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A qualitative analysis of language learning tasks: the design of a tool

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This study outlines the construction of a tool to enhance the competence of foreign language teachers in estimating the effectiveness of language-learning tasks. Five assumptions basic to second-language acquisition are crucial to the design of the tool. Subsequently, drawing on insights from cognitive psychology about information-processing, this study develops a categorization of learning activities. This description holds clues to the nature of the mental actions carried out in the working memory. After presenting two tasks to demonstrate the tool, its contribution to the enhancement of the teacher's competence in estimating the learning impact of language-learning tasks is discussed.

Keywords: Language instruction; learning activities; task analysis; teacher competencies; textbooks.

Introduction

Across many subjects and many years there has been no genuine alternative to the use of printed teaching materials, usually taking the form of textbooks implementing the curriculum.[1] Although, as documented in the certification requirements of many teacher-training programmes, a critical attitude towards such materials has been considered part of the teachers' basic competence, following the textbook's course closely and uncritically has been common practice in everyday teaching. Thus, in the Netherlands, the

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majority of foreign-language (FL) teachers considered themselves unable to join in an educational reform while there were no textbooks to rely on (Dutch Education Inspectorate 1999). Currently, however, there is a growing focus on issues related to the design and evaluation of language-learning materials by FL teachers (McGrath 2002, Tomlinson 2003). This implies an extension of the teachers' competence.

The teachers' handling of learning materials

Several recent developments have stimulated and justified the increased interest in the competence of teachers to estimate the learning impact of instructional materials. First, as Hennessy *et al.* (2005) and Spodark (2001) have pointed out, the rise of new technologies such as the Internet encourages teachers to search for a fruitful integration of these new technologies and more traditional printed instructional materials. Students are growing up as 'screenagers' (Rushkoff 1997) in a 'new media age' (Kress 2003), with ample opportunity to process a huge amount of information, and teachers have to adopt new ways of coping with these changes and using the students' ICT abilities as a basis for teaching. Secondly, current educational reforms in Europe (for instance, Basic Secondary Education in the Netherlands) aim at more independent student activities and more autonomous learning. In this setting, there is a growing demand on teachers to differentiate and to enable learners to work more in accordance with their actual levels of proficiency and personal interests. Due to the constraints of printed media and publishers' interests to produce large quantities of standardized materials, textbooks are less suitable for this purpose. In such circumstances, as Marsden (2001) has shown in his studies of textbooks, teachers will often avoid using books and design supplementary course materials to complement the written curriculum as provided by existing textbooks.

Thirdly, the design activities of teachers are often triggered by discussions about the core objectives of education. In the Netherlands, for example, we see a trend towards competence-based learning in FL education, where learning includes integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Westhoff 2004b). This development has received an impetus by the 'can-do statements' of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). However, the CEFR is an evaluation instrument through which students can make their levels of proficiency in the different languages visible. It gives no guidelines on how to achieve these levels.

Developments of this kind demand an extended competence in handling learning materials on the part of teachers. Thus, it seems appropriate that such a competence is formulated in the new standards of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2002: 101) for the preparation and certification of FL teachers. These standards emphasize the acquisition of 'decision-making skills', including 'making critical decisions regarding planning for instruction, selecting materials, sequencing and executing learning activities'. However, Gomes de Matos (2000) has contended that FL teachers are not inclined to analyse the potential effectiveness of instructional materials, and that the critical analysis of such

materials has been overlooked, or even neglected, in teacher education programmes. In order to fill this gap a scaffolding instrument for qualitative task analysis of instructional materials would be useful. In this paper we will describe the characteristics that such an instrument for FL tasks should possess, our effort to find an existing tool, and the construction of such a tool to meet our criteria.

Theoretical framework

Cognitive psychological perspective

Given the purpose of the instrument (estimating learning impact), we chose a cognitive psychological perspective. More specifically, we started from current insights from cognitive psychology about how information is processed in working memory, and stored in long-term memory (LTM) in such a way that it can be activated and retrieved when desired.[2] Thus, storing in LTM takes place in the form of traces of mental actions in working memory, and it is the nature of the mental actions that take place in working memory that are crucial for learning outcomes. According to Baddeley (2001: 852), the term 'working memory' has been adopted 'to cover the system or systems involved in the temporary maintenance and manipulation of information'. The working memory is the place where information, coming from the sensory stores and from LTM is combined and assembled in a process of constructing meaning. Storage in LTM (the actual learning result) is largely determined by the nature of the manipulations in working memory. For this reason, we concluded that the critical analysis of tasks required a method of qualitative analysis especially directed at the characteristics of the mental actions elicited by these tasks in working memory.

However, following this cognitive psychological perspective, mental actions cannot be considered in isolation (Westhoff 2000). To begin with, there will always be an *object* to the action: some entity (the 'content') being manipulated in working memory by mental action. Additionally, something is needed to elicit this action. In textbook tasks, this is normally the *assignment*. Thus, although the 'agent', i.e. the means by which something is done or caused, of a task is in the mental action, the content and the assignment are the two other constituents of a learning task that determine the learning effects. Therefore, a learning task should always be considered in the light of the interaction of its three constituents (mental action, content, assignment).

The definition of tasks for SLA

In the literature about tasks in SLA there is a broad spectrum of task definitions, depending on the underlying theoretical assumptions. Ranging from broad, pedagogically inspired definitions like Breen's (1987) 'anything that goes on in the classroom' to Task-based Approach (TBA) definitions

(Bygate *et al.* 2001, Skehan and Foster 2001, Willis and Willis 2001) grounded in a specific second-language acquisition (SLA) theory (Long 1985). Given our general cognitive psychological perspective we adopted a broad task definition. In this framework the agent of the learning activity is the effectiveness of the mental action in working memory, irrespective, for example, of whether this action is directed at constructing knowledge in an exemplar-based memory system (vocabulary, chunks) or aims at constructing knowledge about language patterns (as distinguished by Skehan 1998).

Regarding SLA tasks, Littlewood (2004) has distinguished two dimensions in task definitions. The first dimension represents a continuum along which students may operate with differing degrees of focus on form and meaning. Littlewood has divided this continuum into five sections, ranging from non-communicative (e.g. grammar drills) to authentic communication (e.g. role-play and discussion). While this first dimension touches upon the degree of communication, the second dimension focuses upon the student's degree of active personal involvement. According to Littlewood (2004: 323), this second dimension is not specific to language learning, because without involvement students cannot learn at all. Although involvement is basic to all education, Littlewood gives no further indication of what involvement entails and how it should be elicited while working with tasks. Focusing on the mental actions in working memory, we can be more specific on this involvement aspect by relating it to the degree of complexity and 'richness' as proposed by Craik and Tulving (1975) and Laufer and Hulstijn (2001). Therefore, in this study, we define *tasks* as any means intended to elicit meaning-focused language use with the aim of developing foreign-language proficiency (Ellis 2003: 1).

Looking for an existing tool for qualitative task analysis

Method

As a first step, we determined what kind of criteria such a tool for qualitative task analysis would have to include in order to respond to our intended aim. In our framework, the tool could be assumed to serve the desired aim if it included:

- pre-specified criteria to estimate in advance the potential effectiveness of language tasks, focusing on the student's mental actions in working memory triggered by these tasks; and
- pre-specified criteria to make an inventory of types of language tasks. To be appropriate for training purposes, these criteria would have to be theoretically and/or empirically argued.

We investigated whether existing tools could serve the desired aim. We conducted a literature search of the period 1980–1998. We used manual searches in handbooks, practical guides on SL-methodology and searches in ERIC, the *Modern Language Association Library* (MLA), *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* (LLBA) seeking relevant papers.[3] We also undertook a manual search of journals in the domain of SLA.[4] We examined

the publications generated by our search activities to see if they met the criteria indicated above.

We found several examples of tools for the analysis of SLA tasks in textbooks. Those offered by Nunan (1989), Sheldon (1988), Ur (1996) and Williams (1983) were considered to be the most promising. An examination of their tools showed that they contained a wide range of both criteria and headings,[5] but basically they sought to answer questions such as: 'What should a textbook look like, and what language materials must it include?' Such an approach to analysis relates to questions such as: Do the tasks exploit language in a communicative way? Is vocabulary presented in appropriate contexts and situations? However, such analyses focus on the surface of textbook's tasks, paying little attention to their effectiveness as a means of eliciting mental actions in working memory.

Outcomes

For our purposes, the tools we identified and examined have four major deficiencies. First, they do not contain criteria for the analysis of *individual* SLA tasks, but apply to tasks in general or to a complete set of tasks, such as a textbook chapter or the entire textbook.[6] Secondly, the tools we identified are not designed to further teacher competence. In itself, this is not a problem because a tool can, of course, be used in a way different from that envisaged by its designers. However, we believe that tools to foster teacher competence should include criteria that are underpinned theoretically or empirically. These are absent from the tools we identified. Thirdly, it appears that these tools did not provide assistance in delineating the characteristics of mental actions in working memory and their role in constructing and storing meaning. Finally, the questions formulated in the tools we identified often ask for impressionistic and associative answers and lacked systematic theoretical underpinning and transparency. These tools do not contribute to enhancing a teacher's insight into the characteristics of a task which promote learning. The conclusion emerging from these observations, based on our literature search, was that for our aims a new tool for a qualitative analysis of textbook tasks was needed.

The conceptual framework of a new tool

Which aspects of the SLA process should be considered in a tool in order to cover SLA teaching-learning processes? What are the contents of a representative SLA tool ('representative' meaning that no really important issues would be missing)? To answer these questions, we first made a synopsis of the issues to be addressed in the instrument based on a literature review. We distinguished two aspects of tasks that seemed to be relevant to our tool. First, we established the domains in which learning actions could be expected to contribute to SLA. Secondly, we categorized types of mental actions according to certain characteristics of the way they are processed in working memory.

Domains of activities: five basic assumptions about second-language acquisition

In spite of fierce debates on one or another issue, a consensus seems to exist regarding five basic assumptions of second-language acquisition (for an overview, see Brown (2000), Lightbown and Spada (1999), Mitchell and Myles (2004), and Richards and Rodgers (2001)).

(1) *Exposure to input.* Without extended exposure to a rich input, there is little SLA (Krashen 1985). Although very few of Krashen's ideas can be confirmed empirically, and most of them have now been largely challenged (McLaughlin 1987, Ellis 1990, 2002, Norris and Ortega 2000, DeKeyzer 2003), there seems to be a broad consensus in the recent research literature that being extensively exposed to a rich foreign-language input is a crucial, although not an exclusive prerequisite for foreign-language acquisition.

(2) *Content-oriented processing.* Mere exposure is not enough. There seems to be little doubt that being exposed to input is only effective if the input is processed (or, in more practical terms, if the learner has tried to understand its meaning). Something has to be constructed in the working memory before it can be passed to and stored in LTM (Johnson 1983, Wesche 1993, Skehan 1998).

(3) *Form-oriented processing.* There is far less agreement on the role of grammar, or so-called 'form-focused instruction'.[7] Although some research outcomes have been presented advocating the role of formal instruction (Housen and Pierrard 2005), support seems to be growing for the *weak interface hypothesis* (Ellis 1990). This hypothesis tries to explain the paradox that extended content-oriented input processing, combined with form-focused instruction, leads to better results than input processing alone, but that taught grammar rules are seldom used in producing output. The weak interface hypothesis claims that part of the learner output is rule-directed, but that we do not consciously know the rules. Learners form hypotheses about form aspects of the language by processing input. This process of hypothesis formation is supposed to be stimulated by directing the learner's attention to form aspects of the input. Such instruction is characterized as 'Focus on Form', to be distinguished from explicit grammar instruction, which is labelled 'Focus on FormS' (Long 1991, Doughty and Williams 1998). AQ2

(4) *(Pushed) output.* There has been support for the facilitating and stimulating role of output production. Several arguments are given in its favour. It is assumed to enhance fluency, make language learners conscious of their deficits, and so increase their motivation to learn. According to the output hypothesis (Swain 1995, Swain and Lapkin 1995, De Bot 1996), pushed output contributes to form-orientation and gives the teacher or the communication partner the opportunity to provide corrective feedback.[8] Two varieties of output can be distinguished. One part of our language utterances consists of unanalysed combinations ('chunks') that are perceived as wholes (Lyons

1968). Their use is labelled 'formulaic speech' (Myles *et al.* 1998). Pushed output increases the learner's ability to use these chunks in different situations and combinations (Schmitt and Carter 2004, Schmitt *et al.* 2004). The other variety is somewhat misleadingly labelled 'creative speech' (Ellis 1985: 167–170): misleading, because it has little to do with poems or creative writing. The term is used for rule-guided production.

(5) *Acting strategically*. Generally speaking, only limited time is available for foreign-language acquisition. This means that there will always remain gaps in knowledge. For that reason, it is useful and practical to develop a repertoire of strategies to compensate for these deficiencies. We can compensate for deficiencies in *receptive knowledge* by applying reading and listening strategies, such as inferring unknown elements, using prior knowledge, etc. (Westhoff 1991a, b, 1996). To make up for deficiencies in *productive competence*, we can use communication skills such as negotiating meaning, avoiding, description, fillers, and the like (Bialystok 1990, Poulisse 1990, Littlemore 2001).

These five assumptions can be considered as the basic ingredients of effective activities aimed at foreign-language acquisition. Together they form what Westhoff (2004) calls the 'SLA penta-pie', containing all the basic 'ingredients' of a complete and nutritious language 'meal'. The first ingredient (being exposed to input) does not in itself involve mental action. Only when input is *being processed* in working memory (in fact the second and third ingredients) can mental activity be assumed. For that reason, we have confined ourselves to the remaining four domains in our tool. We have described them and given a variety of examples of each type with the help of concrete tasks published in commonly used FL textbooks.

A categorization of mental actions

In a qualitative analysis, for our purposes the gist of each task (the essential 'agent') has to be found in the action in working memory elicited by the assignment—in an activity-driven perspective on learning some kind of 'action' is always required (Haenen 2001). In this we draw on insights from several directions in cognitive and socio-cultural educational psychology (Bruer 1993, National Research Council 2000, Arievitch and Haenen 2005). However, in the literature there are very few examples of categorizations that classify learning activities according to the characteristics of the elicited mental manipulations in working memory, e.g. in terms of 'depth of processing' (Craik and Lockhart 1972), 'richness' (Craik and Tulving 1975), 'involvement load' (Laufer and Hulstijn 2001), and the like. One example seemed promising: the work of O'Malley and Chamot (1999). However, looking more closely, it seems to lack conceptual clarity, at least for our purposes. For instance, in terms of analysing mental actions, the distinction O'Malley and Chamot (1999) make between 'note-taking' and 'summarization' cannot be easily justified in terms of characteristics of mental manipulations in working memory. Labels such as 'personalizing' or

'discovering' are not distinctive regarding the amount and variety of features involved in the mental action. Clues to tackling this problem can be found in Westhoff's (1996, 2004a, 2006) Multi-Feature Hypothesis (MFH). Combining insights from schema theory (Rumelhart and Ortony 1977) and connectionism (McClelland *et al.* 1986, Gasser 1990, Plunkett 1998), Westhoff analyses mental learning activity in terms of the amount and variety of linguistic and non-linguistic features involved in that action. The Multi-Feature Hypothesis predicts that retention and ease of activation are improved by mental activities involving many features from many different categories, manipulated in such a way that they occur in current combinations, in great frequency, and simultaneously. From this hypothesis, five criteria for effective learning tasks can be derived, namely being lifelike, current, informative, functional, and rich in variety of language (Westhoff 2004a).

Combining this MFH with O'Malley and Chamot (1999), we distinguished task types according to the estimated characteristics of the types of activity elicited in working memory. As a distinguishing criterion, we looked at the amount, variety, and frequency of features (linguistic and non-linguistic) that are apparently involved in the elicited action. In 'ranking according to a given criterion' (such as in ordering based on chronology), for example, only one feature has to be considered (point in time), whereas in 'generalizing' (such as deducing a rule from a series of cases) many features of a different kind have to be considered (in order to establish which ones have enough in common to be considered as a group under a covering heading). Combinations of these actions may be possible in carrying out a specific task. Based on these considerations, the following actions have been delineated (see table 1):

(1) reproducing,
(2) ranking,
(3) categorizing,
(4) structuring,
(5) generalizing,
(6) applying, and
(7) elaborating.

The construction of the tool

Method

Based on these theoretical considerations, we designed a draft version of the tool for the qualitative analysis of language learning tasks (QALLT). In order to optimize the theoretical representativeness of the content, the user-friendliness of the form, and the comprehensibility and clarity for average teachers we used an iterative Delphi-like procedure. The designed materials were judged by a panel over three iterations, and revised according to the feedback we received. To cover different specific fields of expertise within the general field of FL teaching, we selected experts for this panel on the

Table 1. Mental actions in second-language acquisition with descriptions, explanations, and illustrations.

Mental action	Description	Explanation and illustration
Reproducing	Repetition of the language input	In language education it is a common procedure to elaborate language input on the basis of repetition, rehearsing and memorizing, e.g. remembering words by listening and repeating aloud.
Ranking	Positioning the language input by virtue of a shared feature that is ordinal or taxonomic in nature	Possible ways of ranking: ● simple, such as based on chronology, meaning; and ● complex, such as based on use, attractiveness.
Categorizing	Arranging the language input into groups	Examples of categorizing: ● What belongs to content, relation, procedure? ● What do you recognize in ...? Do you agree with ...? For what groups could it be interesting to ...? ● Search (according to some description) ...; and ● Looking for similarities and differences.
Structuring	Putting the language input into one or more groups and determining their relationships	Example: ● grouping words according to their meaning by making 'word maps'.
Generalizing	Taking the language input to a level more general than the one given	Examples: ● deduce a rule from some concrete instances; ● recognize a pattern; ● note-taking; summarizing; and ● devise questions with texts.
Applying	Taking the language input to a more concrete level than the one given	Examples: ● think of examples or instances of a general principle or idea; ● think of illustrations; and ● think of directions for use.
Elaborating	Relating the language input to knowledge already stored in the memory	For example, answering questions such as: ● What do I know already? ● What else do I need? ● Where and how can I find it? and ● What's its relevance?

basis of their expertise in language methodology and/or in-service training of FL teachers, their expertise in curriculum development, or their being very experienced language teachers. The final product provides a scaffolding for a systematic and deliberate in-depth analysis of language-learning tasks. The tool contains a set of theoretically argued questions and guidelines. In order to increase the tool's relevance to FL teachers, it focuses on different task types and actions, and can be completed independently.

To demonstrate the tool, we present two tasks. Task 1 (see table 2) provides French sentences containing several possessive pronouns (Hoekstra *et al.* 1998: 34). In French, certain morphological features of possessive pronouns vary according to the gender of the possession (not the possessor). In the task, the student is told that the words in bold are possessive pronouns. The student is asked to find out why the forms of the possessive pronouns vary, and to record their findings in brief keywords. This task is an example of *form-oriented processing of input*, while the elicited mental action is *generalizing*, viz. the relevant grammatical rule has to be deduced and reproduced by the students themselves from some concrete situations as given in the French sentences. Using the tool, the teacher determines which assignment and actions are to be reviewed, and answers questions leading to the assessment of this particular task, such as: Is the assignment lifelike? Does the rule concern a (very) frequent grammatical structure? Does the student really have to infer the rule by processing input on the grammatical structure?

Task 2 (see figure 1) provides a picture showing eight chairs (Häusserman and Piepho 1996: 159). In the story, told in German, the students have to fill in the missing words in the various sentences. In doing so, they have to choose between '*sitzen*' and '*setzen*'. In German, '*sitzen*' (English equivalent: to sit) expresses somebody's location which remains unchanged, while '*setzen*' (English equivalent: to sit down) expresses a kind of movement. The

Table 2. Task one: possessive pronouns in French.

Task one
In de brief van Hélène komen de volgende zinnen of zinsdelen voor [In Helen's letter there are the following sentences or parts of sentences]:
- Je suis obligée de surveiller **mon** comportement. - A la maison **ma** mère me dit : «Surveille **ton** language!». - Je me rattrape avec **mes** copains. - Une de **mes** amies a été séparée de **sa** bande par **ses** parents. - ... **ma** copine leur en voulait beaucoup. - **Ses** parents ne se doutent de rien mais avec **ses** copains, ils font quand-même des bêtises.
De vetgedrukte woorden zijn bezittelijke voornaamwoorden. Probeer te ontdekken waarom de vormen van het bezittelijk voornaamwoord verschillen. [The boldly printed words are possessive pronouns. Find out why the forms of the possessive pronouns differ.]
....

Source: Hoekstra *et al.* (1998: 34).

Task two

Erg%onze Sie*sitzen* oder *setzen [fill in the appropriate form of* to sit *or* to sit down*]:*

Ein sch^ner Mainachmittag im Garten: Unter dem Apfelbaum . . . die sch^ne Irmgard, und ich . . . mich neben sie. Der Opa . . . in dem gro□en runden Sessel. Ans andere Ende des Tisches . . . sich Peter. Wo . . . die Oma? Nat,rlich neben Opa. Nun kommt Corinna, bringt Kaffee und Torte und . . . sich neben Peter. Der letzte ist, wie immer, Paul, er . . . sich zwischen Corinna und die Oma. Welcher Platz bleibt leer? *[A fine May afternoon in the garden: under the apple tree sits beautiful Irmgard, and I sit down next to her. Granddad is sitting in the big round chair. At the other end of the table Peter is sitting down. Where sits grandma? Of course next to granddad. Now Corinna comes in, taking with her coffee and cake, and sits down next to Peter. Paul, as always the last one, sits down between Corinna and grandma. Which chair remains empty?]*

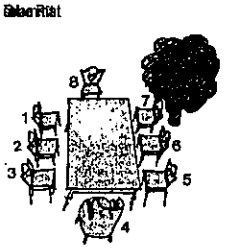

Figure 1. Task two: the picture shows eight chairs. In the story told the students have to choose between 'sitzen' (to sit) and 'setzen' (to sit down). The story describes where seven people are seated. The story ends with the question: Which chair remains empty? Source: Häusserman and Piepho (1996: 159).

story describes where seven people are seated. The remaining chair is empty. The story ends with the question: Which chair remains empty?

This task is an example of *producing output*, in this case the production of 'creative speech' (Ellis 1985), because the production is rule-guided. The mental action is *applying*, because the grammatical phenomenon of *sitzen/ setzen* is being practised and applied in a concrete and comprehensible situation. Having determined task and action, the teacher is asked to answer such questions as: Is the assignment lifelike? Does the assignment organize useful corrective feedback? Which rule is assumed? Does the student have to apply the rule to various cases?

As both examples show, the task (step 1) first has to be categorized according to its task domain. Secondly (step 2), after the determination of the task domain at hand, teachers are asked to analyse (a) the specific task assignment (e.g. write a summary, design a mind map), (b) the triggered mental actions (e.g. abstracting, structuring), and, finally, (c) the content to be mentally manipulated (e.g. a journal article about 'Operation Enduring Freedom'). After these two steps, the teachers are asked (step 3) to evaluate the task and to come to an overall assessment ('Do the students learn from this task?'), followed by a request (step 4) to provide suggestions for its revision and improvement in order to enhance its learning effect.

The evaluation of the tool

After designing the tool, we evaluated it in the form of a systematically monitored trial. In order to explore the effects of using the tool, we designed two types of training settings. One group of teachers attended a face-to-face workshop; a second group analysed the textbook tasks individually, using a self-study package. To study the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural effects of the two interventions, we used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, we gathered information about the adequacy of the tool's content, given the SLA domains we had delineated, the adequate implementation of these domains, and the training of teachers in the use of the tool. We collected our data using questionnaires, interviews, and hands-on use of the tool by SLA experts.

The outcomes of the evaluation by the teachers are reported elsewhere (Driessen 2003). The results show that, even after brief training, teachers reported that the use of the tool contributed to their competencies. Most teachers were satisfied with the particular intervention and the new knowledge-base they had received. The data show that the teachers were not only able to work with the tool, but also reported to have gained knowledge and insight into which characteristics of tasks account for learning effects.

Conclusions

Although a comprehensive in-depth analysis of a substantial body of learning material may not be feasible for language teachers, conducting such an analysis in a reduced form on a sample of tasks can contribute to the development of their competencies. This development can be seen as a learning process, in which the performance of a QALLT can be conceived as a learning task. In that context, the analysis itself is the mental learning action, the textbook materials to be analysed are the content, while the tool we developed is meant to function as the assignment intended to elicit this mental action. In order to best serve this assignment function, the following points should be considered:

- It should be made clear that the tool is based on broadly accepted, current insights from cognitive psychology and SLA theory.

- The tool should be implemented in such a way that the various elements and aspects, derived from those insights are systematically and explicitly taken into account.

Furthermore the outcomes of the evaluation show that

- An extensive clarification of the concepts is required. This must include the theoretical background in concrete terms and with practical illustrations.
- Successful use requires some introductory training and guidance when the instrument is first used. This training can be done in a face-to-face workshop, but also in individual self-study settings.

As the results of our study have shown, systematically reiterative appraisal by a representative panel of experts not only contributes substantially to the practical usability of the tool, but also seems to be a feasible and essential means for the establishment of the tool's validity.

Discussion

Some remarks must be made. First, we opted for a broad task concept. This might be questionable because a stricter task concept exists in the conceptual framework of the so-called Task-based Approach (TBA, Bygate *et al.* 2001, Nunan 2004). There some of the aspects that are addressed in our tool are not relevant (such as the production of 'creative' speech), and some others (such as the elicitation of interaction and negotiation) are missing. Nevertheless, we opted for the broad concept for several reasons, one of them being that, in the literature on this issue, there is substantial support for a broad task definition. This ranges from 'anything that goes on in the classroom' (Breen 1987) to 'any means that is intended to elicit meaning-focused language use with the aim of developing foreign-language proficiency' (Ellis 2003: 1). Furthermore, the professionalism of teachers we were aiming at also has a broader scope than solely organizing and assessing learning activities within the constraints of the TBA. We have advocated the extension of the teacher's existing competencies with the competency to evaluate the usefulness of learning materials.

Secondly, we confined ourselves to the relatively narrow category of 'textbook tasks'. This means that we left more open-ended and more complex tasks, such as projects or WebQuests (Dodge 1995), out of consideration. We justify this with the claim that our tool was meant, first and foremost, as a *learning* tool for teachers. In the context of training, textbook tasks, because they are less complex, are more appropriate and manageable. More complex task arrangements, such as WebQuests, would ask for much more understanding of what the task or the set of tasks is about, and as a consequence leave less room for in-depth analysis of the mental actions being elicited. In other words, we were afraid that our tool users would not see the wood for the trees.

Thirdly, the choice of relatively simple tasks implies that our tool is not specifically aiming at 'communicative' materials. This is not necessarily a problem. The 'agents' in the learning activity are not essentially different and the criteria, such as 'life-like', 'informative', 'functional' and the like, had the built-in characteristic of directing the attention of teachers towards the weaknesses of non-communicative learning materials.

Our work is intended as a contribution to the on-going debate on the professional development of SL teachers. We have proposed a tool for a qualitative analysis of language learning tasks that has the potential of supporting teachers in their role of curriculum-makers and in their (lesson-) planning activities. Working with the tool offers valuable professional-development opportunities in initial teacher preparation and in-service programmes. We believe this to be so because of the promising results of both types of training settings. In addition to the teachers who attended the face-to-face workshop, the teachers of the self-study intervention also reported positive learning results. This second group of teachers analysed the textbook tasks individually and received no additional training to help in the use of the tool.

Although teacher development was the main reason for developing a tool for a qualitative analysis of language-learning tasks, other purposes may also be of potential interest to prospective teachers, teachers in the field, and textbook writers. For instance, in textbook selection, teachers can use the tool as a supplement to checklists or other available instruments. In this way, insights into the strengths and weaknesses of textbooks could be obtained from different perspectives. Because of time constraints, this endeavour should not be too ambitious but, rather, have the character of an educated guess, by way of the analysis of a limited sample of tasks. For textbook development, the tool can be used as an alternative, or a supplement to the trialling procedures as described in Barnard and Randall (1995). Again, the use of the tool should remain realistic, given the in-depth, time-consuming nature of the analysis.

Notes

1. This situation also holds for other subjects; see, e.g. Marsden (2001) and Widdowson and Lambert (2006).
2. For an overview, see Anderson (2000), Baddeley (1997, 2001), Carroll (2004), and Ellis (2003).
3. We used one or more of the terms relating to textbooks/tasks, to assessment/evaluation/selection, and to second language.
4. *Applied Linguistics*; *ELT Journal*; *Language Learning*; *Modern Language Journal*; *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*; *System*.
5. These criteria enable the user to evaluate textbooks on issues ranging from editing quality, physical characteristics, and teacher guidance on the arrangement, appearance, and sequencing of language items.
6. We did find examples of criteria for tasks practising the four language skills (Williams 1983), and specifically for communicative tasks (Nunan 1989).
7. For an overview, see Burgess and Etherington (2002), DeKeyser (2003, 2005), and Doughty (2003).
8. For an overview of the effect of pushed output, see Spada (1997) and Toth (2006). Experiments seem to confirm this claim; see Nobuyoshi and Ellis (1993) and Swain and Lapkin (1995). AQ5

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