

# The role of individual and social variables in oral task performance

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This paper reports on a data-based study in which we explored – as part of a larger-scale British–Hungarian research project – the effects of a number of affective and social variables on foreign language (L2) learners’ engagement in oral argumentative tasks. The assumption underlying the investigation was that students’ verbal behaviour in oral task situations is partly determined by a number of non-linguistic and non-cognitive factors whose examination may constitute a potentially fruitful extension of existing task-based research paradigms. The independent variables in the study included various aspects of L2 motivation and several factors characterizing the learner groups the participating students were members of (such as group cohesiveness and intermember relations), as well as the learners’ L2 proficiency and ‘willingness to communicate’ in their L1. The dependent variables involved objective measures of the students’ language output in two oral argumentative tasks (one in the learners’ L1, the other in their L2): the quantity of speech and the number of turns produced by the speakers. The results provide insights into the interrelationship of the multiple variables determining the learners’ task engagement, and suggest a multi-level construct whereby some independent variables only come into force when certain conditions have been met.

## I Introduction

The past decade has brought an increased interest in language learning tasks as basic conceptual units to analyse learning behaviours that lead to second language (L2) acquisition (e.g. Bygate, 1996, 1999; Candlin and Murphy, 1987; Crookes and Gass, 1993a, 1993b; Foster, 1998; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Long and

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Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 1995; Skehan, 1998a, 1998b; Skehan and Foster, 1997, 1999; Willis, 1996; Yule and Powers, 1994). The theoretical significance of 'tasks' lies in the fact that they allow researchers to break down the complex, prolonged learning process into discrete segments with well-defined boundaries, thereby creating meaningful 'anchor points' in discussing the various dimensions (e.g. cognitive, affective or socio-dynamic) of L2 processing. In other words, considering language instruction and attainment within a task-based framework can provide a relatively concrete and 'fine-grained' level of analysis and one that is conducive both to implementing and combining various different research paradigms. To use a metaphor from mathematics, tasks may be seen in many ways as the 'lowest common denominators' in various lines of L2 research.

From a practical perspective, tasks are not so much seen as units of learning behaviour as methodological building blocks to be used as the systematic basis for syllabus organization. Used in this sense, 'tasks' usually refer to communicative language activities in which purposeful communication, authentic situations and active learner engagement are key concerns. Willis (1996) argues that task-based learning 'combines the best insights from communicative language teaching with an organized focus on language form' (p. 1) and Skehan (1998b) asserts that 'instruction in which learners are given tasks to complete in the classroom makes the assumption that transacting tasks in this way will engage naturalistic acquisitional mechanisms, cause the underlying interlanguage system to be stretched, and drive development forward' (p. 95).

In accordance with the above, task-based research has been one of the most dynamic research domains in the L2 field during the, 1990s, with the majority of studies adopting either a cognitive (e.g. Skehan, 1998b) or an instructional design paradigm (e.g. several studies in Crookes and Gass, 1993a, 1993b). Because of the prominent cognitive and educational dimensions of L2 learning, it requires little justification that both these approaches are central to the understanding of L2 task behaviours. Advances in task-based research, however, have also indicated several directions in which the task framework can be further extended. In this paper we pursue two such directions, the study of the *affective foundations* of task performance and the systematic analysis of the

*social parameters* of the task situation in relation to task performance.

## **II Research on the affective and sociodynamic dimensions of task performance**

### *1 Motivation and task performance*

With respect to the *affective dimension* of task performance, the first thing we need to note is that none of the traditional ‘feeder’ disciplines of L2 studies in this area (e.g. motivational, educational and social psychology) have been much concerned with researching affective task characteristics. When discussing conative (i.e. motivational and volitional) issues in psychology, human behaviour has been typically treated in a ‘macro-sense’, emphasizing general action tendencies and their relationship with basic motivational influences (e.g. how intrinsic motives or the expectancy of success affect achievement behaviour in general) rather than the specific motives that underlie the completion of particular tasks (e.g. how and why a problem-solving or a narrative task differ in their capacity to engage students). Most of the work in psychology that has examined specific task characteristics has focused on cognitive issues such as the aptitude and the thought processes of the learner and how these interact with cognitive task demands and constraints.

In a pioneering study on task motivation, Winne and Marx (1989) explain the marked imbalance in the study of cognition and affect in task research by concluding that researchers have traditionally viewed the key factor in task performance to be the ‘students’ *capability* to exercise cognition rather than the selection, temperament, or persistence of cognition’ (p. 227). In other words, task attainment has been largely seen as the function of various cognitive factors, whereas motivational variables have been usually regarded as mere modifying variables that do not contribute significantly to the core issue of *what* students are doing in the process of task completion. Our impression is that this view has been changing recently; one important domain in which a more integrated approach has emerged in educational psychology is the study of ‘self-regulatory learning’, where cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies have been increasingly studied

with respect to their interplay with motivational strategies (cf. Zimmerman, 1994). Also, in a more general sense, cognitive and affective/motivational processing in learning behaviours have been found to be more closely related to one another than was suspected earlier (cf. Winne and Marx, 1989).

In the L2 field, the study of the role of motivation in second language acquisition has been a prominent research area (for a recent review, see Dörnyei, in press), but the macro-orientation observed in general psychology has also been characteristic here. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the emphasis had been on examining how various language attitudes affected students' general propensity to engage in L2 learning and their overall learning success (e.g. Gardner, 1985). Recently, however, a new direction has emerged in L2 motivation research which has shifted the emphasis from general to situation-specific motives in order to understand language learners' concrete classroom behaviours and 'task motivation' (e.g. Crookes and Schmidt, 1991, Dörnyei, 1996; Julkunen, 1989; Williams and Burden, 1997). For example, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) have developed a Process Model of student motivation, which views motivation as being associated with a complex mental process that involves, among other things, initial planning, intention formation, task generation, task implementation, action control and outcome evaluation. Thus, this conceptualization centres the wide array of relevant motivational influences on task performance, and does this around a temporal axis, portraying motivational processes as they happen in time. Key components in the model include the learner's perception of the significance of the learning goal, the incentive values associated with task completion, the expectancy of success in the task, as well as various aspects of relevant domain-specific knowledge (e.g. action schemata, performance standards, background information and varied attainment strategies).

## *2 Tasks and the social situation*

Looking at the other main direction of enquiry pursued in this paper, the analysis of the *socio-dynamic determinants* of task performance, we find a somewhat different situation. There is a significant body of literature in the social sciences investigating

how people interact and co-operate in various small group formations, such as work groups engaged in problem-solving tasks or leadership teams making decisions. Although such an approach is clearly relevant to instructional contexts as well, except for the field of co-operative learning, which has been extensively researched in the past, the amount of research conducted on the social psychology of instructional design has been surprisingly little (although, see Cohen, 1994; Schmuck and Schmuck, 1997).

In the L2 field, the extension of task research paradigms to include a systematic micro-analysis of social parameters is warranted by the fact that a great deal of the learning activities advocated by current communication-oriented teaching methodologies involve dyads or small groups rather than individual learners, and therefore a learner's performance cannot be evaluated properly without any reference to the influence of his/her peers. In fact, the task situation can be seen as a prime example of a 'microsystem' in Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological psychological sense, which he defined as a

pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit, engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment.

(p. 15)

One field in the social sciences that is particularly relevant to the study of such interpersonal social systems is *group dynamics*, whose central tenet states that when individuals spend extended time together, pursuing shared goal-directed behaviour in a context with well-defined boundaries (e.g. a seminar, a work team), they become a 'group', which is a powerful social unit that is in many ways more than the sum of its parts (for a review, see Ehrman and Dörnyei, 1998). 'Groups' have been found to develop their own idiosyncratic internal structure (i.e. intermember relations, status hierarchy, group norms and role system), which has a significant bearing on the productivity and performance of the individual members (Forsyth, 1998). The best documented effect of this type has been that between group cohesiveness and group performance

(Gully, Devine and Whitney, 1995; Mullen and Copper, 1994), with cohesiveness being both a prerequisite for and predictor of increased productivity. This positive relationship has also been found to apply to verbal performance: Levine and Moreland's (1990) review of the psychological literature presents evidence that members of a cohesive group are more likely than others to participate actively in conversations and engage in self-disclosure or collaborative narration, which are student behaviours necessary for effective communicative task involvement. In the L2 field, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1994) have produced empirical evidence that perceived group cohesiveness substantially contributes to language learners' motivation complex and correlates significantly with various language criterion measures.

An interesting question in this context is how 'dyads' co-construct the task outcome. From a social perspective, dyads can be seen as being halfway between individual learners and groups. Similarly to small groups, the learners' achievement in dyads is not only a function of their own characteristics but also of the quality and quantity of the interaction and co-operation between the participating actors in the task. On the other hand, in a dyad the pattern of relations is much simpler than in groups as there is only one interpersonal relationship, that between the two members; in contrast, even in a small group of three, there are already three different relationships (between Members A and B; B and C; and C and A) and this number increases progressively with each additional member. Thus, whereas in groups the quality of the relationship between any two members is not a sufficiently dynamic variable to describe the group as a whole, the *interpersonal relationship* between the two participants is a central determinant of the socio-dynamic set-up of a dyad. Although the relationship factor has received some attention in past task-based research (e.g. Plough and Gass, 1993), Skehan (1998b) mentions it as one of the most promising, largely uncharted areas in the field of task-based research.

### *3 Research design*

To summarize, the purpose of the study reported in this paper has been to explore various affective (primarily motivational) and

socio-dynamic variables underlying student performance in communicative language tasks. Using data from a large-scale British–Hungarian research project, our objective was to identify some important variables that determine the participating language learners’ actual *engagement* in language tasks in terms of the amount of speech produced. We see ‘task engagement’ as a central issue in instructed second language acquisition because we believe it is a prerequisite for any language processing to take place. To put it broadly, if students are not actively involved in the instructional tasks and do not produce a certain amount of language output, the tasks are unlikely to be effective in developing communicative skills. Therefore, all the cognitive and linguistic processes discussed in the L2 task literature depend, to some extent, on this initial condition.

The design of our study was relatively simple: following a straightforward correlational research design we identified and assessed a number of independent (predictor) and dependent (criterion) variables, and then computed correlations between them. Within this framework, our study contains two special features:

1. Besides looking at task performance in the learners’ L2, we also administered the same task (with a slight variation in content) in the participants’ mother tongue to be able to examine the extent of variation in the task output that was caused by the language factor.
2. Unlike most studies on L2 motivation, in which the criterion measure is some sort of course achievement or standardized language proficiency score, we correlated the obtained attitudinal/motivational variables with objective measures of the participants’ actual language output in a concrete learning task. This may be important, because from a theoretical point of view, the relationship between motivation and achievement is not straightforward. Motivation as a psychological term is used to refer to the antecedent of action rather than achievement. It is true that motivated learners will demonstrate more effort and persistence in their task behaviour, which in turn can lead to increased achievement. However, this relationship is indirect, because achievement is also influenced by a host of other

factors, most notably the learners' ability, learning opportunities and the instructional quality of the learning tasks. Thus, we believe that examining the influence of motivational variables on actual learner behaviours may provide more reliable and valid measures of the general significance of motivation in L2 learning than examining motivation–achievement relationships.

### **III Method**

#### *1 Participants*

The participants of the analyses discussed in this paper were 46 Hungarian students (aged 16–17) studying English at an intermediate level in 5 classes in 2 Budapest secondary schools. The two schools were of the same type, 'gimnázium' (similar to the former British grammar schools), providing general instruction and preparing students for further studies in higher education. They were all well-regarded but not particularly 'famous' or 'elite' schools. The English curriculum involved teaching integrated skills with an emphasis on developing communicative competence, and students in all five groups used course books published in Great Britain. The group sizes ranged from 12–16 (but not every student participating in the project was present when the data reported here were gathered).

#### *2 Tasks*

The tasks used in the study were two alternative versions of an oral argumentative task. This task was designed as an interactive problem-solving activity, aimed at eliciting arguments concerning everyday school matters. Students (working in pairs) were given a list of items and they were asked to select and rank-order some of these individually, based on an imaginary situation (see Appendix for the L2 task). Following this, they were to compare with their partners their preferences and come to a compromise by means of a negotiation process. First the students' performance in the L2 task was recorded, and then, on a separate occasion, they repeated the task (though with different content specifications) in their L1.

### 3 Data collection

All the data collection of the study was carried out within the framework of the students' regular English classes. First a *C-test* was administered to the participants to measure their global language proficiency; the actual version used had been validated for Hungarian learners of English (Dörnyei and Katona, 1992). Then the participating students were asked to fill in two self-report questionnaires. The first focused on attitudinal/motivational issues, based on Clément, Dörnyei and Noels's (1994) instrument specifically developed for Hungarian learners. The second questionnaire included three sections: (a) a scale assessing the level of group cohesiveness in the students' learner groups (adapted from Clément *et al.*); (b) three standard sociometric questions examining the interrelationship between the learners (e.g. 'If you received three tickets to the cinema, which two of your groupmates would you invite?'); and (c) a scale assessing the participants' 'willingness to communicate' (WTC) in the L1; WTC has been conceptualized to be an important language learner variable (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels, 1998) and the actual items used in our study were adapted from an instrument developed by McCroskey and Richmond (1991). Table 1 contains a summary of the variables used in the study.

### 4 Data analysis

All the recorded material was transcribed by trained research assistants and the transcriptions were checked by the researchers. As mentioned above, we used two measures of the quantity of learner engagement: the number of words and the number of turns produced by the participants. This second measure was included because it was assumed that the successful completion of a problem-solving, negotiation-based task such as the one we had used would require a considerable amount of turn-taking to take place. In contrast, 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. Therefore, the number of turns used by a speaker can be seen as an indicator of the level of student involvement. We must note that there is a difference between the two criterion measures in that the number

**Table 1** Description of the independent variables in the survey with the number of items comprising a scale and the Cronbach Alpha internal reliability coefficient given in brackets where applicable

<b>L2 proficiency</b>	C-test scores
<b>Motivation</b>	Results of a 45-item self-report questionnaire consisting of 6-point Likert-type items
• Educational/cultural orientation	L2 learning associated with the wish to acquire knowledge and to learn more about English-speaking people; e.g. 'Learning English is important for me to become more educated' (4, .85)
• Attitudes towards English speakers	E.g. 'I like the way Americans behave' (3, .76)
• Incentive values of English proficiency	A broad factor associated with the various benefits of L2 proficiency; e.g. 'Learning English is important for me because I may need English in the future (work, further education)' (9, .73)
• Attitudes towards the English course	E.g. 'I like the English classes' (3, .84)
• Language use anxiety	Anxiety experienced while using the L2; e.g. 'I usually feel ill at ease when I have to speak English' (2, .74)
• Linguistic self-confidence	Factor associated with a favourable self-conception of language aptitude, satisfaction with progress and a belief in one's ability to succeed in L2 learning; e.g. 'I am sure I'll be able to learn English' (5, .70)
• Effort	The extent of effort the student plans to exert when learning the L2; e.g. 'I would like to invest a great deal of energy into learning English in the future' (2, .62)
• Need for achievement	Factor associated with the learner's general desire to achieve and succeed; e.g. 'I like working hard' (2, .76)
• Attitudes towards the tasks	E.g. 'I have found the language tasks used in the project useful' (2, .51)
<b>Social variables</b>	A number of different variables related to the learner's class group and the learner's social position
• Perceived group cohesiveness	Six Likert-scale items describing the learner's group; e.g. 'I like my English class group' (.75)
• Status	An index of the learner's popularity in his/her class: the number of peers who have chosen the learner to go to the cinema and have sincere talks with (based on the sociometric questions)
• Relationship with the interlocutor	A dichotomous measure indicating whether or not there is a mutually expressed interpersonal link between the speaker and the interlocutor (in the sociometric matrix)

**Willingness to communicate (WTC)**

Six-point rating scales measuring the learner's 'readiness to enter into discourse in different social situations, such as 'Standing in the bus stop with friends' (6, .44)

of turns depends more directly on the quality of the joint interaction than the number of words does. For example, if the interaction itself is not very productive but one person offers lengthy monologues, this will result in a high word count but a low turn number on his/her part. One's turn number depends directly on the interlocutor's active contribution, since in turn-taking the number of turns produced by the two speakers is roughly equal.

All the data from the questionnaires were computer coded, and the number of variables to be analysed was reduced by computing multi-item variables (scales) by summing the thematically corresponding items. This resulted in a total of 11 scales, summarized in Table 1, along with their description, the number of items they were made up of, and the Cronbach Alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient. The mean Cronbach Alpha coefficient across the eleven scales is .64, which is adequate for such short scales (note that the lowest figure emerged with the WTC scale because it deliberately sampled responses concerning different social situations). Because, as will be shown in Table 2 below, there was considerable between-group and between-task variation in the learners' language output, for the correlation-based analyses we computed standard scores within each class for both the independent and dependent variables and used these rather than the raw scores in the computations. This involved mathematically converting the distribution of the scores within each class sample in a way that the mean was 0 and the standard deviation 1, which is an established statistical method of compensating for within-sample differences before pooling the data from various subgroups (see Dörnyei, *in press*; Gardner, 1985).

## **IV Results and discussion**

### *1 Descriptive statistics*

Table 2 presents basic descriptive statistics of the two criterion measures. The figures show that there is considerable between-task

and between-group variation, which was the reason for using standard scores in the subsequent analyses.

## 2 *Analysis of student performance in the L2 task*

Table 3 presents the correlations between the independent and the dependent variables. As can be seen, there are no significant correlations (at the  $p < .05$  level) with any of the social variables, nor with L2 proficiency. *Willingness to communicate* (WTC) shows a positive significant correlation with the number of turns but not with the number of words produced. This is, in fact, in accordance with the construct of WTC, since it is more a measure of whether someone will initiate talk rather than how much the person actually speaks.

With respect to the motivational variables, we find that only the situation-specific factors – attitudes towards the English course, attitudes towards the task and linguistic self-confidence – correlated significantly with the criterion measures and none of the more general motivational orientations did. (Although the construct of ‘linguistic self-confidence’ is generally seen as context-independent, in our case it is also largely situation-specific in the

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics of the criterion measures: group means and standard deviations (in brackets)

Group code	Number of words		Number of turns	
	Task – L1	Task – L2	Task – L1	Task – L2
1	175.38 (62.21)	139.63 (45.80)	16.38 (7.39)	16.63 (3.34)
2	183.50 (100.58)	228.00 (131.38)	11.30 (7.24)	19.77 (11.51)
3	233.70 (43.35)	245.00 (130.04)	21.10 (7.48)	18.00 (2.53)
4	241.50 (91.62)	198.63 (41.97)	14.13 (4.85)	16.13 (1.64)
5	132.80 (43.32)	139.00 (73.43)	11.90 (3.63)	17.00 (5.68)
Total sample	192.07 (79.68)	191.91 (101.76)	14.93 (7.10)	17.74 (6.96)

**Table 3** Correlations between the dependent and independent variables in the L2 task

	Word no.	Turn no.
L2 proficiency	-.18	.03
Willingness to communicate (WTC)	.25	.36*
<b>Motivation</b>		
• Educational/cultural orientation	.01	-.05
• Attitudes towards English speakers	.11	.04
• Incentive values of English proficiency	-.10	.28
• Attitudes towards the English course	.39**	.35*
• Language use anxiety	-.10	.00
• Linguistic self-confidence	.35*	.21
• Effort	.08	-.05
• Need for achievement	.02	-.06
• Attitudes towards the tasks	.32*	.48**
<b>Social variables</b>		
• Status	.15	-.17
• Perceived group cohesiveness	-.08	.12
• Relationship with the interlocutor	-.16	-.13

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

sense that it is a function of the quality and quantity of previous L2 contact, which for most of these learners had been restricted to the L2 classroom.)

Thus, the emerging pattern of correlations in Table 3 is somewhat controversial: while all the positive correlations make sense and were expected on the basis of theoretical considerations, the lack of some other expected correlations raises questions. Why were the more generalized motivational orientations not related to achievement in our study in spite of the fact that past research (cf. Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993) has consistently detected such associations? Why did the three social variables not appear to affect student performance even though theoretical considerations would suggest so? And finally, how can we explain the lack of any significant relationship between verbal behaviours and L2 proficiency?

In order to answer these questions, let us first look at the task situation from the students' perspective. Although the language tasks were administered during the learners' regular English classes, they were not part of the official syllabus but instead served

research purposes. And even though we placed a great emphasis on 'selling' our project to the students, that is, on creating positive task attitudes, it was inevitable that not everybody took the activities equally seriously. We can guess, for example, that some of the students may have looked at our project as a welcome break from the serious, 'real' school activities, whereas others may have found our tasks pointless or a nuisance. This is, in fact, quite understandable and to a certain extent inevitable with a classroom-oriented investigation such as ours; however, if this assumption is true, it would mean that the behaviour of some of the students (the ones who did not take the task seriously for some reason) was somewhat random and not necessarily reflecting their motivation to learn the L2. Such random task behaviour, in turn, would be expected to depress the motivation-behaviour correlation coefficients.

In order to test this hypothesis, we divided the sample into two subgroups based on the 'attitudes towards the task' variable by forming a continuum of the learners according to their score on this variable and by assigning the upper half of the sample to the 'high task-attitude' subsample (HighS) and the lower half of the sample to the 'low-task attitude' subsample (LowS). Following this, we repeated the correlation analysis reported above in the two subsamples separately (see Table 4).

The results in Table 4 confirm our conjecture that the two subsamples show strikingly different characteristics in terms of the relationship between the motivational and language measures. Within the HighS, WTC has a very strong positive relationship with the two criterion measures: it explains 45 per cent of the variance in the number of turns (as indicated by the correlation coefficient of .67), and even the somewhat lower (but still highly significant) correlation with the number of words (.47) accounts for 22 per cent of the variance. Furthermore, in this subsample, social status (i.e. the learner's social standing or popularity in the class) correlates positively with the number of words, which is consistent with findings in social psychology that indicate that high-status students tend to have the floor for longer periods than their lower status peers (e.g. Forsyth, 1998).

We also find a highly significant positive correlation between need for achievement and word number, suggesting that in the

**Table 4** Correlations with the number of words and turns in the L2 task in high and low task-attitude subsamples

	High task attitudes		Low task attitudes	
	Word no.	Turn no.	Word no.	Turn no.
L2 proficiency	-.39*	-.09	.14	.27
Willingness to communicate (WTC)	.47**	.67**	-.04	.06
<b>Motivation</b>				
• Educational/cultural orientation	-.09	-.20	-.06	-.15
• Attitudes towards English speakers	-.01	.06	.12	-.17
• Incentive values of English proficiency	-.47**	.22	.10	.25
• Attitudes towards the English course	-.04	-.07	.47**	.29
• Language use anxiety	-.33	-.02	-.17	-.31
• Linguistic self-confidence	.43**	.08	.32	.35
• Effort	-.14	-.12	.19	-.12
• Need for achievement	.47**	.19	-.35	-.23
• Attitudes towards the tasks	.25	.27	-.03	.29
<b>Social variables</b>				
• Status	.38*	.15	.04	-.38*
• Perceived group cohesiveness	.03	.19	-.39*	-.21
• Relationship with the interlocutor	-.12	-.04	-.09	-.11

\*  $p < .10$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$

*Note:* In order to compensate for the rather small sample size that was due to the division of the original sample into two halves, in this procedure the probability level of  $p < .10$  was accepted as significant

HighS those students who participated in the task particularly actively also had a high level of general achievement motivation. The strong role played by need for achievement in L2 learning was documented by Dörnyei (1990), who explained its relevance to L2 motivation by arguing that the process of instructed language learning is made up, to a considerable degree, of academic achievement situations and therefore the learners' general desire to achieve and succeed can be expected to enhance their performance in such contexts.

It is noteworthy that neither WTC, nor social status, nor need for achievement are directly related to the learners' disposition towards the L2 (as they were computed by using variables referring to WTC in the L1, general social relationships and non-L2-specific motivational variables, respectively) and, according to our results,

they only come into force if students take a favourable attitude towards the language task to be performed. This underscores the importance of task quality in the learning process and the importance of a task-based approach to understanding the operation of the L2 motivation complex.

Finally, there is one more factor that has a powerful effect on the number of words produced in the HighS: linguistic self-confidence. Although this variable has also emerged as a positive correlate in the total sample, its impact is considerably stronger amongst the task-motivated learners. This is in accordance with theoretical considerations: although self-confidence (i.e. the self-conception of aptitude, competence and coping potential) is normally assumed to exert a general influence on learning across different tasks and domains, its impact is usually particularly strong in the case of 'task-specific self-confidence' or, as it is usually termed in the literature, 'self-efficacy'. We believe that self-confidence in the task-motivated subsample can be viewed as an index of self-efficacy.

We also find two significant negative correlations in the HighS between word number and (a) L2 proficiency and (b) incentive values of English proficiency (i.e. the benefits associated with L2 proficiency). Both are rather unexpected and we can only speculate about the reason for their emergence. With respect to L2 proficiency, it can be argued that higher-level learners were able to express their messages in a more concise and to-the-point manner, thereby needing to say less while completing the argumentative tasks. The negative relationship with incentive values indicates that those task-motivated learners who report being particularly interested in the pragmatic/utilitarian aspects of L2 proficiency participate less actively than other task-motivated learners. This may suggest that some of the self-reported motivation of these learners was mere 'lip service', that is, they reported an interest in learning English because that was the done thing in Hungary at the time of the investigation (Dörnyei, Nyilasi and Clément, 1996) without actually having made the commitment to work hard.

Let us now consider the results in the LowS. Here we find very few significant correlations, which is consistent with our original hypothesis that because these learners failed to take

the task seriously, their performance would be somewhat random. The only positive correlation with a criterion measure, between attitudes towards the English course and word number, shows that there was only one subgroup in this task-unmotivated subsample which produced a systematically higher number of words: the learners who had a favourable attitude towards the English course in general. This implies that the generalized positive disposition toward the whole course in their case neutralized some of their negative perception of the particular task and thus they participated more actively than learners who held unfavourable attitudes towards both the course and the task. This result is important in pointing to the fact that situation-specific motives have at least two distinct levels – task-related and course-related – depending on the extent of their generalization.

The other two significant correlations in this subsample were both negative and concerned social attitudes. Learners with a higher social status initiated significantly fewer turns, and students who considered their learning group a cohesive entity (i.e. who felt comfortable in this social situation) produced significantly fewer words. It seems therefore that the learners who did not take the tasks seriously (as shown by the fact that they were in this subsample) but had a comfortable social position within the group felt no social pressure to participate actively and therefore gave the task a ‘big miss’.

To summarize the interrelationships between the independent and dependent variables in the L2 task, the results point to a multi-level construct of predictor variables in terms of their impact on the criterion measures. The basic level concerns task-attitudes, with the HighS (naturally) showing increased performance in terms of the number of words produced. Within this subsample learners who shared some non-L2-specific characteristics – WTC, need for achievement and social status in class – spoke extensively, particularly if they also developed sufficient linguistic self-confidence in the past. In the LowS, students who shared a positive disposition towards the course in general (in spite of their less favourable attitudes towards the task in particular) participated more actively than others, and learners who had a comfortable social position in the class produced the least language in their

performance – even the social pressure exerted by the group could not constitute a leverage on them to get actively engaged in the L2 task. Thus, the effect of some variables in our study appeared to be conditional on the existence or absence of some others: WTC, need for achievement and social status had a positive effect only on those learners' task-engagement who had favourable task-attitudes, whereas social status had a negative effect when accompanied by negative task attitudes.

### *3 Analysis of student performance in the L1 task*

Let us now turn to examine the students' performance in the argumentative task performed in their mother tongue. Table 5 presents correlations between the dependent and independent variables. Looking at the table, we find a very different picture from the one that emerged in the L2 task. First of all, five out of the nine motivational variables have significant correlations with both criterion measures (which is more than what we found in the L2 task), but all these coefficients are negative. These consistent results point to the fact that, in the L1 task, learners who did not particularly like the English classes and did not see much point in learning English in general appeared to be more active than their motivated peers. It is as if they had sensed that finally there was a chance for them to participate in a class that normally was not their 'space', and thus 'went for it' by chatting away in Hungarian. If this hypothesis is true, we would expect the learners' relationship with their speaking partner to have a considerable impact on the extent of their engagement, since a suitable interlocutor is a prerequisite for a casual conversation. Indeed, the only significant positive correlations we find in this task are those between the relationship with the interlocutor and both criterion measures.

These results raise an important issue: if the interpersonal effect of the interlocutor had a detectable influence on the speaker's performance in the L1 task – which is consistent with our expectations derived from the social psychological literature – why did it fail to emerge in the L2 task? In other words, what was it about the L2 task that overrode the interpersonal relationship effect? Although our data do not provide an unambiguous answer to this question, they allow us to formulate certain hypotheses. The

**Table 5** Correlations between the dependent and independent variables in the L1 task

	Word no.	Turn no.
L2 proficiency	-.21	-.19
Willingness to communicate (WTC)	-.16	-.16
<b>Motivation</b>		
• Educational/cultural orientation	-.33*	-.43**
• Attitudes towards English speakers	-.12	-.20
• Incentive values of English proficiency	-.32*	-.35*
• Attitudes towards the English course	-.34*	-.33*
• Language use anxiety	.26	.08
• Linguistic self-confidence	-.48**	-.37*
• Effort	-.37*	-.34*
• Need for achievement	-.11	.15
• Attitudes towards the tasks	-.18	-.24
<b>Social variables</b>		
• Status	.09	-.01
• Perceived group cohesiveness	.08	.05
• Relationship with the interlocutor	.37*	.37*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

two most prominent features in which the two tasks differed were the language of the communication and their instructional purpose. Both of these may have had a bearing on the sociodynamic character of the argumentative task:

- When the medium of the communication is an L2, the challenge of trying to express one's thoughts using a limited linguistic code and to decode the interlocutor's meaning from the often imprecise/incorrect verbalizations creates an emotional state that is different from the communication mode in one's mother tongue and which may modify one's perceptions of the latent sociolinguistic features/constraints of the interaction.
- The L2 task in our study was a 'learning task' proper, in which students were assumed to adopt a 'learning mode'. The existence of such a 'learning mode' is confirmed by the fact that when certain traditional, non-authentic L2 activities require the participants to produce often bizarre interactions with little or no real communicative meaning, motivated learners do not seem to have any problem acting out their parts, whereas they would

be unlikely to take such meaningless interactions seriously in real life. Although one purpose of applying communicative tasks is exactly to reduce the artificial nature of the communicative situation, we may speculate that some aspects of the 'learning mode' will always prevail, and therefore when learners do the same task in their L1, the difference will not just be in the ease of speech but also in the suspension of the 'learning mode'.

Although the above arguments are admittedly tentative and speculative, the fact remains that learners in our study behaved differently when the task was carried out in their L1 and L2. Further research into this difference may reveal some important aspects in the learners' task disposition that differentiate classroom tasks from real-life tasks.

## **V Conclusion**

Although this article has presented data from a relatively small student sample and we have used only two rather crude criterion measures concerning the quantity of speech the learners produced (without examining the quality of the language output), the results revealed some interesting patterns in the affective and socio-dynamic factors underlying oral task performance. To start with, motivational variables were found to make a significant impact on the learners' task engagement. Although this was not at all unexpected, since past research on L2 motivation has consistently confirmed the effects of motivation on learning achievement, our study was novel in the sense that we selected situated language behaviours rather than some sort of global proficiency or course-achievement measure as the main criterion variable. By doing so, we were hoping to detect stronger and more consistent relationships than the ones usually reported in motivation studies employing holistic criterion measures, because general proficiency/achievement scores are less directly related to motivation in that they are further away on the motivation-behaviour-achievement chain. Indeed, in accordance with this hypothesis, several of the correlation coefficients we have found were well above .40, which is rarely achieved in L2 motivation studies. Our assumption has received further confirmation by the fact that it was the situation-specific rather than the general motives that had a particularly

strong impact on the extent of the learners' task engagement. It was also noteworthy that even among the situation-specific motives we could detect two distinct levels, one related to the course in general, the other to the specific task, as was shown by the fact that amongst the task-unmotivated learners those who had a favourable disposition towards the course participated more actively than those who had unfavourable attitudes towards both the course and the task.

A second significant finding of our study concerned the fact that the various predictor variables included in our research paradigm affected student behaviours very differently depending on the extent of the students' initial task attitudes. In the high task-attitude subsample, linguistic self-confidence and three non-L2-specific variables – WTC, need for achievement and social status – emerged as significant positive determinants of student behaviour. The construct of WTC was first introduced in L1 communication studies and has been hypothesized to have a significant impact on L2 learner behaviours as well (MacIntyre *et al.*, 1998); the powerful associations detected in our study provide strong endorsement of this assumption. With regard to social status, as far as we know, our study is the first in the L2 field to identify a significant empirical relationship between this variable and L2 use. This result also confirms, more generally, the validity of the inclusion of social aspects into our extended research paradigm.

In the low task-attitude subsample only one predictor variable, course-specific attitudes, showed a significant positive relationship with the number of words produced, indicating that a generalized positive disposition towards the course will have a positive effect on task-engagement even in those tasks that the learners do not particularly like. On the other hand, two socio-dynamic measures – social status and perceived group cohesiveness – appeared to have a negative impact on task engagement in this subsample, implying that amongst task-unmotivated learners the lack of any social pressure further reduces work output.

The striking differences found in the task-motivated and task-unmotivated subsamples also have some important research methodological implications. Task attitudes appear to function like a filter: if they are positive then the learner's performance follows

'regular' patterns, that is, reflects the effects of other relevant influences (e.g. need for achievement, WTC). However, if the filter is 'up', that is, if students assume negative attitudes towards the particular task examined, their performance becomes somewhat random. We would expect that this filtering effect may also apply to linguistic variables (e.g. to the fluency, accuracy and complexity of the speech produced), and if this is so, it might be advisable to include the measurement of attitudinal variables in task-based research in general so that students with low-task motivation can be treated separately or can be excluded from the sample.

The results from the L1 task point to a further important issue, concerning a special 'learning mode' students adopt in pursuing instructional tasks. The fact that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the task participants only influenced their performance in the L1 and not in the L2 task indicates that an 'L2 learning mode' may affect the perception of some important parameters of the communication and suggests that this warrants further, more focused research.

Finally, as we noted earlier, some correlations in our study were not as high as expected. For example, it is difficult to understand why language anxiety did not show a stronger (negative) relationship with L2 use. Having given this question a great deal of consideration, we suspect that one reason why our study has produced only partial results in some respects may be that – in the traditional vein of motivation research – we took an individualistic perspective and focused only on one member of the conversing dyad at a time, whereas in reality the actual conversation was a joint product of both speakers. Anxiety, for example, may have a completely different effect on the task outcome depending on whether the interlocutor also has it or not: it may well be the case that if both parties have language anxiety, this variable becomes a highly significant determinant of the L2 output, whereas if the interlocutor is sufficiently confident, he/she may 'pull along' the more anxious speaker and therefore the impact of anxiety may not reach statistical significance. We would assume that such a dynamic relationship may be relevant to affective features in general in communicative language tasks and, therefore, we are planning a follow-up study to investigate how the interlocutor's affective characteristics and social perceptions affect the two participants'

joint performance, that is, how affect is co-constructed.

In conclusion, we have found the adoption of a task-based framework to study the affective and socio-dynamic correlates of learner behaviour a useful research paradigm which has further potential. The task-based focus allows for a micro-analysis of the various factors, conditions, constraints and processes that determine success in using an L2 for communication in learning situations. Our results also provide evidence that affective (motivational) and sociodynamic factors have a significant impact on the learners' language output, and could therefore be combined with the study of cognitive, linguistic and educational task variables that have been the subject of much past research. In fact, an extended task-based paradigm offers a potentially comprehensive framework within which researchers can study a number of different aspects of L2 acquisition/use in a hitherto unprecedented integrated manner.

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## Appendix

### *The L2 task used in the study*

You are a member of the school student committee. Your school wants to participate in the district's social life and asks students to offer their help. The following possible options have been suggested:

- Delivering lunch to elderly people in the district
- Publishing a local newsletter
- Helping out in the library
- Providing tourist information
- Performing for children in the kindergarten
- Collecting newspaper/wastepaper
- Feeding birds
- Maintaining the park
- Performing for elderly people
- Organizing sports events

First, look at the list alone for three minutes and choose 5 *activities* you would find interesting or useful. Put them on these lines *in the order of your preference*.

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_

Second, compare your list with your partner's. The lists are probably different. Your task is to find the best compromise with your partner and *prepare a final list of 3 activities* you together will recommend to the school management.

1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_

*You have 10 minutes* to convince your partner about your ideas. Make sure you give reasons but remember that you *MUST come to an agreement on the best proposal*.