptitude, proficiency, and intelligence.

Robinson (2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2011) makes a distinction between task complexity (cognitive factors) and task difficulty (learner factors). A task's level of cognitive complexity can be imposed by manipulating the former beforehand, and the latter cannot be easily predicted from the beginning but rather after learners finish working on a task. According to Robinson, (2003b, p.31) degree of cognitive factors and learner factors (task difficulty) do not necessarily result in a fixed relationship to each other due to different affective and ability variables among learners. For example, a highly motivated learner, but with low ability, may make a great effort to expand "the resource pool currently available to meet the demands of the task", by contrast with a highly intelligent learner, but s(he) has lower motivation. This suggests that one learner may find the identical work challenging, while another learner may find it simple.

Thus, Robinson (2005, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2022) argues that the modulation process of task complexity should be the primary basis for the sequencing of educational tasks (cognitive factor) known as the Cognition Hypothesis since other factors, especially learner factors such as, difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation are difficult to predict from the beginning. According to Robinson, cognitive factors (directing and depletion of resources) can be manipulated in such a way to increase and decrease learners' psychological burden when completing tasks. The resource-directing dimension is a cognitive factor that has a specific role in affecting students to concentrate on the linguistic elements of accuracy, fluency, and complexity (CAF). On the other hand, the resource-depleting dimension has nothing to do with the linguistic aspects but rather having effect on increasing or reducing learners' psychological condition. The task could be less cognitively demanding if it is made cognitively simple, either along the resource-directing or resource-dispersing dimension. However, the activity will be more cognitively challenging if it is made cognitively hard for either the resource-directing or the resource-depleting dimension. This indicates that a simple task will be perceived easier by learners; therefore, they would be more confident and more relaxed to work on the simple task than to complete a complex one and vice versa.

However, Robinson (2001) is in agreement with the concept of the Cognitive Familiarity initiated by Skehan, (1998) that a task which is made cognitively more complex would be easier for learners to complete if they have background or prior knowledge of the topic. However, the theory is not specifically concerned with the level of familiarity. Skehan further points out that a learner will find it easy to complete a cognitively complex task if they have previously done similar tasks. This is in accordance with Bygate's argument (1999) that learners can perform a task more easily if they have repeatedly work on similar tasks. This suggests that prior knowledge and repetition make more cognitively complex tasks easier to complete.

Further, Robinson points out that the most prospective task to promote learning is when it is simultaneously made complex along with the aspects of the resource-directing and simple for those of the resource-dispersing dimensions. This means that there are three types of tasks which can be

simultaneously manipulated complex and simple to facilitate learners to achieve their language performance. The three types of tasks take the forms of i) describing many things (-few elements), ii) discussing past activities (there and then), or iii) making an argument for a given topic (reasoning demands), and they are provided with the topics with which learners are familiar and with planning time to prepare what they will discuss. However, no studies have been done to investigate the three types of tasks. For this reason the current study employed these three types of tasks as the topic of investigation.

The engagement of cognitive factors as the major factor to design models of pedagogical tasks has led to increasing numbers of studies to investigate the effect of tasks particularly designed on the basis of the manipulation of the cognitive factors on learners' language productions either in a spoken or written form (Allaw & McDonough, 2019; Astuti, Mahpul, & Kadaryanto, 2025; Kamilah, Rianawati, & Mahpul, 2025; Mahpul, 2014; Mahpul & Oliver, 2018; Optaria, Mahpul, & Sukirlan, 2025; Qiu, 2020;). Task complexity in relation to the Cognition Hypothesis should be the major factors to design pedagogical tasks as learner's language performance in terms of CAF indicates the level to which a student will find the task easy or challenging, but the language performance does not necessarily reflect learner factors, such as difficulty, stress, motivation, interest, and confidence. This suggests that research to explore learners' perceptions of task complexity regarding learner factors and the factors contributing to them needs to be undertaken so that a more holistic input of pedagogical tasks would be identified. Tavakoli (2009) point out that the investigation of learners' perceptions of task's complexity determined by cognitive characteristics is necessarily undertaken to inform learners' needs of designing pedagogical tasks.

Few studies to explore learners' perceptions of tasks sequenced on the basis of manipulating complexity have been undertaken (Awwad, 2019; Kim, 2009; Mahpul, 2014; Tavakoli, 2009). The investigation of learners' perceptions of tasks manipulated on the basis of cognitive factors predominantly found out the relationship between the degree of task complexity and learner factors, employing the closed-ended questions proposed by Robinson (2001a) with a nine-point rating scale regarding the level of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation. The findings supported the Cognition Hypothesis that there was a relationship between the degree of the manipulation of task complexity and learners' level of difficulty. The task regarded as cognitively more demanding was perceived being more difficult to complete than the simple one. However, no findings indicated information in depth other than the relationship between the manipulation of task complexity and learners' level of perceptions since the instrument took the form of closed-ended questions.

Unlike previous studies, Mahpul (2014) investigated 30 Indonesian EFL students' perceptions of simple and complex tasks to follow up the effect of the use of the tasks on CAF using open-ended questions instead of closed-ended questions, to explore more comprehensive data in depth. The questions adapted Robinson's model of closed-ended questions, but they were extended to ask the students reasons of their level of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, motivation, and learning opportunity shortly after the students finished completing the task. The findings showed that the factors such as, repetition of doing previous tasks and the inclusion of pictures in a task contribute to reduce psychological burden. This suggests that students' levels of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation in completing tasks are not due simply to the degrees of the manipulation of cognitive factors.

The study by Awwad (2019) investigated the relationship between the degrees of cognitive factors particularly comparing the simple and complex tasks, i.e. no reasoning and reasoning demands, and learners' and teachers' perceptions of task difficulty, and the factors of task

complexity contributing to difficulty in completing tasks. The subjects were 68 students of a Jordan secondary school and 26 teachers. The results showed that there was a relationship between degrees of task complexity and task difficulty. The more complex task was perceived more difficult to perform. Reasoning demands with respect to task-induced and task-inherent, were regarded as the major factors of task complexity contributing to both learner's and teachers' difficulties in performing the tasks.

Although previous task-based language teaching (TBLT) studies have examined learners' perceptions of tasks with different levels of cognitive complexity, no empirical study has investigated learners' perceptions of different task types designed with the same level of cognitive complexity, as proposed by Robinson. While the Cognition Hypothesis suggests that learners may perceive the same task differently, it remains unclear whether the same learner perceives different task types with equivalent cognitive complexity in distinct ways. Therefore, this study examines learners' perceptions of three task types matched for cognitive complexity and explores the factors influencing their perceived difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation. In doing so, it extends previous research by providing a broader understanding of learners' responses to pedagogical tasks.

Method

Research Design

This current study was aimed to explore the college students' perceptions of three different types of tasks in the form of monologic task. In this study the students were first asked to work on each type of the task. The students were subsequently provided with questionnaires in the forms of semi-structured questions about levels of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation shortly after completing every single task. At another time they worked on another task and then they were given questionnaires. Thirty male and female students of English Department, School of Education, the University of Lampung, Indonesia served as the study's subjects. They have been formally studying English at the English Department for a year.

Data Collection

The current study employed two types of instrument to elicit the data: i) tasks and ii) questionnaires. There were three types of tasks each of which was designed with the same degree of complexity, that is, complex for every single aspect of the resource-directing and simple for all aspects of the resource-dispersing dimensions.

a) Task 1 is particularly sequenced for learners to describe many elements (cognitively complex), but all aspects of resource-dispersing dimensions are made simple, taking the form of a single task the topic of which learners are familiar with, and is provided with 10-minute planning time for learners to plan what they are going to describe (many elements with prior knowledge, planning time, a single task).

b) Task 2 differs from Task 1 in the manipulated aspect of the resource-directing dimension, asking learners to describe their past activities, but it is similar in three aspects of the resource-dispersing dimensions (there and then with prior knowledge, planning time, a single task).

c) Task 3 is also different from Tasks 1 and 2 in that reasoning demand is required, but all the three aspects of the resource-dispersing dimensions are also made simple like Tasks 1 and 2 (reasoning demands with prior knowledge, planning time, single task).

The current study employed semi-structured questions extending Robinson's model of closed-ended questions to explore the students' perceptions of the three types of tasks in depth so that

more comprehensive data would be identified. The questionnaires were concerned with questions related to learner factors in terms of the level of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation when performing the three models of the task. They were given to learners shortly after the learners finished completing every single task subsequently.

Data Analysis

Learners' perceptions of the three types of tasks manipulated along with cognitive factors were classified into five categories, i.e., levels of difficulty, stress, confidence, interest, and motivation were coded with the symbols, (+) and (-). The former indicates: easy, relaxed, confident, interested/interesting, motivating, while the latter (-) refers to the opposite to each category of the three types of tasks. The data of the learners' responses to the five categories were analyzed manually by descriptive coding and in-vivo adopting the coding procedures by Saldana (2009). The former is a summary or the code of a statement and the latter is a direct quote from a statement.

RESULTS

Students' perceptions of the three types of tasks sequenced on the basis of cognitive factors (task complexity)

Learners' perceptions of the three types of tasks regarding five categories, the level of difficulty, stress, confidence, interest, and motivation are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of the three types of task complexity

No	Category	Task 1 (Many elements)		Task 2 (Past tense)		Task 3 (Reasoning demand)	
		Percentage		Percentage		Percentage	
		Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
1	Difficulty	45	55	60	40	30	70
2	Stress	48	52	55	45	30	70
3	Self-confidence	60	40	80	20	40	60
4	Interest	60	40	80	20	70	30
5	Motivation	55	45	60	40	60	40

Table 1 showed that Task 1 was perceived by more participants as difficult and stressful, but it was regarded as being able to increase learners' confidence, interest, and motivation. Interestingly, Task 2 requiring learners to describe their past activities (there and then) made more learners easier, relaxed, confident, interested, and motivated while completing the task compared to Task 1 (many elements to describe) and Task 3 (requiring learners to argue on the the topic of the task). Unlike Tasks 1 and 2, Task 3 was regarded by the majority of the learners difficult and stressful to complete and it also degraded learners' self-confidence, but it was perceived by more students as being able to increase learners' interest and motivation. The three types of tasks have two aspects in common, facilitating learners to increase their interest and motivation. This suggests that cognitively complex tasks do not necessarily lower learner factors regarding the five categories in terms of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation to learn language.

In summary, the complex tasks sequenced with the same degree of task complexity, but each type of the task is manipulated with different aspects of the resource-directing dimensions (requiring learners to describe many elements, to tell about past activities, and to give argument) do not necessarily lead one learner to have the same perceptions of the same degree of task complexity. Learner factors regarding levels of difficulty, stress, and self-confidence for the three types of the tasks were not entirely consistent among learners, but the other two factors, interest

and motivation. There were various reasons contributing to learner factors while performing the three types of tasks as discussed in more details in Section 4.2 below.

Factors contributing to learner factors regarding the five categories

Learners' reasons contributing to the five categories regarding their difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation while they were working on the three types of tasks were summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The factors contributing to learner factors regarding the three types of tasks

No	Reasons for being easy, relaxed, confident, interested, and motivated in performing the tasks	Percentage		
		Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
1	Familiar with the topics	25	30	21
2	Interesting topics	15	20	14
3	Planning time	13	10	8
4	Accompanied with pictures	10	7	5
5	Familiar with the previous tasks	0	8	5
	Reasons for being difficult, stressed, not confident, not interested, and not motivated in performing the tasks			
1	Complex tasks	20	10	24
2	Language problems	10	10	15
3	Not interesting topics	7	5	5

As shown in Table 2, learners provided reasons that the three types of tasks were easy, did not make stress (relaxed), increased confidence, interest, and motivation for 5 reasons such as, familiar with the topic, interesting topics, planning time, accompanied with pictures. On the other hand, the tasks were perceived difficult, created stress, lowered confidence, interest, and motivation because of 3 major reasons such as, complex tasks, language problems, and not interesting topics. The findings were partly in line with the aspects of designing pedagogical tasks, such as task complexity (cognitive factors) and task difficulty (learner factors) as indicated in the Triadic Componential Framework. Learners' reasons regarding the five categories while performing the three types of tasks were related to task complexity, i.e., familiar with topics, planning time, and complex tasks, and task difficulty (learner factors) particularly ability variables, that is, learners' problems with language when completing the tasks. However, the two aspects, i.e. interesting topics and pictures, have necessarily nothing to do with the aspects required for designing pedagogical tasks as stated in the Triadic Componential Framework.

Discussion

The findings of the current study partly support the argument proposed by Robinson (2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005, 2007a, 2015) that the complex task, cognitively more demanding will be perceived as difficult and makes learners less relaxed (stressed) in doing the task. The findings were also partly in agreement with those of the previous studies (Awwad, 2019; Kim, 2009; Mahpul, 2014) that there was a relationship between the degree of complexity and learner's difficulty in completing the tasks. The data of the current study showed that the complex tasks, (Tasks 1 and 3) were perceived by more students as difficult and stressful, but not Task 1. The finding with respect to Task 1, where the complex task was regarded by most learners as easy and not stressful, supports the theory of the Cognitive Familiarity proposed by Skehan (1998) that a complex task will be perceived as easier when learners are familiar with or have background

knowledge of the topic. Although the learners are familiar with the topics of the three types of tasks, they might more familiar with the topic of Task 1, talking about past activities as they were having these sorts of activities rather than talking about facilities of the classrooms available in their schools (Tasks 1 and 3). This suggests that complex tasks sequenced with the same degree of task complexity (cognitive factors) will be perceived differently by the same learner, depending on the learner's degree of familiarity with the topic. The more familiar with the topic of the task the learner is, the easier the task will be regarded.

One thing that made most learners felt easy, relaxed, confident, interested, and motivated to work on the three types of tasks was due to familiarity with the topics of the tasks. Familiarity with the topic of the tasks was identified as the most dominant factor in the current study. The majority of learners are familiar with the learning facilities available in their school.

"I have no problems working on the tasks because the topics about facilities in the school are familiar to me." (Student A)

This finding supports the concept of cognitive familiarity particularly familiar with the topic of the task and discourse (Skehan, 1998) and it is in accordance with Robinson's concept of task complexity (cognitive factor) that learners's prior knowledge of the topic of tasks will facilitate learners to complete tasks with greater ease despite the cognitively complex tasks. The finding is also consistent with that of previous study by Mahpul (2014) where familiar topics contributed to lower psychological burdens when doing cognitively complex tasks.

Interestingly, the data of learners' reasons for being easy, relaxed, confident, interested, and motivated in performing the tasks were due to interesting topics and pictures.

"I feel easy because the topic is interesting" (Student B)

"For me it is easy because it is accompanied with the pictures so this helps me describe the task." (Student C)

The findings are consistent with those of the previous study (Mahpul, 2014). This indicates that learner factors regarding the five categories in terms of difficulty, stress, self-confidence, interest, and motivation do not necessarily correspond to the level of task complexity (cognitive factors) imposed to tasks, but rather aspects other than cognitive factors, such as the topic of the task and the pictures equipped to the tasks.

Furthermore, the repetition factor also lowered learners' psychological burdens in completing task when learners are familiar with doing a relatively similar task. The finding is consistent with that by Mahpul (2014). It also supports Bygate's argument (1999) on the task repetition, that is, learners will find it easy to work on tasks when they have previously done similar tasks. This indicates that learners' difficulty in completing does solely rely on the cognitively complex tasks.

"I feel easy because I have done a similar task." (Student D)

On the other hand, the data of the current study showed that two models of tasks, Tasks 1 and 3, were perceived by some students as difficult and stressful, and they decreased learners' confidence, interest, and motivation due to the manipulation of task complexity. This indicates that there is a relationship between the manipulation of task complexity and learner affective factors. These findings are consistent with those of the previous studies (Awwad, 2019; Mahpul, 2014; Robinson, 2001a) that the participants' difficulty in doing a task is closely related to the manipulation of cognitive factors (task complexity). These findings also support the Cognition Hypothesis; learners will find it hard to work on the cognitively more complex task because learners think harder when completing a task (Robinson, 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2005, 20017, 2011, 2015, 2022).

A few learners also found it difficult to complete the tasks due to language problems, especially grammar and vocabulary mastery significantly contributing to learners' difficulty in completing the tasks. The finding is in line with the argument by Bygate (1999, p.41) that learners pay more attention on "how to speak in correct grammar" rather than focus on describing the topic of the task. This suggests that learners with low language competence will have difficulty to work on the tasks developed based on task complexity even with a cognitively simple task. It is possible that learners may know *what to describe*, but they do not know *how to describe*.

In short, the data of this study showed that the different tasks sequenced with the same degree of cognitive complexity were perceived differently by the same learners. The majority of learners felt difficult and stressful particularly when they are required to work on cognitively complex tasks, describing many elements or giving argument (reasoning demands) than describing past activities (there and then). However, cognitively complex tasks do not necessarily decrease learners' interest, confidence, and motivation. There are five aspects contributing to the success of learners in working on all three types of tasks related to learner factors, i.e. familiar topics, interesting topics, planning time, equipped with pictures, and familiar with the model of the previous task. However, the majority of learners found it hard to perform all three models of cognitively complex tasks for three aspects namely, complex tasks, language problems, and uninteresting topics.

Conclusion

Although the manipulation of task complexity (cognitive factors) and learner factors showed relationship to each other, the level of difficulty of tasks do not necessarily correspond to the degree of the manipulation of task complexity (cognitive factors) imposed to tasks. For example, factors other than those included in the Triadic Componential Framework, such pictures and interesting topics, also play roles especially in lowering learners' level of difficulty and stress, so that their interest, confidence, and motivation increased when working on the three models of complex tasks. This shows that the level of difficulty of tasks has also something to do with the pictures equipped in the tasks and the extent to which learners are interested in the topic of a task. The finding of the current study contributes to our understanding of developing a pedagogical task, that is, the manipulation of cognitive factors and learner factors as described in the Triadic Componential Framework is not sufficient. The other two factors, pictures and interesting topics may not be ignored in developing a pedagogical task in spite of being difficult to predict at the beginning. The inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive factors may actively involve learners in language learning activities as their needs are included tasks which in turn will lead to their capability of speaking in English.

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