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PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF TASK-PERFORMANCE: THE CASE OF ARGUMENTATION

Abstract

The study reported in this paper investigated the pragmatic aspects of task-performance in a series of argumentation tasks that 24 Hungarian learners of English performed over a period of two years. The aim of our research project was to determine how various pragmatic measures of task-performance such as the pragmalinguistic markers of argumentation, the number of claims, counterclaims, supports and counter-supports were affected by task-repetition, the long-term development of language skills, task-content and a short-term focussed intervention. We also analyzed how these variables differed when the participants performed the same type of task in their mother tongue.

The results showed that familiarity with the structure of the task helped learners to pay more attention to informational content of their message, which was reflected in better performance in terms of the number of support they provided for their claims. Neither language development assumed to have taken place during one year, nor the argumentation training resulted in the improvement of the participants' argumentation skills. Another finding of the study was that the type of task and the level of formality of the interaction have an effect on the pragmalinguistic measures of task-performance.

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I Introduction

The skill of argumentation has long been acknowledged as an integral component of academic skills. Moreover, the ability to form and support an opinion is not only essential in pursuing university or college studies, but in everyday and business life as well. For this reason, in many countries (for example in the United States and in the United Kingdom) argumentation is explicitly taught already at secondary school level. In a number of other countries, however, such as Hungary, where the study reported in this paper was conducted, secondary school students only receive sporadic education in rhetorics. In these countries very few books are available on what the rules of argumentation are even in the learners' mother tongue, not to mention foreign language textbooks. Nevertheless, when students enter a university in Hungary, they are expected to be able to give voice to their opinion and support it adequately. It was this contradiction between the explicit teaching of argumentation and university requirements in Hungary that motivated our investigation, which focussed on L2 learners' performance in a series of oral argumentation tasks for a period of 2 years.

When reviewing the literature of task-based language learning (for a comprehensive review see Skehan, 1998), we found that most studies in this field were concerned with the linguistic measures of L2 learners' output in various tasks, and that very little is known today about the pragmatic aspects of task-performance. Moreover, upon studying the body of research on task-based learning, it also became apparent that while a number of studies have investigated participants' performance across various types of tasks (e.g. Bygate, 1999; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Robinson, 1995; Robinson, Ting & Urwin, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1996), the issue of how the content of the task influences students' output has not been addressed. In

addition, at present we know of no studies that compared learners' performance in the same type of task in L2 and the participants' L1. In order to gain an insight into these relatively unexplored areas of task-based learning, our study aimed to find an answer to the following questions:

1. How do task repetition, the long-term development of language skills, task-content, and a short-term focussed intervention affect the quantity of arguments and the pragmalinguistic expression of argumentation in oral argumentative tasks?
2. How does performance in terms of the quantity of arguments produced and the pragmalinguistic expression of argumentation differ in L1 and L2?

II Research on L2 learners' argumentation behaviour

There has been extensive research on how various task characteristics influence task performance and the summary of these studies has been reported in a number of articles (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 1997), therefore here we will only summarise the relevant studies on tasks that involved argumentation. Duff (1986) used a prioritising and a discussion task to investigate interactional and discoursal differences. She found that the measures of meaning negotiation did not differ to a significant extent, but the results showed that the length of turns was significantly longer in the prioritising task than in the discussion task. Foster and Skehan (1996, 1997) and Skehan and Foster (1997) compared decision-making tasks with narrative and personal information exchange tasks. The findings of these series of studies showed that decision-making tasks place a heavy cognitive load on learners in terms of conceptual planning, which in turn, results in the decrease of accuracy and fluency and in the increase of complexity of the output. As can be seen from this brief summary, the pragmalinguistic correlates of argumentation tasks have not been investigated yet in the framework of task-based language learning research, therefore it is instructive to turn studies

in other fields in this respect.

The first systematic study of the organisation of oral argumentation in the 20th century that is relevant to our purposes was carried out by Toulmin (1958), who claimed that the units of the analysis of arguments should be the premise, warrant, backing, qualification, rebuttal and conclusion. In the field of discourse analysis the investigation of argumentation gained more importance in the 1980's. Schiffrin (1985) carried out a qualitative analysis of arguments in every day conversations in which she studied the discourse properties of rhetorical and oppositional arguments. She considered "monologues supporting a disputable position" (p. 37) rhetorical arguments, and "discourse through which one or more speakers support openly disputed positions" (p. 37) oppositional arguments. Schiffrin found that oppositional argumentation involves both co-operation and competition, and it is characterised by the "ongoing negotiation of referential, social and expressive meanings" (p. 45).

Kopperschmidt (1985) devised a complex system for the analysis of arguments, which he defined as "the use of a statement in a logical process of argumentation to support or weaken another statement whose validity is questionable or contentious" (p. 159). He proposed the use of five analytical steps in the study of the macro-structure of argumentation: 1. the definition of the problem, 2. the formulation of the contentious thesis, 3. the segmentation of arguments, 4. the reconstruction of the argumentation strands, and 5. the reconstruction of an argumentative global structure. Kopperschmidt also drew up a system for the investigation of the micro-structure of argumentation, which involved the analysis of the role of the argumentative statements, the study of the argumentative potential and formal analysis, which is concerned with argumentation patterns.

Drawing on Toulmin's (1958) work, Tirkonnen-Condit (1985) carried out a study on the problem-solution structure of argumentation, in which she identified four principal structural components of the argumentative text: situation, problem, solution and evaluation. She also concluded that various text types might contain an alternative combination of these

components. Toulmin's (1958) model was also used in studies on contrastive rhetoric (Connor & Lauer, 1985, 1988; Connor, 1990).

We do not know of any studies that have investigated the effect of the explicit teaching of argumentation skills in the field of oral argumentation. There is, however, an increasing body of research on the development of L2 argumentative writing skills. The NORDTEXT and NORDWRITE projects were especially designed to investigate how L2 learners acquire the skill of producing coherent written discourse (for a review see Enkvist, 1985). In another study Varghese and Abrahams (1998) also examined the effectiveness of instruction in argumentation at a university in Singapore. The 30 subjects who participated in the research project received 12 week-long overt training with the help of materials developed on the basis of Toulmin, Rieke and Janik's (1979) work. The results showed that students produced "more explicit claims, more specific and developed grounds and more reliable warrants" (p. 302) at the end of the course, although it has to be noted that their study lacked a control group.

III Research on pragmatic development in L2

There have been a number of studies with cross-sectional design which investigated how the development of L2 linguistic competence correlates with the acquisition of pragmatic competence (for a comprehensive review see Kasper & Schmidt, 1997). Kasper and Schmidt (1997) in their review of the body of literature concluded that L2 learners can access the same range of speech act realization strategies as L1 speakers, regardless of their level of proficiency. Both cross-sectional (e.g. Blum-Kulka & Ohlstain, 1986; Maeshiba et al. 1996; Trosborg, 1987) and longitudinal studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Ellis, 1992) carried out with participants in L2 environment suggest that the development of L2 proficiency in general brings about pragmatic development. Nevertheless, the findings of

research on interlanguage pragmatics also showed that even L2 learners with high level of grammatical or linguistic competence attain only a relatively low level of pragmatic competence (e.g. Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987; Ohlstain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). Furthermore, ESL and EFL learners were also found to differ as regards their sensitivity to pragmatic errors (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998) and the target-like production of speech acts (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) argued that the scarcity of available pragmatic input both inside and outside the classroom accounts for their findings that L2 learners in a foreign language environment were less sensitive to pragmatic violations than their peers in the United States.

Very few experimental studies have been conducted in this field to date. The two studies that investigated the effect of overt pragmatic training both involved German learners of English studying the language in Germany. Wildner-Bassett (1984) explored the effect instruction on the use of conversational gambits and concluded that both the learners who were taught with the communicative approach and those who learnt with the suggestopedic approach improved as regards the overall quality of the use of gambits. In House's (1997) research project, one group of the participants followed a communication course in which pragmatics was taught explicitly, and in the other group learners received only implicit pragmatic training. The results showed that the explicit group used a wider variety of gambits and discourse strategies, but the uptaking and responding behaviour of both groups remained deficient.

IV Method

1 Participants

Using data from a large-scale British-Hungarian research project conducted together with Martin Bygate, Anita Csölle, Zoltán Dörnyei, Dorottya Holló and Krisztina Károly, in the present study we analysed the speech samples of 24 EFL students, from three groups of two different secondary schools in Hungary. The two schools were of the same type and can be considered similar to the British former grammar schools. Both schools provided general instruction and prepared students for further studies in higher education. They were all respectable but not particularly 'famous' or 'elite' schools.

The participants were between 16 and 18 years old, and 8 of them were male and 16 female. On the basis of the C-test, we could conclude that members of Group 2 were significantly less proficient than learners both in Group 1 and 3 (F= 13.0.4, p = 0.02). Although Group 1 scored highest on average on the language proficiency test, these students had been previously instructed with the grammar translation method, and thus had little experience in argumentation. The proficiency scores of Group 2 were the lowest, but students in this group were taught with the communicative method. Group 3 was also taught with the communicative method and attended a French-Hungarian bilingual class, consequently the members of this group spoke French at a near-native level.

Insert Table 1 around here

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2 Settings and procedures

The data on which this study is based was collected between October 1996 and March 1998, in the students' natural surroundings, during the regular English classes. At the onset of

the study a C-test was administered to all participants. This instrument contains short texts, in which every second half of every second word has been deleted. Besides being easy to administer, C-tests are assumed to provide a general picture of the test-takers' L2 competence (e.g. Dörnyei & Katona, 1992; Klein-Braley, 1985; Klein-Braley & Raatz, 1984). The test used in this study has been validated by Dörnyei and Katona (1992), who found the reliability of the test acceptable both in the case of university and secondary school students ($r = 0.65$ for university students, $r = 0.64$ for secondary school students). The C-test administered to the participants consisted of three texts with 21 gaps each.

The instructions to the tasks were worded by the research group, but were presented to the students by their regular teachers. Students worked in pairs simultaneously. In the tasks 12 items were listed, of which students had to choose five in the preparation phase. The goal of the communication phase was to persuade their partners of their choices, agree on three items and rank order them. Students were overtly instructed not to give in easily. The instructions and phases of the tasks were the same; they only differed in the topic given. Based on the teachers' opinions, the research team supposed that the content of the tasks was familiar to the students and did not require the use of specific vocabulary.

In the first argumentative task students had to agree on extra-curricular classes the school should offer (e.g. Spanish, karate, choir). In the second task students had to decide on where they would like to go on a school trip (e.g. visiting museums, bicycle tour wild camping). The task students had to perform in Hungarian aimed at agreeing on how the money the got for decorating their classroom should be spent (e.g. green plants, painting, new chairs). In the pre-intervention task students could decide on social activities they would do in their district (e.g. performing in the kindergarten, delivering lunch for elderly people, editing a local newspaper). In the post-intervention task, the participants had to choose what items they would take with them on a trip to England (e.g. roller blades, spare pair of jeans, CDs, a hairdryer).

In January and February 1998, the two experimental groups received overt training in argumentation. The intervention was designed by the research team, including the teachers of the experimental groups, who then conducted the training in their regular classes on the basis of uniform teaching materials. The training consisted of five classes of lexical instruction, and another five classes taught argumentation skills to the students. The lexical training focussed partly on conversation strategies, teaching students fillers and hesitation devices, so that they could gain time when a difficulty in communication occurs. Another aspect of the lexical training involved language functions that can be used in an argumentative discussion. These included the verbal expression of opinion, the language of agreement and disagreement. Most of the lexical training materials were based on Dörnyei & Thurrel (1992).

The teaching of argumentation skills to the students comprised first the definition of arguments, facts, and opinions. Then, students were instructed to formulate arguments and support them, paying a special attention to the ordering of supportive statements. A further unit introduced the notion of refutation to the students, and how they can use it in their argumentation. Finally, students had the opportunity to practice these skills in a problem-solving activity. The content of the activities used during the teaching of argumentation skills was different from the ones used during the data collection sessions. The materials used during this phase of the training were based on Glendinning & Mantell (1983). After the intervention the students were recorded during the performance of another argumentative task.

The control group received a ‘placebo’ training in order to control for the Hawthorne effect. The teacher of the group was asked to discuss controversial issues with the students in ten classes, but no explicit lexical or rhetorical training was provided. After the intervention, students in this group were recorded performing the same type of task as the experimental groups.

V Analysis

The recorded performance of the students was transcribed by trained transcribers. First, the number of *arguments* was counted. For the purpose of our analysis, argument was defined as a statement which takes a point of view and supports it with either emotional appeals or logical reasoning (Varghese & Abraham, 1998). Arguments were further sub-divided into *claims*, *support*, *counter-claims* and *counter-support*. "A statement or proposition that the arguer wants the audience to accept and/or act upon" (Varghese & Abraham, 1998: 292) was considered a claim. "Facts, examples, data, etc. offered in support of a claim" (Varghese & Abraham, 1998: 292) were identified as support. Counterclaim was defined as a statement or proposition that refutes the interlocutor's claim, and facts, examples and data offered in support of the counterclaim were regarded as counter-support.

Sample analysis:

A: Well, let's see what we put in the first place I think first of all we have to take the
C camera. This is the most important thing, because it's three weeks and there will be
S so many museums and everything
CC B: Well, but I think I already have a er er small camera in my suit-case, in our suit-case.
S A: Yes, but it's not the same to make simple photos and I think it's good fun, so we have
S to make some kind of films to to remember.
CS B: Well, but we have we have so so so few things in our suit-case, and I think
C B: that a spare pair of jeans would be also necessary.

(C = claim, S = support, CC = counter-claim, CS = counter support)

The analysis of lexical expressions of argumentative speech acts was based on the use of lexical fillers, the frequency of linguistic markers expressing opinion (e.g. I think, in my opinion) or agreement (e.g. I agree, yes, OK, all right), and disagreement (e.g. I don't agree,

No, Yes but, but). Lexical fillers were defined as "words or gambits to fill pauses, to stall, and to gain time in order to keep the communication channel open and maintain discourse at times of difficulty" (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998: 369) (e.g. well, you know, etc.,). The type and total number of linguistic markers were coded and the frequency of the latter was calculated for 100 words spoken.

In the case of the analysis of the participants' argumentation behaviour, the two authors coded the data separately following a common rater training. In the case of disagreement, the problematic elements were discussed and a consensus was reached. The data were processed by a statistical programme (SPSS).

VI Results and discussion

1 Performance of groups across tasks

In the case of the first four tasks we compared the performance of the three groups in terms of the variables investigated in the study by means of one-way analysis of variance. As no significant difference was found among the three groups in any respect in any of the first four tasks, we pooled the data of the students in Tasks 1, 2, 3 and 4 and carried out the statistical analyses on this unified database.

Table 2 shows the results of the repeated measure ANOVA procedure, which was carried out to examine whether various aspects of the participants' performance in the four tasks differed.

Insert Table 2 around here

The repeated measure ANOVA procedure showed significant task effect in the case of the

total number of support (F= 5.92, p = 0.00), counter-support (F= 4.47, p = 0.01), counter-claims (F= 5.92, p = 0.00), and the total number of counter-arguments (F= 3.80, p = 0.02). No such effect was found in the case of the number of claims (F= 0.45, p = 0.72), the total number of claims (F= 1.20, p = 0.32), support for claims (F= 2.03, p = 0.12) and total number of arguments (F= 1.23, p = 0.31). In the case of the number of claims and total number of claims, the lack of task effect is understandable, as we observed in the tape-scripts that the number of claims made by pairs of students was identical with the number of different options they had selected. Thus we can conclude that in this prioritizing task, the number of claims is neither language nor task-content dependent, but is determined by the task specifications. It was interesting to observe, however, that no task and language effect was found in the case of support for claims and the total number of arguments. On the one hand, the lack of such effect might have been caused by the task specifications. On the other hand, if we examine Table 2, it can be seen that students did not even provide two supports for one claim in any of the tasks, and the total number of argumentative utterances in the whole task on average was between 7.66 and 9.80. If we consider that the average number of turns produced by the participants was 16.81 in the four tasks, it can be seen that approximately only every second turn of the students contained an argumentative utterance. The participants' performance in these aspects was below our expectations and signals the effect of the lack of education in rhetorics in Hungary.

In the case of the variables where the repeated measure ANOVA showed significant task effect, paired-sampled t-tests were carried out. These tests revealed that students produced significantly more support (t = 2.37, p = 0.03) and counter-support (t = 2.5, p = 0.04) in Task 2 than in Task 1. The results support Bygate's (1996a, b) findings and assumptions that task repetition reduces the cognitive load the content of the task poses for students and helps to pay more attention to linguistic form. We can extend Bygate's line of argumentation and claim that familiarity with the structure of the task in itself, without familiarity with content,

frees learner's capacity to pay attention to argue more successfully, that is, to provide more support for their claims. This means that familiarity with a task might not only trigger better performance in terms of linguistic features, but in terms of informational content as well.

The participants' performance in Task 3, which was recorded a year later, did not differ from either Task 1 or Task 2 in any of the variables investigated. Lacking measures of learners' language development between the recording of the first two tasks and Task 3, we cannot draw firm conclusions from this finding. We can only speculate that the participants' level of proficiency might have developed in these 12 months, since they received between 120 and 160 hours of instruction during this time. Despite the assumed development of language skills, students' argumentation skills did not show any improvement. On the one hand, this might suggest that without explicit instruction the ability to argue effectively does not develop. On the other hand, the increase in the learners' level of L2 competence might not have been sufficient to provide them with more linguistic tools to persuade each other.

The paired sample t-tests showed that the task performed in Hungarian differed significantly from all the other tasks in a number of respects. Students produced significantly more support in their L1 than in Task 1 ($t = 4.38$, $p = 0.00$), Task 2 ($t = 3.15$, $p = 0.01$), and Task 3 ($t = 3.05$, $p = 0.01$). Similarly, counter-support in the Hungarian task was also significantly more frequent than in Task 1 ($t = 2.90$, $p = 0.01$) and Task 3 ($t = 2.89$, $p = 0.01$). Furthermore, the number of counter-arguments produced in the Hungarian task was also significantly higher than in Task 1 ($t = 2.79$, $p = 0.01$), Task 2 ($t = 2.14$, $p = 0.05$) and in Task 3 ($t = 2.36$, $p = 0.03$). These results suggest an important difference between students' ability to provide counter-arguments and support for their claims in their mother tongue and in a foreign language. It seems that participants of this study were able to support their claims relatively successfully and come up with counter-arguments in their mother tongue, but they either did not transfer these skills to L2 or their competence in L2 was not sufficient for this transfer to take place. These findings show that the participants acquired various sub-skills of

argumentation in their mother tongue to a different extent. They show generally poor performance in terms of the total number of arguments for their opinion, but they are certainly better at providing support for their statements as well as at arguing against their interlocutor's point of view in Hungarian than in English.

The frequency of lexical expression of argumentation in the various tasks was also studied by means of the repeated measure ANOVA procedure (see Table 3). Significant task-effect was obtained in the case of the frequency of lexical fillers ($F = 3.75$, $p = 0.01$). The paired sample t-tests showed that participants used significantly more lexical fillers when performing the task in Hungarian than in Task 1 ($t = 2.49$, $p = 0.02$), Task 2 ($t = 2.29$, $p = 0,03$), and Task 3 ($t = 3.00$, $p = 0.01$). In the case of the frequency ($F = 1.40$, $p = 0.25$) and the type of linguistic markers of expressing opinion ($F = 1.23$, $p = 0.31$), and the frequency of the markers of expressing agreement ($F = 1.48$, $p = 0.23$), no significant task effect was found, that is, these variables did not differ to a significant extent in the four tasks analyzed. As regards the types of linguistic markers of expressing agreement, the repeated measure ANOVA procedure showed a significant task effect ($F = 3.73$, $p = 0.01$). The paired sample t-test revealed that the participants used significantly more types of linguistic markers for expressing agreement in the Hungarian task than in Task 1 ($t = 3.15$, $p = 0.01$). Again task repetition, language development and the intervention did not affect the frequency of this variable to a significant extent. The frequency and the type of linguistic markers of expressing disagreement did not differ significantly in the four tasks either.

Insert Table 3 around here

As the results indicate, the repetition of the task did not significantly influence the

frequency of any of the lexical expressions of argumentation. Familiarity with the structure of the task did not induce the more extensive use of lexical markers of argumentation. This is an interesting result since as mentioned above, task repetition helped students to argue more successfully. It seems that due to the lack of focus on teaching pragmatics in Hungarian secondary schools, students did not use their freed attentional resources for using more varied and more frequent pragmalinguistic markers of argumentation. Findings concerning the effect of L2 development support assumptions of previous research which claimed that in a foreign language environment the general development of linguistic competence does not necessarily trigger pragmatic development (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei 1998, Takahashi & Beebe, 1987), that is, students will use pragmalinguistic forms only if they are taught explicitly.

The effect of the mother tongue is also relatively limited. We can see that only lexical fillers were used more frequently in L1 than in any of the tasks in L2, and differences between the variety of markers for expressing agreement only differed in the first task students performed in English (Task 1) and in Hungarian. It might be presumed that either the type of task given to the students or the level of formality in the interaction between the students, or both of these factors constrained the use of pragmalinguistic markers of argumentation both in L1 and in L2.

2 The effect of treatment

The treatment on argumentation seemed to result in little effect as regards the production of claims, counter-claims, support and counter-support. We did not find significant differences in the performance gain of the control and experimental groups in any of the measures of argumentative behaviour (see Table 4). As can be seen in Table 4, despite the training the treatment group, similar to the control group, performed worse in the post-treatment task. As we realized upon the analysis, in this task some of the options given

depended on personal habits, for example whether one takes a hair-dryer to a trip depends on whether one generally dries her/his hair or not. This difference in content seems to be the reason why students spent most of the time in the post-intervention task discussing the choices where personal habits played an important role. It is a common knowledge in the literature of teaching argumentation (e.g. Smalley & Ruetten, 1995) that it is difficult to argue about issues where personal habits are involved. Thus, the difficulty caused by the content of the task might have resulted in worse performance.

Insert Table 4 around here

The difference between the level of difficulty of the tasks, however, does not explain why the training did not result in differences between the performance of the control and the experimental groups. On the one hand, it might be presumed that the treatment was not intensive and long enough to provide learners with sufficient input and opportunities to practice. On the other hand, as mentioned above, participants exhibited better skills in argumentation in Hungarian than in English. Thus it might well be possible that despite the lack of explicit education in rhetorics, these students master several sub-skills of argumentation in Hungarian, and it is the lack of L2 competence that prevents them from being able to express and defend their point of view in English. In this case the training in argumentation in itself cannot help students to argue more successfully.

As regards the linguistic expression of argumentation, the performance of the treatment group improved in two aspects. As a result of the training, they used a wider variety of fillers ($t = 2.75$, $p = 0.02$) and markers of expressing agreement ($t = 2.61$, $p = 0.02$) than the control group (see Table 5). In the case of the frequency of expressing agreement, a negative gain can be observed, but the performance of the students in the treatment group deteriorated to a significantly smaller extent than that of the control group ($t = 2.07$, $p = 0.05$).

Insert Table 5 around here

The reason for the effectiveness of the training probably lies in the fact that fillers are not complicated to use, since very few contextual restraints govern their use. Therefore, students could easily apply new types of these markers learnt during the treatment. The explicit teaching of the various means of expressing agreement might have called students' attention to the need to use more varied means of linguistic expressions of agreement. The negative gain in the frequency of the linguistic expression of agreement can be due to the content of the post-intervention task. As mentioned above, in this task students were asked to argue about objects which were related to personal habits. Argumentation in which personal habits are involved is more difficult, since it is generally difficult to convince people to give up their personal habits. In the pre-intervention task students had to discuss social activities (e.g. cleaning the park, feeding the birds, delivering lunch to elderly people etc.). The difference in the content of the pre-intervention and post-intervention task might account for the fact that both groups of participants performed worse in the post-intervention task. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Table 5, the performance of the treatment group was affected to a smaller extent by this difference than that of the control group.

The frequency of fillers, however, did not increase as a result of the treatment. This is probably due to the fact that fillers are mainly used by L2 learners to gain time to cope with linguistic or conceptual problems (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998), and therefore the cognitive complexity of the task and the level of students' L2 competence constrained their use. The frequency and type of linguistic markers of opinion did not seem to be affected by the training either. The comparative Hungarian data (see Table 3) show that the frequency and type of markers of opinion is very similar to the frequency found in both of the English tasks. We presume that the level of formality between the students influenced the use of linguistic

markers of opinion. The participants might have perceived that by adding more markers of opinion they would seem opinionated or over-formal in the given interaction.

The frequency of markers of disagreement increased to a similar extent both in the control and treatment groups. The reason for this can be that how often one expresses disagreement largely depends on what one's interlocutor says. In other words, the difference in the point of view of the participants concerning the given subject might have affected the frequency of linguistic markers of disagreement to a greater extent than the knowledge of these markers. As regards the type of linguistic markers of disagreement, both groups showed similar improvement. We can only speculate that certain task characteristics, such as the extent of disagreement provoked by its content, might have overridden the effect of training.

VII Conclusion

The study reported in this paper investigated a relatively under-explored area of task-based language learning research: the pragmatic aspects of task-performance. Our aim was to gain an insight into how pragmatic measures of task-performance were affected by task-repetition, the long-term development of language skills, task-content and a short-term focussed intervention.

Task-repetition helped learners to familiarize themselves with the structure of the task, and despite the different content of the two tasks, participants provided more support for their claims when performing the same type of task for the second time. Therefore we concluded that familiarity with the structure of the task frees learners' attentional resources to pay more attention to informational content. The results, however, also suggested that task-repetition does not induce better pragmalinguistic performance.

Language development that was assumed to have taken place within a year did not result in better performance in terms of the arguments and their pragmalinguistic expression. We presume that this is related to the finding that participants showed better argumentation skills in a number of respects in their mother tongue than in English. The results suggest that the level of L2 proficiency prevented the students from being able to use their argumentation skills in English. This might have been the reason for the lack of success of the argumentation training as well. Another interesting finding of the project was that the type of task and the level of formality of the interaction between the students seem to have a considerable effect on the pragmalinguistic measures of task-performance. This influence results in the similar frequency and variety of the linguistic markers of argumentation both in English and in Hungarian.

The findings of this study can have potential implications for language teaching. First of all, they show that familiarizing learners with the structure of a task can enable them to

communicate more successfully in terms of informational content. Secondly, the results indicate that several types of tasks with interlocutors assuming different roles need to be used for practicing pragmalinguistic markers. Thirdly, the findings demonstrate that rhetorics needs to be taught more intensively and for a longer period of time, as a few lesson-long rhetoric training is not effective in itself. Finally if teachers aim to induce successful argumentative behaviour with a prioritizing task, they should specify the task in a way that it should not involve personal habits as options to choose from.

The study described in this paper has several limitations. Despite the fact that considerable efforts were made to have the same students work in pairs, sometimes the participants had different partners which might have affected their performance. When designing the project, we also assumed that if we keep all the facets of task-input except for the task-content constant, we would gain absolutely comparable data. The results of the study, however, did not confirm this presumption. These short-comings point to the need that in order to verify many of the results described in this paper, a more controlled study should be carried out. In addition the effect of task-content on L2 learners' performance should also be studied in more detail.

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Table 1 The language learning history and the level of proficiency of the groups

Variables	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Age	16	17	17-18
Level of proficiency	upper-intermediate	Intermediate	upper-intermediate
Average score on the proficiency test (out of 63)	41.00	27.85	40.54
Number of English classes per week	4	3	3
Amount of communicative training preceding the research	less oral practice, focus on accuracy	regular oral practice	extensive oral practice
Knowledge of L3	elementary German	Elementary German	advanced, near-native French

Table 2 Oral argumentative tasks

Date	Tasks			Task content
	Group 1	**Group 2**	**Group 3**	
Oct 1996	Task 1	Task 1	Task 1	Extracurricular activities
May 1997	Task 2	Task 2	Task 2	Class trip
Oct 1997	Task 3	Task 3	Task 3	Social activities
Jan 1998	Task 4	Task 4	Task 4	Decorating the classroom - task performed in Hungarian
	Intervention	**Placebo treatment**	**Intervention**	
May 1998	Task 5	Task 5	Task 5	Items for a trip to England

Table 3 Repeated measure analysis of variance of the measures of argumentation

Variable	Task	Mean (per task)	SD	SS	MS	df	F
Number of claims	1	3.60	1.72	2.73	0.91	3	0.45
	2	3.06	1.33				
	3	3.13	1.50				
	4	3.40	1.29				
Number of counter-claims	1	0.67	1.34	2.75	0.93	3	0.92
	2	0.40	0.63				
	3	0.73	0.96				
	4	1.00	0.65				
Number of support for claims	1	4.06	2.01	40.98	13.66	3	2.03
	2	5.13	2.94				
	3	5.13	3.62				
	4	6.40	2.50				
Number of counter-supports	1	1.26	1.22	47.60	15.86	3	4.47*
	2	2.47	1.90				
	3	1.06	1.48				
	4	3.33	2.46				
Total number of claims	1	4.26	1.70	8.00	2.66	3	1.20
	2	3.46	1.72				
	3	3.86	1.45				
	4	4.40	1.59				
Total number of support	1	5.33	2.19	163.11	54.37	3	5.92**
	2	7.20	3.66				
	3	6.21	3.87				
	4	9.73	3.53				
Total number of arguments	1	7.66	3.15	97.91	12.63	3	1.23
	2	8.20	3.09				
	3	8.27	4.52				
	4	9.80	2.30				
Total number of counter-arguments	1	1.93	1.86	61.53	20.51	3	3.80*
	2	2.46	2.03				
	3	1.80	2.11				
	4	4.33	2.89				

* $p < 0.05$
** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 Repeated measure analysis of variance of the frequency and type of pragmalinguistic expression of argumentation

Variable	Task	Mean (per 100 words)	SD	SS	MS	df	F
Frequency of lexical fillers	1	0.42	0.52	12.62	3.15	3	3.75*
	2	0.27	0.49				
	3	0.59	0.56				
	4	1.71	1.33				
Type of lexical fillers	1	0.40	0.49	1.00	0.25	3	1.94
	2	0.20	0.32				
	3	0.46	0.33				
	4	0.77	0.49				
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing opinion	1	1.66	0.57	4.68	1.17	3	1.40
	2	1.57	0.79				
	3	2.20	1.28				
	4	1.58	0.95				
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing opinion	1	0.70	0.30	0.81	0.20	3	1.23
	2	0.78	0.41				
	3	0.77	0.51				
	4	0.91	0.28				
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing agreement	1	3.38	3.30	20.06	5.01	3	1.48
	2	2.42	1.73				
	3	3.13	2.41				
	4	2.81	0.93				
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing agreement	1	1.10	1.01	7.70	1.92	3	3.73*
	2	1.14	0.66				
	3	1.53	0.81				
	4	2.19	0.90				
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing disagreement	1	1.31	0.92	1.79	0.44	3	0.78
	2	1.50	1.27				
	3	0.90	0.49				
	4	1.12	0.68				
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing disagreement	1	0.78	0.69	1.11	0.27	3	1.14
	2	0.78	0.69				
	3	0.66	0.45				
	4	0.78	0.63				

* $p < 0.05$

Table 5 Analysis of the effect of training on argumentation skills

Variable	Group	M (SD) Pre-test	M (SD) Post-test	Gain	df	t value	p
Number of claims	Treatment group	3.00 (1.11)	2.57 (1.28)	-0.43	18	-0.06	0.95
	Control group	4.00 (2.14)	3.63 (1.19)	-0.37			
Number of supports	Treatment group	5.07 (3.25)	4.71 (2.09)	-0.35	18	0.73	0.47
	Control group	5.83 (2.83)	3.75 (1.75)	-1.62			
Number of counter-claims	Treatment group	1.07 (0.83)	0.57 (0.65)	-0.5	18	-1.41	0.17
	Control group	0.50 (0.53)	0.75 (0.89)	0.25			
Number of counter-supports	Treatment group	1.86 (2.14)	2.29 (2.61)	0.43	18	-0.88	0.39
	Control group	2.00 (1.93)	3.88 (2.36)	1.88			
Total number of claims	Treatment group	4.07 (1.14)	3.14 (1.35)	-0.93	18	-0.81	0.43
	Control group	4.50 (2.00)	4.38 (1.69)	-0.13			
Total number of supports	Treatment group	6.93 (4.05)	7.00 (4.31)	0.07	18	-0.08	0.94
	Control group	7.38 (2.62)	7.63 (2.13)	0.25			

Table 6 The effect of training on the frequency and type of pragmalinguistic expression of argumentation

Variable	Group	M (SD) Pre-test	Post-test	Gain	df	t value	p
Frequency of lexical Fillers (per 100 words)	Treatment group	0.62 (0.69)	0.76 (0.74)	0.14	18	0.51	0.62
	Control group	0.53 (0.48)	1.05 (1.57)	0.52			
Type of lexical fillers	Treatment group	0.75 (0.68)	1.21 (0.97)	0.46	18	2.75	0.02
	Control group	1.00 (0.87)	0.43 (0.79)	-0.57			
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing opinion (per 100 words)	Treatment group	1.21 (1.05)	1.06 (0.87)	-0.15	18	1.39	0.18
	Control group	2.67 (0.98)	2.02 (0.44)	-0.65			
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing opinion	Treatment group	1.00 (0.63)	1.14 (1.10)	0.14	18	----	------
	Control group	1.00 (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	0.00			
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing agreement (per 100 words)	Treatment group	2.15 (1.85)	1.79 (1.19)	-0.36	18	2.07	0.05
	Control group	4.29 (1.97)	1.44 (1.69)	-2.85			
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing agreement	Treatment group	1.88 (1.09)	2.50 (1.09)	0.62	18	2.61	0.02
	Control group	3.56 (2.07)	1.86 (0.90)	-1.70			
Frequency of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing disagreement (per 100 words)	Treatment group	0.91 (0.88)	1.28 (0.75)	0.37	18	1.26	0.23
	Control group	0.78 (0.67)	1.57 (0.72)	0.79			
Type of pragmalinguistic markers of expressing disagreement	Treatment group	1.06 (1.00)	1.93 (0.92)	0.87	18	0.49	0.62
	Control group	1.44	2.86	1.42			

	(1.24)	(1.86)