

## **Innovation in L2 Writing Task Design: Introduction to the Special Issue**

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# Introduction to the Special Issue: Innovation in L2 writing task design

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## 1. Why Innovation?

In *The cultural origins of human cognition*, the cultural anthropologist, Michael Tomasello (1999) theorized that human evolution itself is rooted in the dual impetus of tradition and innovation: “the tension between doing things conventionally, which has many obvious advantages, and doing things creatively, which has its own advantages as well” (p. 53). Yet, it feels like innovation in research and pedagogy is rarely encouraged (Tardy, 2021). In higher education, as academics navigate the research publishing machine, engulfed by the need to digest thousands (millions) of submissions every year (Hyland, 2023), it is no wonder that “doing things conventionally” becomes a way to overcome journal gatekeeping; a way to cope with the increasing managerialism of academia; and ironically, a way to manage the innovation fatigue caused by the constant new demands placed on academics by university administration (Morris & Tang, 2022).

Nonetheless, the topic of our special issue is innovation in L2 writing task design. What do we mean by innovation? It is a slippery term. It requires prepositions, and pronouns. Innovation from what? Of what? In what ways? According to whom? For us, innovation is sparked by the realization that some good old way of doing something simply does not work anymore, or perhaps stems from a rebellious desire to find our own way through a problem. In this volume, Kubokawa (2023) offers the following definition derived from the literature by way of introduction to his paper, and it works well for our purposes:

Innovation has been defined as the realization of pedagogical and methodological ideas that result in the development of new techniques, materials, services, and supports, and importantly, improvements to the delivery of already-existing ideas (Reinders et al, 2019). In other words, innovation is combining tried-and-true concepts with new ones to produce novel outcomes. In L2 teaching contexts, this approach aligns with Delano, Riley, and Crookes (1994) who discuss how innovation incorporates the idea of integrating modifications to known methodologies by combining theory and practice.

Crucially, innovation is not only the new or novel; it is also the refinement of what already exists and entails the integration of both theory and practice. The five papers that comprise our special issue exemplify this novelty, refinement and integration of theory and practice, demonstrating how we can innovate in the field of L2 writing studies – how we can be original, rebellious, and thought-provoking as researchers and teachers. We can start *small*. We can start with a task.

## 2. Why task? Why task design? And why the Journal of Second Language Writing?

Over 10 years ago in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Ortega (2012) argued for the need for research at the interface of L2 writing and SLA and identified task as one of the cornerstones of this endeavour. At the same time, she exposed a flaw in task design: the “contrived writing” (p. 412) that students had been expected to produce in most SLA-focused research:

Tasks, too, must be considered central to language learning opportunities that writing events can generate. The writing tasks that scholars committed to researching interfaces between L2 writing and SLA seem to be able to imagine thus far include fairly contrived writing (Ortega, 2012, p. 412).

Tasks then should not be contrived; in fact, if we are expecting our tasks to promote language and literacy learning, they must also be engaging:

...valued, intrinsically interesting, and engendering a sense of ownership. (p. 412).

Since Ortega's observations, the field of L2 writing has expanded in a multiplicity of directions: an interdisciplinary richness that—as Matsuda (2021) underlines—makes this area of research particularly dynamic and receptive to innovative approaches. Designing (and refining) such tasks can also be hugely enjoyable. This creative process allows us to synthesise theory, previous research, and our own teaching experience to generate a catalyst for our students' learning and engagement, a process recommended by Ortega as a locus of research (see Negretti & McGrath (2018) for an illustration of this mindset).

But if we are to design (and investigate) innovative, theoretically grounded, and intrinsically interesting tasks, we first need to establish what in fact constitutes a task. Like innovation, 'task' is a difficult concept to pin down. This may be because, as Swales and Feak artfully observe in this volume, "[i]t is easy to describe a specimen, but it is much harder to describe a species." (2023, p.2). Nonetheless, in his seminal work on genre analysis, Swales (1990) identified the centrality of task in writing development, and offered the following definition:

One of a set of differentiated, sequenceable, goal-directed activities drawing upon a range of cognitive and communicative procedures relatable to the acquisition of pre-genre and genre skills appropriate to a foreseen or emerging sociorhetorical situation (Swales, 1990, p. 77).

Yet this definition has seen little uptake in the literature compared with, for example, the definition of discourse community that appeared in the same volume (Swales & Feak, 2023). Is task an activity? A sequence of activities? An assignment? A way to assess learners' knowledge? A written product or a learning tool? All of the above? The reader may wish to take a moment here and consider: how do you define task?

Returning now to Ortega's epilogue for the JL2W's special issue on the interface of L2 writing and SLA (2012), the author reflects on the elements needed to further the field of L2 writing research. These elements are L2 proficiency, teachers, and tasks. We wondered about the uptake of these suggestions in the research, and for the purposes of this editorial, we explored previous issues of the JL2W: we first note that research in L2 writing has certainly responded to Ortega's call for a greater focus on L2 proficiency, making notable strides towards a better understanding of learners' L2 capacities in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency and how they impact writing (by way of example, see Crossley & McNamara, 2014). Equally, much attention has been paid to how task complexity impacts learners' writing proficiency (see for example Sanchez & Sunesson, 2023; Yoon & Polio, 2017) and learners' proficiency needs (see for example Kyle & Crossley, 2016). Indeed, a simple search for complexity and accuracy on the JL2W's website results in more than 400 publications each, and more than 200 for fluency.

When it comes to Ortega's call for a focus on teachers, the picture is fuzzier. One prominent research direction is teacher feedback, in particular how feedback, and especially written corrective feedback, impacts learners' L2 development. However, in this line of research, the role of the teacher and the teachers themselves seem somewhat overshadowed by the feedback per se. Take, for example, the well-known article by Bitchener and Knock (2010) in

which three different types of feedback are compared in terms of their effectiveness in promoting accurate article usage. That said, there are examples where the role of the teacher and pedagogy are more prominent; for instance, Merkel's (2018) study on the feedback and learning generated by the dialogue between the teacher/researcher and the learner; and Yang, Zhang and Dixon's (2023) conceptualisation of feedback as a pedagogical tool. Lee's (2020) recent paper provides a timely reminder that "the teacher's role in the authentic classroom cannot be overstated" (p. 4), and it seems many L2 writing researchers agree; at the time of writing, Lee's paper is at the top of the most cited list in the journal.

This brings us to the third of Ortega's elements and back to the focus of our special issue: task. Ortega writes (p. 413):

The inclusion of more central and richer roles for teachers and *tasks* [our emphasis] in future research agendas would be a noteworthy addition to efforts at understanding instructional interfaces between the two fields [...] The content, purposes, and demands of writing matter because they greatly impact on the degrees of engagement with writing that educational designs for writing can foster. This is why writing tasks also matter.

We were curious as to what extent Ortega's emphasis on task had been taken up in the journal. We therefore asked our research assistant to conduct an informal literature review of JL2W's publications in the last 15 years to identify whether 'task' in the papers was primarily conceived of as first and foremost a learning task/pedagogical tool, a data collection tool, or both<sup>1</sup>. Our assistant identified only 42 papers that focus on task as *both a pedagogical and methodological* tool. She did not identify any papers that explored task as purely a pedagogical tool, but this is perhaps not surprising for a journal that requires papers to make a significant contribution to theory. In 38 papers, task was used for both pedagogical and data collection purposes, but in the majority of papers (184) task was used purely as a means of data collection, with scant or no reference to pedagogy. To illustrate, consider one of the most cited papers focused on assessing L2 writing proficiency by means of lexical complexity, Kyle and Crossley (2016). In this study, Kyle and Crossley show that different types of task foster L2 proficiency in different ways, thanks to their development of fine-grained measures of lexical sophistication, which is of course relevant from a pedagogical perspective. Yet, the task here is still an L2 product, used to assess a dimension of L2 proficiency (thereby equating writing proficiency with language proficiency)<sup>2</sup>.

We think that this skewness towards L2 proficiency, and task as a product, presents a dilemma for the journal. The aim of JL2W as per the mission statement is to publish research that makes a strong contribution to theory and pedagogy of L2 writing and writing education: "Manuscripts should take care to emphasize the pedagogical implications of the work" ([JL2W, Aims and Scope](#)). Many of the studies our assistant retrieved do clearly discuss pedagogical implications of the findings. However, it is less clear to us how these implications are derived from the design of the study (the aim and research questions) and the findings. For the most part, it seems that teachers in the classroom have to determine themselves how to put the research recommendations into actual practice, as application is not in fact incorporated into the study design. To illustrate, a very well-conducted study

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<sup>1</sup> This review cannot be considered systematic, and as such, the results should be treated with some caution. Our purpose here was just to provide an indication. Future research may wish to tackle this question more systematically.

<sup>2</sup> It is not only SLA-focused, L2 proficiency articles that see task as a product. For example, Hankerson (2022) in a critical language awareness article that examines a curriculum for African American writers, tasks are still used as products, as a means to assess the learners' development (i.e., as a data collection tool).

aiming to determine the needs of adolescent L2 academic writers examined students' tasks—essays—from the perspective of lexical and syntactical complexity (Maamujav, Olson & Chung, 2021). In their pedagogical implications section, the authors (rightly) state:

Students need to know not just what linguistic choices they can make, but why they make these choices and when these choices are fitting. In order to expand L2 students' linguistic resources and repertoire, teachers may need a multifaceted pedagogical approach that provides 1) exposure to rich materials and activities that represent and align with the content and conventions of academic writing, 2) explicit instruction that draws learners' attention to syntactic structures and lexical use, 3) strategy instruction that shows how language is used to construct meaning, and 4) guided practice that promotes the application of their acquired linguistic knowledge in composing, revising, and editing processes (Maamujav & Olson, 2019, p. 14).

However, in the study itself, the task is a product, and the pedagogical implications/applications described above remain untested. In order to integrate the study's findings into their practice, an L2 (ESL/EFL) teacher would have to do the hard thinking themselves. (Note, this paper is also one of the most downloaded at the time of writing).

The approximately 40 papers we identified that treated tasks as both a methodological and pedagogical tool present a variety of foci and theoretical lenses. We manually scanned this collection and found that some papers deal with task as a learning tool in a somewhat indirect way (for example by focusing on teachers' conceptualizations of task, as in Worden (2019)). But many illustrate what we mean by *task as a locus of pedagogical and methodological innovation* in our initial call for papers, and what we assume Ortega (2012) meant when she called for more focus on authentic and engaging tasks in L2 writing research. In this set, particularly helpful is Yasuda's (2011) distinction between a pedagogic task, which is used to scaffold learners' ability to write in an L2, and a target task, which is what the students are aiming to perform at the end of instruction. In her study, Yasuda illustrates how each writing task—as an instance of genre—entails choices and possibilities, and as such pedagogic tasks can be used to promote language learning and writing as a social activity rather than an L2 proficiency progression:

The combination of genre and task can therefore create a crucial pedagogical link between socially situated writing performance and choices of language use. (p. 113).

Another article in this set that caught our eye was authored by Wan (2014). Students wrote metaphors about their beliefs about academic writing and then read their classmates' metaphors. In the interviews, students revealed that by reading other peoples' metaphors they were able to “concretize and synthesize their concepts of writing” (p. 62). This pedagogical and methodological task is not only innovative and engaging for the students, but also moves our understanding of L2 writing development forward in that the findings point to the importance of learners' conceptualizations and beliefs about writing. The article also provides the teacher with concrete guidance on classroom activity. In another study that explores how different types of tasks lead to differential learning trajectories but also engagement in learners, Tan (2023) compares multimodal composition and traditional text-based writing tasks and their effects on cognitive processes. Again, clear insight is provided as to how different types of pedagogical choices may have an impact on students' learning (once again, this is one of the most downloaded from the journal).

It seems therefore (the articles cited above notwithstanding) that in most L2 research in the JL2W, tasks have been considered primarily as a means of assessment and data collection, a way to probe L2 writers' capacity to produce a text in L2, with various individual differences (cognitive load, affect, anxiety) affecting the quality of a product that is measured by text-intrinsic characteristics such as complexity, fluency and accuracy. This perspective tends to see the task as a product, and those tasks are—to again quote Ortega—fairly contrived. Far fewer articles conceive of task as a means of learning, shifting the focus from characteristics of the end-product to the (cognitive, social, affective) process(es) involved in arriving at that product. When tasks are designed as pedagogical tools, their purpose is to scaffold rather than assess (except perhaps from a formative assessment perspective). The effectiveness of this type of task is also very difficult to assess because it often requires a multiplicity of data, reflexivity in interpretation, and the use of quality criteria that are less measurable. Clearly it is here that more research is needed, and our special issue begins to address this gap.

### **3. Introducing the papers in this special issue**

The five contributions to our special issue embody the different facets of innovation we touched upon in our introduction and speak to the issues that we have raised in our editorial: a move away from task as product, a focus on learning processes, and the exploitation of the task in the classroom. All have a strong pedagogical strand to their arguments, and all move us closer to a revised and more fleshed out working definition of pedagogical task by considering what a task does or should do.

Hakim's short communication constitutes an early attempt to employ the concept of Genre-Related Episodes (GREs) as developed by Tardy and Guo (2021) in the L2 writing classroom to explore what kind of genre-based pedagogical tasks facilitate the development of genre specific knowledge and genre awareness. GREs are defined as:

Any part of the dialogue where the writers talk about the genre they are producing, question the genre they are producing, question their genre use, or correct themselves or others in relation to genre. (Tardy & Gou, 2-21, p. 57).

Drawing on observation data from an EMI university in Lebanon, Hakim found that the collaborative tasks designed for the project generated discussion among the students pertaining to formal knowledge episodes, rhetorical knowledge episodes, and genre awareness episodes. Her findings potentially enhance our understanding of how writers collaboratively develop their genre knowledge in classroom contexts. Crucially, the findings also begin to shed light on how teachers can design pedagogical tasks to target specific domains of genre knowledge.

In Kubokawa's multiple case study, the author fosters an interdisciplinary teacher collaboration to design a multilingual poetry task that develops the literacy and linguistic skills of multilingual resident immigrant high school children in the US. Integral to the task design is consideration of social affective factors. Here, Kubokawa is following CCCC's recommendations that a task must provide recognition and support (pedagogical and emotional) for multilingual writers to draw on and integrate linguistic and cultural resources into their writing. This aim recognizes that learning is governed not just by cognition but also by affect: a task needs to engage learners (also recalling Ortega's (2012) call for tasks that are both intrinsically interesting and engender ownership). Kubokawa provides a detailed account not only of the pedagogical task design, but also how the task was delivered in the classroom. The findings reveal that the multilingual poetry task prompted both multilingual writers and their teachers "to consider linguistic, rhetorical, compositional, and cultural aspects that other writing genres may not readily provide" (Kubokawa, 2023).

For Schlam Salman and Haskel-Shaham, “tasks should encourage writing but should also help learners to develop an awareness of how written language is used for communication and how these constructed meanings may differ across languages and sociocultural contexts”, a particularly pertinent dimension of language learning given the sociolinguistic context in which the research was conducted. The study captures what happens when Arabic speaking learners of Hebrew undertake a theoretically grounded three-step translation task (L2 output; translation to L1; retranslation into L2) designed to foster metacognitive awareness and noticing. As in Kubokawa’s study, the task pays attention to social and affective dimensions in that the prompt was to write about the challenges students from East Jerusalem face when studying in higher education institutions in Israel. Post-task, the students reported gaining awareness of “holes” in their knowledge of vocabulary, semantics, syntax, structure, content and pragmatics, and a heightened ability to deploy their language knowledge consciously and intentionally.

In the fourth article in the collection, Sala-Bubaré and Castelló explore how to capture the development and processes in research writing through the lens of task. Crucially, they show how an authentic, meaningful pedagogical task (or sequence of tasks) implemented with doctoral writers can constitute a methodological innovation that provides rich learning data that would be unavailable if we viewed task exclusively as a written product. As with Kubokawa and Schlam Salman and Haskel-Shahm, Sala-Bubaré and Castelló recognize the need to create tasks that facilitate both data collection and learning, and that those tasks need to be valuable and relevant for learners. Such tasks can scaffold learning processes in a way that allows the gradual construction of students’ disciplinary identity in research writing.

And last but certainly not least, Swales and Feak innovate by tracing, critiquing and theorising the evolution of a task in L2 writing pedagogy, leading us to a new approach to task design and a definition of what constitutes quality in this endeavour. Only Swales and Feak dare to construct a full definition of an effective writing task, identifying four key characteristics that by now will be somewhat familiar to the reader: sensitivity to content; relatability; and capacity to lead students to a new place and engage them. Importantly, they underscore the need for reflection on what we mean by task and how and why we use this concept:

[T]he creation of an effective task entails critically thinking about our own assumptions and expectations underlying a task along with finding a balance between guiding students and giving them ample room for meaning making, analytical thinking, and creativity.

Overall, these five contributions embody what Ortega (2012) encouraged over 10 years ago in this journal: an attention to writing task not only as a data collection tool but also as a pedagogical tool and a site of L2 learning.

#### **4. Contribution and conclusion**

We began our editorial with the idea of innovation, which we defined as not only the new or novel, but also the refinement of what already exists. Further, we stressed the need for the integration of both theory and practice when innovating. We called for researchers and teachers to be original, rebellious, and thought-provoking in their task design. We have also critiqued somewhat the many controlled, experimental studies on L2 writing where task is a primarily a means of inquiry and product. We do not want to diminish these important studies; however, we do want to call for and promote studies that design instructional tasks for the writing classroom that can also be used to elicit learning processes, either with a focus on L2 language or a focus on L2 writing – as in the papers included here in our special issue.

In this sense, we echo McKinley's (2022) call for innovation in L2 writing research and a reconceptualization of its methodological arsenal and join him in calling for a move away from the "incessant focus on writing task products" (p. 4). We hope to underscore in this special issue, through the five papers collated and our editorial, the value of task as a site of investigation of learning, especially in instructed classroom settings, and call for more representation of this type of study in future issues of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. This includes research that goes beyond learning process—the pre/post process debate has a rather Western focus with English L2 at its centre—towards exploring sociocultural and contextual dimensions of learning to write in L2 or learning an L2 through writing.

Of course, tasks are not the whole story. Instructional tasks are one step in the complex socialization practices that lead to L2 acquisition (Bankier, 2022) and research into these practices can also be sites of innovation. Ultimately, we need answers as to how learning to write in a second language happens, and when it does not, as well as when writing provides a site for language learning, and when it does not.

We end by thanking the authors of the papers included in this special issue, the reviewers who gave up their precious time to provide valuable feedback, the editors of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* for giving us this opportunity to explore the topic, our research assistant, and the readers who we hope will join us in pushing further research on L2 writing task design.

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