# Investigating tasks in the context of business English: Sources of difficulty and motivation from the learner's perspective

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**Abstract**

Although communicative tasks are widely used in teaching such business English topics as meetings and negotiating, not many studies have explored how learners perceive these tasks. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), a great deal of research has been conducted on tasks in general. However, research on business English tasks is rarely found in the literature either of SLA or of English for specific purposes (ESP). To fill this research gap, the present study examines task-based language learning in business English contexts. Specifically, it investigates some sources of difficulty and motivation that are associated with task-based language learning on a business English course and explores learners' perceptions surrounding four tasks in the form of business meeting role-plays. Data for the study include pre- and post-task questionnaires and retrospective interviews. The study shows that learners' perceptions of task difficulty and their motivation to work on a task are influenced not only by the design features of the task, but also by learner factors, such as their own motives, life histories and prior learning experiences. The study also shows that sociocultural SLA is highly relevant to research on task-based language learning in an ESP context and that future sociocultural studies of tasks can benefit from the use of task typologies.

## 1 Introduction

With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) and learner-centered approaches to curriculum development, it has emerged as crucial to understand learners and their perceptions. As Tarone and Yule (1989: 133) noted more than two decades ago, "the importance of the learner's perspective is recognized in virtually all modern approaches to the language-learning process". But, despite the wide use of CLT in business English, few studies have examined business English learners' perceptions and perspectives, notably those pertaining to their learning process. This is not surprising, given the general lack of research into business English pedagogy. As Nickerson (2005) remarks, although many researchers are themselves practitioners, research into business English pedagogy is limited.

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), a great deal of research has been conducted on different topics related to learners and their learning. However, because the fields of English for specific purposes (ESP) and SLA rarely coincide, few of the insights from SLA research have informed ESP research, or vice versa. This lack of cross-fertilization between ESP and SLA is evidenced by the fact that very few research studies in SLA are conducted in the context of ESP, and little ESP research has explored the issues related to language learning which are traditionally investigated by SLA researchers. One of the areas that has attracted a great deal of research in SLA is task-based language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). However, although communicative tasks are found in many mainstream business English coursebooks (Chan, 2009) and are the key components of many resource books for teachers (e.g. Chan & Frendo, forthcoming; Emmerson & Hamilton, 2005), studies of business English tasks are rarely found in either the SLA or the ESP literature.

Two areas of pedagogical importance not only for general English but also business English are task difficulty and task motivation. Some understanding of learners' perceptions of task difficulty and what makes a task motivating for them can help materials writers, curriculum developers and teachers alike to design and sequence tasks in such a way that the learners working on these tasks can feel reasonably challenged and at the same time motivated. Issues related to task difficulty and task motivation have been investigated by some SLA researchers, mainly those from the cognitive tradition (e.g. Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Kormos & Dörnyei, 2004; Robinson, 2001, 2007; Skehan & Foster, 1997). However, despite the importance of task difficulty and task motivation for business English pedagogy, studies on these areas by business English researchers are rare.

The present study seeks to investigate what the learner sees as sources of difficulty and motivation in task-based language learning in the context of business English. Specifically, it investigates the task type of role-plays in the form of business meetings. Participating in business meetings is an important activity in the business world (Crosling & Ward, 2002). However, while the discourse of meetings has attracted a great deal of research (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Handford, 2010; Koester, 2010; Rogerson-Revell, 2008), business meeting role-plays, as a type of task in business English teaching, have not so far received much research attention from either ESP or SLA researchers. The present study attempts to fill this research gap by applying relevant concepts from ESP and SLA to analyze the sources of difficulty and motivation when learners perform business meeting role-plays. In this paper, I first review the relevant literature on 1) tasks in ESP and SLA research, 2) task difficulty, and 3) task motivation. I then present the findings of the research, which illustrate the role played by the task, the learner and the interaction of the two in shaping perceptions. Finally, I discuss the implications of this study for research and pedagogy.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Tasks in ESP and SLA research

One important difference between the tasks of interest to ESP researchers and those of interest to SLA researchers may be captured by the distinction between pedagogical tasks and real-world tasks (or target tasks). In Nunan's (2004) definition, real-world tasks "refer to the uses of language in the world beyond the classroom", whereas pedagogical tasks are the tasks which occur in the language classroom (p. 1). Real-world tasks are of particular interest to ESP practitioners, many of whom have attempted to identify the real-world tasks which the

learners in their specific teaching context would need to perform in the target situation (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998) as the basis of their curriculum development. Lambert (2010), for example, has identified several workplace tasks and their associated target tasks (e.g. the workplace task of answering inquiries is found to involve talking about quantities, prices and delivery schedules). More recently, Evans (2013) has provided suggestions for designing business English tasks on the basis of findings about real-world practice. So far, however, the task types derived from real-world tasks, in particular those from ESP contexts, have not received much attention from SLA researchers.

As in most areas of SLA research, two paradigms exist in task-based research – the psycholinguistically- or cognitively-based tradition, and the sociocultural perspectives, among which Vygotskian sociocultural theory has had the most influence (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In cognitive studies of tasks, researchers have identified various dimensions of the design features of tasks and investigated their effects on cognitive complexity, as reflected by such indicators as the fluency, accuracy and complexity of the language produced by the learners as they perform the task (see Ellis (2003), Samuda and Bygate (2008) and Skehan (1998) for reviews)[1]. Examples of task features which have been investigated in SLA include one-way vs. two-way tasks (Long, 1981); convergent vs. divergent tasks (Duff, 1986; Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993); personal vs. narrative vs. decision tasks (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997), etc. To capture the differences in task features across different types of task, Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) propose a useful task typology covering five types: jigsaw, information gap, problem solving, decision making and opinion exchange, all exhibiting different task design features, including interactant relationship, interaction requirements, outcome options and goal orientation. Task typologies function as a framework where researchers can identify the design features that distinguish one task from another; this in turn helps them to ascertain more precisely the source of differences between tasks in the dependent variables of interest. Sociocultural researchers, however, rarely adopt task typologies in task research, partly because they tend to be more interested in the learner than in the effects which different task features can produce.

In the cognitive tradition, task factors are often assumed to be fixed and independent of the learner. As Samuda and Bygate (2008) note, cognitive studies of tasks usually aim at identifying consistent effects of the task on learners "whoever they are and whatever their learning context" (p. 95). Sociocultural studies of tasks, in contrast, emphasize the role of the learner. A major insight of sociocultural studies on tasks is the unpredictability of task processes and outcomes once learners, who have their own motives, start implementing them. This unpredictability is illustrated by the "same task, different activities" phenomenon reported in Coughlan and Duff (1994), who, on the basis of activity theory (Leont'ev, 1978), draw a distinction between the task as a "behavioral blueprint" and the activity as the outcome which learners generate when carrying it out. They find that the same task can lead to different task processes and outcomes, not only when performed by different learners, but even when performed a second time by the same learner. Informed by activity theory, some studies have investigated the role of learners' motives and goals in task-based language learning, as well as the role which learners' actions can play in shaping task processes and outcomes (e.g. Brooks & Donato, 1994; Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Donato, 1994; Kobayashi, 2003; Parks, 2000; Roebuck, 2000; Storch, 2004). By contrast, in experimental and

[1] Apart from task design features, various learner factors, procedural factors and implementation conditions have also been investigated by task-based researchers. For the purpose of this paper, however, the focus is on task types and their associated features.

correlational task studies conducted in the cognitive strand of task-based research, the role of motives is rarely considered. As Ellis (2003) comments,

> One of the implications [of taking learners' motives into account] is that researchers need to ascertain what motives learners bring to a task if they are to understand the interactions that occur when the task is performed. In this respect, much of the task-based research that has taken place to date is seriously at fault. (p. 184)

While sociocultural studies of tasks have the strength of being aware of the role of learners' motives, a drawback of these studies, as Ellis (2000) critiques, is that they pay scant attention to the impact which task variables may have on learning. This is a valid point, since the effects of task features are very rarely explored in sociocultural studies, although, from an activity theory perspective, the influence of the task is something to be acknowledged (Lantolf, 2005).

### 2.2 Task difficulty

The notion of task difficulty is important for syllabus design because of its influence on the grading and sequencing of tasks. As Nunan (1988: 47) states, "any proposal failing to offer criteria for grading and sequencing can hardly claim to be a syllabus at all". Two well-known frameworks for characterizing task difficulty are Skehan's "three-way distinction for the analysis of tasks" (1998) and Robinson's "triadic componential framework" (Robinson, 2001). Skehan's framework draws distinctions between code complexity, cognitive complexity (which includes cognitive familiarity and cognitive processing), and communicative stress. Robinson's componential framework distinguishes between "task complexity" (which is the result of the cognitive demands imposed by the task), "task difficulty" (which depends on such learner factors as affective and ability variables), and "task conditions" (which include such interactional factors as participation and participant variables). Robinson maintains that, because task difficulty, which arises from learner factors, cannot be determined *a priori*, tasks should be sequenced solely on the basis of their complexity.

Until Tavakoli's (2009) study, not much had been done to verify that the variables specified in task difficulty frameworks were in fact what the learners themselves perceived as sources of difficulty. Using a qualitative method and working with picture narrative tasks, Tavakoli considered learners' perceptions of difficulty in relation to the frameworks by Skehan and Robinson[2]. It was found that cognitive demands, clarity of the picture/story, linguistic demands, amount of information, learner-related and affective factors, etc. were the sources of difficulty named by the learners. Tavakoli's conclusion is that, although Skehan's framework covers more types of relevant cognitive factor than Robinson's, the former would still benefit from incorporating learner factors. One interesting observation in Tavakoli's study is that conflicting views sometimes appeared among the learners; for example, "there were markedly different opinions on whether too much information in a picture story would make narrating it easier or more difficult" (p. 12). This suggests that the same task can be perceived differently by different learners. However, the study did not investigate the reasons behind the differing perceptions, interesting though these would have been to researchers in both the cognitive and the sociocultural domains.

[2] Tavakoli's study compared the perceptions of teachers and learners, but for the purpose of the present review, only the part dealing with the learners is discussed.

Another relevant study of task difficulty is by Nunan and Keobke (1995). In this study, it was found that the sources of difficulty perceived by the learners included both task factors (e.g. the open-endedness of the task) and learner factors (e.g. cultural knowledge). It was also found that learners' differing perceptions of the difficulty of a task can lead to different consequences. For example, learners who perceived a task to be more difficult than it actually was (as measured by successful performances of the task) were intimidated and either did not give it appropriate effort or did not attempt it. This finding points to the significance of learner perceptions of task difficulty, since these perceptions can directly influence the way in which learners approach a task and the outcome of the task.

**2.3 Task motivation**

Task motivation has received significantly less attention from SLA researchers than task difficulty, and empirical studies of task motivation have been "few and far between" (Kormos & Dörnyei, 2004: 1). Julkunen (2001) suggests that task motivation depends on both general motivational orientations and "the unique way the student perceives the task" (p. 33). On the basis of this distinction, it has been argued that learners should be motivated by both task-independent and task-dependent factors (Dörnyei, 2002: 139; Julkunen, 2001). According to Julkunen (2001), the term task motivation can be used "when task characteristics are the focus of attention in motivation" (p. 33).

The two major studies related to task motivation conducted in cognitive SLA are Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) and Kormos and Dörnyei (2004), which use task engagement measures in the form of the number of words and the number of turns produced by learners as indicators of task motivation. The researchers consider these measures relevant because "a hasty and unmotivated solution in which no real arguments or attempts at persuading the interlocutor are involved can be achieved by using very few turns" (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000: 283). Studies taking this approach seek to ascertain how "a more positive versus a more negative attitude towards a *particular* task displayed significant differences from each other" (Dörnyei, 2002: 143; emphasis added). However, since it was not the purpose of these studies to ascertain how learners' levels of motivation vary as a result of changes in task characteristics, further research is necessary to ascertain how tasks with different characteristics influence a learner's level of motivation to perform them.

Taking a sociocultural perspective, Platt and Brooks (2002) relate task engagement not only to the motivation exhibited by the learner but also to the difficulty of the task. By investigating task performance using a microgenetic approach, i.e., observing how the task unfolds moment by moment, Platt and Brooks identify the qualitative evidence of task engagement and relate it to the feeling among learners of being motivated as they overcome the difficulties of a task. They find that "true engagement" is manifested "both verbally and nonverbally" (p. 391), and is associated with learners' feeling "more motivated", "personally strengthened" and "empowered" as a result of overcoming the difficulties of a task (p. 390). The findings of the study contribute to the understanding of the relationship between task motivation, task difficulty and task engagement. However, since task features were not the focus of this study, as is often the case with sociocultural studies of tasks, it is unclear how different types of task may influence task motivation differently.

## 3 The study

### 3.1 Background

The research reported in the present paper is a preliminary study for a larger project investigating tasks in business English contexts (Chan, 2010). It is exploratory in nature and was conducted during a 5-day voluntary summer course in business English at a university in Hong Kong. Two classes of the same course, Classes A and B, were offered in two different weeks. The course adopted a task-based approach and was designed and taught by me. Different business English topics were covered in the course, and a range of data was collected throughout the course for both research and course development purposes. In the present paper, I focus on learners' perceptions of four tasks in the form of business meeting role-plays through analyzing the data collected from questionnaires completed by the students in the two classes and from individual interviews with four of the students.

### 3.2 Research questions

The present study aimed to identify sources of task difficulty and task motivation in business English contexts. The research questions were:

1. What factors influence learners' perceptions of task difficulty?
2. What factors influence learners' motivation to perform a task?

### 3.3 Participants

The participants were 35 students from various faculties taking the summer course, 17 in Class A and 18 in Class B. Apart from six students who were postgraduates and/or Mandarin-speaking students from Mainland China, all the students were Cantonese-speaking undergraduates from Hong Kong, who had entered the university upon graduation from secondary school and had had no full-time work experience. Four of the students, two from each class, agreed to be interviewed on completion of the course. Their pseudonyms are Ray, Vicky, Ada and William. All the four interviewees were local Hong Kong students who had learned English for at least 15 years before entering university (from kindergarten to secondary school). They had all gone through the same local public examinations in English before entering the university. None of the interviewees had taken any business English courses before taking the summer course. Among the interviewees, only Ray had had experience of working in business – he had been a part-time telemarketing agent. The interviewees' backgrounds, as shown in their answers in a pre-course questionnaire to identify needs, are summarized in **Table 1**:

| **Interviewee (Pseudonym)** | **Class** | **Major** | **Business English courses taken before taking the course** | **Reason for taking the course / Skills they thought they would need in the future** | **Work experience in business** | **Tasks performed** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ray | A | Biochemistry | None | "improve communication skills" / "how to convince customers to buy your products" | 5 months (part-time) in a telesales company | 1, 2, 3, 4 |
| Vicky | A | Economics and Finance | None | "want to know how to communicate in a more professional way | None | 1, 2, 3, 4 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | (like a business woman)" / "negotiation" | | |
| Ada | B | Industrial Engineering | None | "I think it is useful in the future, because I may probably work in a business field." / "the terms specifically for business", etc. | None | 1, 2, 4 |
| William | B | Statistics and Actuarial Science | None | "it is quite interesting" / "talk to colleagues or clients; presentation" | None | 1, 2, 4 |

**Table 1.** Background information on the interviewees

### 3.4 Tasks

The four tasks investigated in this study were all in the form of business meeting role-plays. Two of the tasks were adapted from role-plays in business English coursebooks and the other two were designed by me. The four tasks were all open tasks (i.e. they have no single preferred outcome) and fell into different categories in the typology proposed by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993). The content and features of each task are described below and summarized in **Table 2.**

#### Task 1 – Social Event

Task 1 was adapted from a meeting role-play found in a business English textbook (Jones & Alexander, 2000: 112). Learners were asked to hold a meeting to brainstorm ideas for a social event based on an agenda provided, and to decide on the date and duration of the event, what form it should take, etc. In terms of task type, this task involves elements of both "opinion exchange" and "problem solving" in the typology of Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993); the goal orientation is first divergent (i.e. different possibilities are allowed) and then convergent (i.e. learners need to converge or agree on a particular solution).

#### Task 2 – Reducing Costs

This task was adapted from another business English textbook (Wallwork, 2002: 24). In the task, three options for reducing personnel costs were given, and learners were asked to decide which one to adopt. The task type is "decision-making", in which learners are "expected to work toward a single outcome, but have a number of outcomes available to them" (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993: 22). The goal orientation of the task is thus convergent. Unlike Task 1, where there are no specific roles, four different roles are specified in Task 2, and each one is told its stance in the discussion (e.g. the trade union member is "against any cuts in salary", and the new member of management prefers job-sharing and a four-day week).

#### Task 3 – Outsourcing (in the same culture)

This task was designed by me and was intended to be an "information gap" task. It divides a group of learners into two smaller teams to role-play members of staff from two companies, an insurance company and a telesales company. The insurance company is considering outsourcing part of its operation to the telesales company. This is an initial meeting between the two companies to exchange information about services and prices. Only the learners in Class A performed this task (see the description of Task 4 below for the rationale behind this arrangement).

**Task 4 – Outsourcing (intercultural)**

This task entails the same content as Task 3, except that the two companies are from two different cultures. All the learners were given descriptions of the culture associated with their role. From the perspective of task design, Task 4 involves more task demands; it requires learners not only to exchange information about services and prices, but also to act according to the specified cultural characteristics and to handle cultural differences. To investigate the possible effects of the additional task demand, the learners in Class A were asked to perform both Tasks 3 and 4, whereas the learners in Class B were asked to perform Task 4 only.

The information about the tasks is summarized in **Table 2**.

| **Task No.** | **Task** | **Task type according to Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993)** | **Main task features** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Task 1 | Social event | Opinion exchange and problem solving | ▪ Non-specialist content<br>▪ Same role for all |
| Task 2 | Reducing costs | Decision making | ▪ Business-related content<br>▪ 4 different roles (from the same company) |
| Task 3 (Class A only) | Outsourcing (same culture) | Information gap | ▪ Business-related content<br>▪ 2 different roles (from 2 companies) |
| Task 4 | Outsourcing (intercultural) | Information gap | ▪ Business-related content<br>▪ 2 different roles (from 2 companies)<br>▪ 2 different cultures |

**Table 2.** Features of the four tasks

The implementation conditions were similar for all the tasks. Each group was given 5-10 minutes to read the task rubric and plan for the task. The students were asked to try to finish each meeting within 20 minutes.

**3.5 Method**

The present study made use of two main data sources – the pre- and post-task questionnaires and the four individual interviews conducted on completion of the course.

***3.5.1 Questionnaires***

The data on perceptions were collected from two sets of pre- and post-task questionnaires (see Appendices 1 and 2). The questionnaires were used to identify the factors influencing learners' perceptions of task difficulty and their level of motivation for performing the task, as reported by the learners themselves. Questionnaire 1 was used for Tasks 1 and 2. Questionnaire 2, which was designed to gather the perceptions related to the task demands, was used for Tasks 3 and 4.

***3.5.2 Interviews***

The individual interviews with the four participants were all conducted in English. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. To ascertain the relationship between task

factors and learner perceptions, all the four interviewees were shown the relevant task rubrics during their interview and asked to do the following:

1. describe what in general makes a task difficult and motivating
2. describe the specific difficulties that they encountered while doing the tasks under investigation
3. describe what they found motivating while doing these tasks
4. rank the tasks by:
    a. level of difficulty
    b. level of motivation
    c. level of usefulness
    d. level of interest
5. explain the reasons behind their rankings and perceptions of each task, and compare and contrast the tasks.

Although the list of interview questions served as a guide, any interesting and relevant points which came up during the interview but were not covered in the list were followed up.

### 3.6 Data analysis

The qualitative data from the questionnaires and the interviews were categorized and analyzed. During the data analysis, it was found that most of the sources of difficulty and motivation fell into four main categories – they could be factors regarding the task, the learner, the interlocutor, or the implementation conditions. However, it was also found that certain items were somewhat ambiguous; for example, some learners wrote down “interesting”, “useful” and “challenging” as the reason for being motivated to work on the task. As discussed below, it was not clear which category these sources of motivation should belong to (for instance, is “interesting” a task factor or a learner factor?). This ambiguity called for further investigation, and the interviews proved to be a useful source of data for triangulation.

## 4 Results from the questionnaires

### 4.1 Sources of difficulty

In the questionnaires, learners could rate the difficulty of the task by circling a number from 1-5. In addition to the ratings, they could provide reasons for their perceptions. While some learners provided more than one reason, others did not provide any. The three most frequently listed reasons, both pre- and post-task, are given in **Table 3**, with the number of learners who offered them being shown in brackets. All the items in the table are sources of difficulty, except where they are shown in italics, which indicates that the item was given as a reason why the learner(s) in question thought the task was easy.

| Task | Pre-task difficulty | Post-task difficulty |
|---|---|---|
| **Task 1** N=24 | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Time limit (9)<br>▪ Content – Lack of details (4)<br>▪ Lack of familiarity with content/prior experience (3) | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Time limit (2)<br>▪ Lack of proficiency (2)<br>▪ Content – Lack of details (2) |
| **Task 2** N=25 | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Position (9)<br>▪ Lack of familiarity with content/prior experience (4)<br>▪ Time limit (2) | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Position (9)<br>▪ Lack of proficiency (4)<br>▪ Convergent goal orientation (2) |
| **Task 3** N=14 | **Class A only**<br>▪ Lack of familiarity with content/lack of prior experience (4)<br>▪ Position (1)<br>▪ *(Easy) Familiarity with the insurance field* (1)<br>▪ *(Easy) Sufficient information provided* (1) | **Class A only**<br>▪ Lack of familiarity with content/lack of prior experience (2)<br>▪ Position (2)<br>▪ Cognitive complexity – dealing with numbers (2) |
| **Task 4** N=16 | **Class A**<br>▪ Dealing with cultural differences (5)<br>▪ Role-playing in another culture (4)<br>▪ (*Easy) Prior experience from Task 3* (4) | **Class A**<br>▪ *(Easy) Prior experience from Task 3* (5)<br>▪ *(Easy) Culture A is easy* (2)<br>▪ Dealing with cultural differences (2) |
| **Task 4** N=16 | **Class B**<br>▪ Position (1)<br>▪ No need to converge (1)<br>▪ Culture (1)<br>▪ Lack of familiarity with content/prior experience (1) | **Class B**<br>▪ Task demands (4)<br>▪ Culture (4)<br>▪ Lack of details (1) |

**Table 3.** Reasons provided by learners in support of their perceptions of difficulty

The source of difficulty most frequently cited pre-task for Task 1 was an implementation factor (the time given for learners to complete the task). The learners thought that the time given might not have been enough, probably because this was their first business meeting role-play in the course. The sources of difficulty cited post-task included an implementation factor (time limit), a learner factor (their perceived lack of proficiency to handle the task) and a task factor (lack of details given in the task to facilitate the discussion).

The source of difficulty for Task 2 most frequently cited by learners, both pre- and post-task, was a task factor, which I call "position". This source of difficulty arose from the fact that all the different roles have different interests to defend: as some learners put it, "everybody represents different positions". The different positions made the task difficult because, as the reasons given by the learners show, it was difficult to "disagree with others", "persuade each other" and "compromise [on] different opinions".

The major source of the pre- and post-task difficulty for Task 3 for the learners in Class A was the lack of familiarity with the content, or lack of prior experience. Other sources of task

difficulty included the conflicting positions between the two companies and the cognitive complexity involved in dealing with numbers. Still, two learners found the task easy, the reasons being familiarity with the insurance field and the presence of sufficient information given in the task rubric.

The main source of difficulty listed for Task 4 by the learners in Class A (who performed both Tasks 3 and 4) was mainly related to the cultural element of the task. Although Task 4 involved the same business content as Task 3 (outsourcing of services, checking prices, etc.), the learners in this class did not list the business-related aspects as sources of difficulty. In addition, because of their previous experience from Task 3, there were learners who perceived the task to be easy, both pre- and post-task.

The learners in Class B, who did not perform Task 3, perceived the task somewhat differently. Not many qualitative responses were given in either the pre- or post-task questionnaire, but from the few responses given, it can be seen that, while culture was listed as a source of difficulty both pre- and post-task, four learners also perceived the task to be difficult because there were many task demands (as one learner put it, there were "many considerations"). This can be seen also from some of the responses to Q5 in Questionnaire 2 (the question asking if learners thought there were many things to pay attention to), which include the need to "sell [their] services" and to "get to know the other side's culture".

The above results from the questionnaires show that most sources of difficulty fall into the categories of task factors (e.g. the amount of detail provided, position, culture, etc.), learner factors (e.g. lack of proficiency) and implementation factors (e.g. the time allowed). An interesting finding here is that Task 4, which involved more task demands than Task 3, was not consistently perceived as more difficult, a point which is further explored below (in Section 5.2.3).

### 4.2 Sources of motivation

In the questionnaires, learners could indicate whether they found the task motivating or not, and could then provide reasons. Some of the learners, however, did not provide any reasons. The three most frequently cited reasons, both pre- and post-task, are given in **Table 4** with the number of learners offering them shown in brackets. All the items in the table are sources of motivation, except the one shown in italics, which was given as a reason why the learners were not motivated when working on the task.

| Task | Pre-task motivation | Post-task motivation |
|---|---|---|
| **Task 1** N=24 | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Practical content (4)<br>▪ Interesting (3)<br>▪ Having prior experience (2) | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Interesting (2)<br>▪ Role – chair of meeting (2)<br>▪ *(Demotivating) Lack of interaction/ discussion (2)* |
| **Task 2** N=25 | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Interesting (4)<br>▪ Position (3)<br>▪ More challenging than Task 1 (3) | **Classes A and B**<br>▪ Interesting (4)<br>▪ Position (3)<br>▪ Challenging (2) |
| **Task 3** N=14 | **Class A only**<br>▪ Real-life (3)<br>▪ Interesting (3)<br>▪ New experience (2) | **Class A only**<br>▪ Real-life (3)<br>▪ Challenging (3)<br>▪ Interesting (2) |
| **Task 4** N=16 | **Class A**<br>▪ Interesting (9)<br>▪ Good partners (1)<br>▪ Useful (1) | **Class A**<br>▪ Interesting (4)<br>▪ Good partners (3)<br>▪ Role A was fun (2) |
| **Task 4** N=16 | **Class B**<br>▪ Useful (1) | **Class B**<br>▪ Interesting (5) |

**Table 4.** Reasons provided by learners for being or not being motivated

The most frequently cited pre-task source of motivation for Task 1 was its practical content. Both pre- and post-task, learners said that they were motivated because the task was "interesting", but they did not elaborate on what made it interesting. Two of the learners who performed the role of the chair in their group's meeting also found that this role was motivating. Two learners reported that they were not motivated because there was a lack of interaction or discussion during the task.

The most frequently cited sources of motivation for Task 2, both pre- and post-task, were the same. Four learners were motivated because the task was "interesting". Three learners considered the task motivating because of the conflicting positions involved (e.g. "people have different opinions and we have to debate", "we need to argue with others", "to keep convincing others", etc.), which shows the role of the "position" factor in influencing not only perceptions of task difficulty but also task motivation.

As regards Task 3, the source of motivation most often listed by learners pre- and post-task was related to its being "real-life", with learners commenting that the task provided "real-life practice" or was "applicable to real life". Other sources of motivation included the task's being "challenging" and "interesting", but no learner elaborated on possible reasons for this. Two learners were motivated because it was a new experience for them.

Task 4 had more task demands than Task 3 because of the additional cultural element. Both pre- and post-task, the most frequently cited source of motivation for learners in Class A was that the task was "interesting". Having good partners was also cited as a source of motivation. For Class B, only one learner provided a reason in the pre-task questionnaire for being motivated to work on Task 4, namely that it was "useful". After the task was completed, five learners considered the task motivating because it was "interesting".

The above results from the questionnaire responses indicate that the sources of motivation included task factors (e.g. the position factor, the real-life content, etc.), learner factors (e.g. having prior experience) and interlocutor factors (e.g. having good partners). For all the tasks, there were some learners who said they were motivated because they found them "interesting", "useful" or "challenging". These responses, however, raise the question: "Is the task interesting/useful/challenging because of some inherent task design features, or is it so because of some characteristics of the learners?" In other words, does the element which makes a task interesting, useful or challenging reside in the task itself or in the learner? Or could it be a result of the interaction between the task and the learner? This prompted Item 5 of the interview questions, which was designed to reveal the nature of the motivation captured by these somewhat ambiguous responses.

## 5 Findings from the interviews

### 5.1 Overall rankings

The interviewees were asked to compare the tasks and rank them. **Table 5** shows the rankings:

| Perceptions | Ray | Vicky | Ada | William |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Difficult | 2, 4, 3, 1 | 2, 3, 4, 1 | 2, 4, 1 | 2, 4, 1 |
| Motivating | 4, 3, 2, 1 | 2, 4, 3, 1 | 2, 4, 1 | 2, 4, 1 |
| Interesting | 4, 3, 2, 1 | 3, 4, 2, 1 | 2, 4, 1 | 4, 2, 1 |
| Useful | 4, 3, 2, 1 | 2, 3 / 4*, 1 | 4, 1, 2 | 2, 4, 1 |

**Table 5.** Ranking of tasks by interviewees
(from the most difficult/motivating/interesting/useful task to the least)
* To Vicky, Tasks 3 and 4 were the same in terms of usefulness.

It can be seen from **Table 5** that all the interviewees perceived Task 2 to be the most difficult, while Task 1 was considered the easiest and the least motivating or interesting of all the tasks that they worked on. The following sub-sections explore the sources of difficulty and motivation in greater detail.

### 5.2 Task difficulty

Intuitively, task factors such as the content, task type and number of task demands would seem to have an influence on task difficulty. This section illustrates that the relationship between these three factors and learners' perceptions of task difficulty is not straightforward.

#### *5.2.1 Task content*

From the data, it can be seen that the interviewees related their perceptions of difficulty to the level of their familiarity with the task content. Task 1 was considered easy, mainly because the interviewees were "familiar" or "too familiar" with the content of the task. This familiarity stemmed from the learners' experience as local students, who, as secondary school candidates preparing for local English public examinations, often performed tasks with content resembling that of Task 1. As Ray and William noted in turn:

> [Task 1] is just like the [local public] oral exam … It's too easy. (Ray)
>
> I think Task 1 is even easier than the [oral section of a local English public examination]. (William)

While the interviewees had similar perceptions of Task 1, their perceptions of other tasks, which involved business content, were different. William considered the business content of these tasks difficult ("we're students, we don't have the [business] sense"). The tasks about the business activity of telesales (Tasks 3 and 4) were, however, not difficult for Ray, who had worked as a part-time employee in a telesales company; as he said:

> I found it not difficult because I've been working in telemarketing. That's why I know some basics … (Ray)

These differing perceptions of the difficulty show that, while William and Ray had done similar tasks in school as they prepared for public examinations, their life outside school had made a difference to their perceptions of task difficulty. Thus, the content of the task alone does not determine perceptions of difficulty; instead, it interacts with the learner's life history and previous experiences to shape perceptions.

#### *5.2.2 Task type – goal orientation and position*

As shown in **Table 5** above, Task 2, which is a decision-making task, was considered by all the interviewees to be the most difficult. The convergent goal orientation of the task (i.e. the need to agree on a particular proposal to cut costs) was a source of its difficulty, because the interviewees found it difficult to arrive at a "conclusion", "compromise" or "consensus". It seems that the learners considered it important to arrive at a conclusion or a consensus because they related it to the satisfactory completion of the task:

> I think that sometimes we may feel like we did not complete the task if we cannot come up with a conclusion. This may be one of the difficulties. (William)

What is worth noting is that Task 1, which was perceived as the easiest by all the interviewees, was also a convergent task (learners needed to agree on the details of the social event after brainstorming their ideas). However, no interviewees mentioned that it had been difficult to reach a consensus in Task 1, whereas they mentioned this with regard to Task 2. This suggests that the convergent goal orientation of Task 2 does not in itself fully explain the difference in its perceived difficulty. Bringing the "position" factor identified earlier (see Section 4.1) into the picture may account for the difference. In Task 2, arriving at a consensus was considered difficult due to the conflicting positions inherent in the task design through the four different roles, as shown in the following comment:

> We need to insist on our interest [in Task 2], and the interests are very contradicting to each other. (Ada)

Conversely, part of the reason why Task 1 was considered easy by all the interviewees was that they were not given different positions and did not have conflicting interests. As Ray and Vicky both said, the task was easy because they did not have to come into conflict with the others.

The differing perceptions of Tasks 1 and 2 suggest that goal orientation interacts with position to influence perceptions of difficulty, at least in the role-plays under investigation. Using the terminology of negotiation theory (see, for example, Goldman and Rojot (2003)), position can either be "integrative", where all parties have the same standpoint and are working towards the same goal, as in Task 1, or "distributive", where all parties have different standpoints and hence possibly mutually conflicting stances towards the issue in hand, as in Task 2. The interview data show that a convergent goal orientation, when coupled with a distributive position, makes a task difficult.

#### *5.2.3 Task demands*

Although from the perspective of task design, Task 4 involved more task demands than Task 3 with the additional element of cultural difference (see **Table 2**), neither interviewee from Class A thought that the additional task demand made Task 4 more difficult. Both Ray and Vicky, who had performed both tasks, thought that Task 4 was mainly about cultural differences:

> [Task 4] is mainly focus on the cultural difference, rather than how to convince. (Ray)
>
> We just had to show that we have a different culture than the others, it's easier [than Task 3] … There's an issue to argue here, but the main point is to show that our culture is different from the others'… We just keep pretending [to be from the assigned culture], not discussing about anything, not discussing the issue or the business things. (Vicky)

By contrast, Ada, who had not performed Task 3 but only Task 4, thought the task was about "maximizing [her side's] profit and benefit". The difference in perceptions was probably due to the difference in history between Class A and Class B. Ray and Vicky, who had performed Task 3 the previous day, perceived the primary purpose of Task 4 to be the experience of cultural differences and gave little weight to the business part of the meeting, which had been their focus when working on Task 3. This shows that, although Task 4 had one more task demand than Task 3 had, the additional demand did not necessarily make the task more difficult, as might have been supposed. In fact, the new task demand in Task 4 (role-playing to show cultural traits) overshadowed the old one (discussing business with the other side). This suggests that the learners had their own way of prioritizing the learning objectives according to their perceptions of the objective of the task, which was influenced by their experience during the course, for example, the tasks that they had already worked on.

### 5.3 Task motivation

The interview data show that the learners' level of motivation was influenced not only by the task features, but also by the interaction between the task and the learners' perceptions pertaining to the past, the present and the future.

#### *5.3.1 Past-focused perceptions*

Learners' past experiences were found to be a factor affecting their motivation when working on a task. As mentioned in 5.2.1, above, the interviewees considered Task 1 easy because the content was familiar to them. Vicky, for example, was not motivated to work on the task because she did not think she was learning anything "new". As she explained,

> [Task 1] is very similar to secondary school tasks. We did it many, many times. (Vicky)

But, while in Vicky's case previous learning experience made a task demotivating, as in the case of Task 1, for Ray previous experience helped to increase motivation. According to him, his experience of working as a part-time telesales agent made him feel motivated when working on Tasks 3 and 4:

> I found [Tasks 3 and 4] interesting maybe because I worked in those company, so the motivation is also high. (Ray)

The above examples show that the content of a task alone does not determine task motivation; rather, the learners' motivation to work on the task is determined by the interaction between the task content and the learners' life history, such as their past learning experience and work experience.

### *5.3.2 Present-focused perceptions*

While the learners' past can exert some influence on motivation, their present-focused perceptions, i.e. the perceptions pertaining to the immediate situation of working on the task, also play an important role. This can be inferred from the learners' motives and goals, as shown in William's comment:

> We took the initiative to join the class and it already showed we care about what we can learn in the course and from the tasks, so we would work on the task to learn … I concerned about whether I and groupmates together can complete the task correctly. (William)

The fact that William cared about what he could learn shows that his motive for taking the course was to learn. Actuated by this motive, his goal when working on individual tasks was to "complete the task correctly", an attitude which was echoed by Vicky, who expressed her "desire to complete the task smoothly and successfully". Whether or not learners expect themselves to be able to achieve their goal of completing the task was found to influence their level of motivation, which is evident from Ada's definition of what a motivating task should be like:

> [A motivating task] is not easy, I need to spend effort to do it, but after my hard working, I can still do it, it's achievable … If it's very very very difficult, I think it can't motivate me to do it. But if it's difficult but not very very difficult, I think it can motivate me to do it. (Ada)

This shows that perceived difficulty can influence the motivation to perform a task and suggests that learners sometimes form expectations of how likely they are, given their abilities, to complete the task successfully.

The challenge brought by a task was also found to be a source of motivation. As shown earlier, Task 2, which involved convergent goal orientation and distributive position, was perceived by all the interviewees to be the most difficult, but the very same task features also made the process motivating for three of them:

> As I had a role to play, I really try to act as if I were really the worker. I really want to convince others and tell others what I really want to choose. (Vicky)
>
> You want to win the others, it will motivate you. (Ada)
>
> If you don't try your best, the others will become very strong in the discussion, you'll lose. (William)

The combined effect of goal orientation and position created a sense of competition in performing the task, as can be seen from the words "win" and "lose" in the above comments from Ada and William respectively. The competitive nature of the task and the learners' goal of winning made the task "challenging", and this, according to both interviewees, was what made it motivating.

### *5.3.3 Future-focused perceptions*

Motivation to work on a task was also found to be related to the learner's motive for taking the course. As the background information in **Table 1** shows, all the interviewees were able to list the business communication skill(s) that they thought they would need in their future professional life. In the interviews, Ray, Vicky and William all stated that their motivation to work on the tasks was influenced by whether they were "useful" for the future, which is consistent with their ranking of the tasks shown in **Table 5**; all three ranked the most motivating task as also the most useful. It was also found from the interview data that the interviewees had different perceptions of what would be useful for their future career, and this future-focused perception had an effect on their level of motivation. The following comments show why Task 2 was considered by Vicky to be more useful than Tasks 3 and 4, and why Ada considered it less useful than Task 4:

> In a company with very limited cultural difference, I may still face the situation of cutting cost. (Vicky)
>
> [Task 4 is about] customer service, salespeople, I am more likely to deal with clients … [Task 2 involves] a member of new management, very few people will do this kind of job. It will take me a number of years before I can be a management person. (Ada)

These comments show that the motivation arising from the usefulness of the task is influenced by the interaction between the task content and the learners' perceptions. Relevant perceptions include the likelihood that they will face situations like those described in the task, and the urgency of the need to practice handling those situations. Interestingly, "usefulness" was defined by all the interviewees in terms of workplace needs and business relevance and not of its effect on improving their English skills. This is probably due to the nature of the course, which was a course in business communication rather than in general English proficiency, and which probably attracted learners whose motive was to learn business communication skills rather than simply practicing English. As William said, "Actually if we are just learning to talk in English, Task 1 may be a good task". This shows that he expected to learn more than English from the course.

## 6 Discussion of findings

The findings from both the questionnaires and the interviews show that learners' perceptions of task difficulty and their motivation to work on a task are not only influenced by the design features of a task, but also by learner factors. The present study gives support to sociocultural studies of tasks which highlight the pivotal role of learners' motives in task-based language learning, and at the same time also shows how task design features can interact with learner factors to influence learners' perceptions.

In terms of task difficulty, the present study shows that the factor that I called "position" interacted with the goal orientation factor in determining learners' perceptions. From the questionnaire data, it can be seen that position was a source of difficulty for Tasks 2, 3 and 4. From the interview data, we can see that the combination of convergent goal orientation and distributive position made Task 2 the most difficult of the four tasks for all the four interviewees. The finding that a convergent goal orientation with a distributive position was perceived as more difficult than a convergent task with an integrative position suggests that goal orientation alone may be too broad a feature to characterize tasks and that existing typologies of tasks, such as the one proposed by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993), may need to be refined when used in research on business role-plays.

This study also shows that task content and the number of task demands did not have a consistent effect on the learners' perceptions of difficulty. The same task feature may have different effects on perceptions, depending on the learner's life history as well as his/her classroom learning history (e.g. what s/he has done in the course). As shown in this study, the learners' history, including their prior learning experiences and part-time work experience, affected their familiarity with the task content, and thus the level of task difficulty perceived. The classroom learning history also had a bearing on the way in which learners prioritized the demands of the current task; hence, given the same task, learners who had performed a similar task might give more attention to the new task demands and less to the old ones, which in turn influenced the perceived difficulty of the task, as well as the activity generated by the task. The familiarity of the content and the number of task demands, therefore, do not necessarily have a consistent one-to-one relationship with task difficulty.

As regards task motivation, two design features of the tasks, namely, the factors of goal orientation and position, were found to have an impact on motivation. The combination of convergent goal orientation and distributive position influenced the present-focused motivation of the task, making it challenging and thus motivating because of its competitive nature. Task content, however, did not have a consistent effect on motivation. The content of a task was found to interact with learners' history and motives, which respectively shaped their past-focused and future-focused perceptions. Past experiences influenced learners' perceptions of whether they were learning something new from the task, whereas what learners perceived as relevant content for their future career influenced their perceptions of the usefulness of the task. Learners' motivation to perform a task, therefore, relates not only to the circumstances arising in the discrete time-frame of the performance of the task, but also further back to the past and forward to the future.

The findings of the present study show that the same task can invoke different perceptions, which are shaped not only by the task but also by the learner's motives and history. This

phenomenon of "same task, different perceptions" means that one can hardly predict how difficult or motivating a task is without reference to the specific learner working on it.

## 7 Implications

In ESP research, issues such as task difficulty and task motivation have rarely been investigated, despite their pedagogical relevance. Although the present study is small in scale and exploratory in nature, it shows that, when investigating tasks in an ESP context, we can apply concepts from SLA research. The present study has several implications for research and pedagogy.

First, the study shows that sociocultural perspectives on SLA can be usefully applied to task-based research conducted in ESP contexts. ESP researchers and practitioners have acknowledged the central role of the learner, as evidenced by the emphasis on analyzing learning needs and subjective needs (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Activity theory, which highlights the role of motive (Leont'ev, 1978), is highly relevant to research conducted in ESP contexts, where learners tend to have more specific needs and wants than those who learn English for general purposes. Activity theory also captures the interaction between the different elements in an activity system (Engeström, 1987, 2001), and can therefore serve as a useful theoretical framework for task-based studies investigating the interaction between the task, the learner and other elements in an activity system.

Second, this study shows that the practice of specifying task features using task typologies can be applied to task-based research conducted in ESP contexts and to that conducted from a sociocultural perspective. In role-plays of business meetings and negotiations, differences of opinion and conflicts are often built in to the task through differences in the roles played by the learners to simulate real-life situations. Although these differences in role are not captured in existing task typologies, relevant dimensions, such as the position factor identified in this study, may be added in order to develop more refined typologies for the tasks used in business English teaching. Future sociocultural task-based research, whether on general English or ESP tasks, can also benefit from the use of task typologies. With an appropriate task typology, sociocultural researchers can pinpoint in a more precise way the different task features from which the different effects originate.

Finally, from a pedagogical perspective, while it has been proposed by researchers in the cognitive tradition that tasks should be sequenced on the basis of task factors alone (Robinson, 2001), this study illustrates the relevance of learner factors in determining learners' perceptions of difficulty and their level of motivation in a classroom context. While preliminary sequencing may be done at the stage of curriculum or materials development, it is suggested that the syllabus should be flexible enough to allow teachers to make adjustments in response to learner factors, as appropriate. The learner factors to consider should include learners' histories and the motives which they bring to their learning. Syllabus designers and teachers alike would be in a much better position to make decisions on and adjustments to their task-based syllabus if more research could be conducted to reveal what shapes the perceptions of learners and to suggest methods by which teachers may adapt tasks to make them sufficiently challenging and more motivating.

Much SLA research has investigated issues that are highly relevant to ESP researchers and practitioners. It is hoped that more ESP research, in particular that related to learning and the

learner, can be conducted by referring to insights from SLA research and that research done in ESP contexts can also inform and broaden the scope of SLA research. It is believed that cross-fertilization between traditionally separate fields in this way would be most beneficial to research and practice.

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## 9 Appendices

### *Appendix 1*

**Questionnaire 1 (Pre-task)**

1. I think the level of difficulty of the task is:
   Extremely easy 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely difficult
2. I think the following things make the task difficult:
3. I think I *can / cannot* complete the task successfully because:
4. I am *motivated / not motivated* to work on the task because:
5. I *like / do not like* the task because:
6. Any other comments:

**Questionnaire 1 (Post-task)**

1. I think the level of difficulty of the task was:
   Extremely easy 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely difficult
2. I encountered the following difficulties while doing the task:
3. I think I *completed / did not complete* the task successfully because:
4. I was *motivated / not motivated* to work on the task because:
5. I *liked / did not like* the task because:
6. Any other comments:

***Appendix 2***

**Questionnaire 2 (Pre-task)**

1. The level of difficulty of the task is:

   Extremely easy 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely difficult

   Reasons:

2. I think the topic is relevant for business:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

3. I am familiar with the situation practiced in the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

4. I am familiar with the topic/content of the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

5. I think there are many things to pay attention to when doing the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   For example:

6. I think the task is useful:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   Reasons:

7. I am motivated to do the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

   Reasons:

8. I think I *can / cannot* complete the task successfully because:

9. Any other comments:

**Questionnaire 2 (Post-task)**

1. The level of difficulty of the task was:

   Extremely easy 1 2 3 4 5 Extremely difficult

   Reasons:

2. I think the topic was relevant for business:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

3. I am familiar with the situation practiced in the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

4. I am familiar with the topic/content of the task:

   Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

5. I think there were many things to pay attention to when doing the task:

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

For example:

6. I think the task is useful:

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

Reasons:

7. I was motivated to do the task:

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

Reasons:

8. I think I *completed / did not complete* the task successfully because:

9. Any other comments: