Interaction Effect of Task Demands and Goal Orientations on Language Learners' Perceptions of Task Difficulty and Motivation

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Abstract

Task-based research has eclipsed the role of individual differences (IDs) in the evaluation of task difficulty and task motivation for reasons related to pedagogically-driven quests to design task impervious to variation. The present article underscores the ID variable of goal orientation which may advance our understanding of some aspects of variation related to task engagement. After implementing one goal-elicitation questionnaire and another questionnaire to measure difficulty and motivation following the performance of assigned narrative tasks, psychometric results revealed two distinct goal orientation levels echoing two significantly different response types to task difficulty and motivation. Whereas one goal group responded positively to unfamiliar and taxing tasks, the other goal group did not. Overall, this article points to the need to rethink the reductionist research agenda that confines task variation to task sequencing conditions and task design features.

Keywords: Individual differences, task, motivation, perceived difficulty, goal orientation.

1. Background

The task-based learning approach has captivated the interest of scholarship in the research field of second language learning (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2009; Mehnert, 1998; Skehan, 1998; Tavakoli & Foster, 2008). Tasks in this regard serve as tools to obtain "clinically elicited samples" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) for the purposes of categorizing, sampling, and assessing the language learning process. According to Ellis (2000), the merit of the task-based approach does not only stem from the characteristic of the tasks as a clinical elicitation technique for researchers and a useful pedagogical instrument for practitioners, but also from the openness of the approach to various theoretical perspectives such as the psycholinguistic perspective. According to this perspective, task difficulty predicts the degree of variation in L2 learners' performance through the experimental manipulation of task variables, such as planning (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999, 2005) and familiarity (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Foster & Skehan, 1996).

Another language learning aspect which figures as an imposing element of any given language classroom fabric is the scope of learner variation. Here, the investigation of individual differences (hereafter, IDs), such as personality traits, motivation, and intelligence, is one of the most active

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research areas in psychology. Dörnyei (2005) noted in this regard that "ID constructs refer to dimensions of enduring personal characteristics that are assumed to apply to everybody and on which people differ by degree" (p. 4). This intent to capture ID patterns underlies a long-lasting controversy between the collective and the individual: While the individual seems counterproductive to the accomplishment of generalizable results, the collective, or the "grand sweep view" (Larsen-Freeman, 2006), overrides the value of individuality in human sciences. This dilemma has drawn a demarcation line within all the research disciplines researching human behavior, including the area of second language acquisition (hereafter, SLA) which has documented a number of IDs in various educational contexts.

In comparison with the bulk of evidence documented by second language/foreign language (hereafter, L2/FL) researchers, works on IDs have invariably focused on the concepts of aptitude and motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). The supremacy of these two concepts has perhaps upset the sense of ecology within this research line, leaving unaddressed, at least disproportionally, a number of learner variables whose exploration might have advanced and refined our understanding of L2/FL learning behavior. In addition to this heavily skewed ID-research picture, the dominating ID concepts of aptitude and motivation have yielded little substance to accommodate to the field of SLA. Dörnyei (2005) explained this sense of isolation by the fact that "the original product-oriented conception of the two key ID factors, aptitude and motivation, was incompatible with the inherently process-oriented stance of SLA" (p. 6). This product-oriented conceptualization, which is more of a pedagogical necessity than a theoretically-driven choice, is understood in view of the dilemma between the collective and the individual.

According to Iwashita, McNamara, and Elder (2001), task-based research has been dominated by an inflexible research format which is solely confined to viewing tasks as "neutral devices for testing" (p. 406) that eclipsed any role for IDs. This reductionist way of defining task difficulty echoes a pedagogical agenda within which task-based research "provides a valid means of *packaging* language experience and leads to effective learning" (italics added) (Lynch & MacLean, 2000, p. 224). Task difficulty is indeed a matter of learner perception rather than the prerogative of professional raters. Hence, what is demanding for one individual learner is not necessarily the case for another. In this regard, some researchers, such as Elder, Iwashita, and McNamara (2002), questioned the real value of such generalizations and demanded that tasks should "be treated with extreme caution and that the findings of SLA research should be revisited with this caveat in mind" (p. 364).

Bachman (2002) also cautioned against the danger of building on deterministic and speculative postulates where difficulty is gauged against a hypothetical learner. In a review of Skehan's (1998) scheme of task difficulty, Bachman (2002) noted that Skehan treated task demands as detached variables that can be isolated for empirical testing. Bachman claimed that communicative stress and task complexity are fundamentally individual characteristics. He argued that task demands "are not inherent in tasks themselves, but are functions of the interactions between a given test-taker and a given test task [and thus the] empirical estimates of task difficulty are not estimates of separate entity, 'difficulty', but are themselves artifacts of the interaction between the test-taker's ability and the characteristics of the task" (Bachman, 2002, p. 464).

Despite such calls for a central role for IDs in the characterization of task difficulty, task-based research has received modest interest among L2/FL researchers in the last decade. For instance, Ortega (2005) revisited her earlier research findings (Ortega, 1995; 1999) about the effect of task planning on L2/FL performance. In her qualitative analysis of supplementary interview data, Ortega (2005) was able to discern two types of L2/FL learners: *communication-oriented* learners and *accuracy-oriented* learners. She thus called for a re-analysis of the task-based findings from an ID perspective, or indicating that otherwise statistical interpretations would remain misleading.

Findings of Ortega (2005) aligned with the cautious stance of Ellis (2000) about the consequences of the orthodoxy in task-based research as any operationalization of task difficulty will remain impressionistic and reductionist unless the role of the learner is considered. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman

(2006) concurred with this line of reasoning since "individuals not only determine what aspects of the outside world are relevant to them, but they actively construct a world around themselves and are constantly altering it" (p. 594). Hence, a realistic description of L2/FL learner behavior should highlight this type of self-regulated learning view which upholds an active role for IDs in the assessment of task difficulty instead of the exclusive investment on external raters (i.e., professional testing experts or simply teacher practitioners). The concept of a self-regulated learner has been well attested in other classroom-focused research and presented a consistent and an operational account of IDs.

The achievement goal theory also lends itself to this line of research because, according to Midgley (2002), learners' "goals provide a framework within which individuals interpret and react to events, resulting in different patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior" (p. xi). Such patterns may enable individuals, including L2/FL learners, to develop differential perceptions of task difficulty as a function of differences in their achievement goal orientations.

Across the goal-related literature, there is agreement over two types of goal orientation: *Mastery goal orientation* (hereafter, MGO) and *Performance goal orientation* (hereater, PGO). MGO refers to individuals who value the learning process and competency growth rather than the learning product. They show more enthusiasm and effort particularly for challenging tasks and a willingness to take risks since a mistake represents a learning opportunity and not a sign of failure. PGO refers to individuals who develop a product-oriented sense of learning achievement. Driven by constant apprehension of failure, they adopt a maladaptive behavior that is inclined to avoiding challenge. It should be noted that despite being a ubiquitous variable in educational research, the construct of goal orientation has received only little consideration among SLA scholarship (see, e.g., Tercanlioglu, 2004; He, 2005), let alone in the study of task difficulty.

A multiple-goal model has equally received interest in the achievement goal theory. Advocates of this approach have sought to revisit the two-dimensional model. The multiple-goal model maintains that the two forms of PGO constitute two unrelated behavioral features. Concerning the Performance-approach goals, they enclose adaptive characteristics of behavior that focus on achievement as an interpersonal matter (i.e., comparison of one's performance with those of others) and effort expenditure (Pintrich, 2000). With regard to the Performance-avoid goals, proponents of the multiple-goals approach believe that these goals yield maladaptive types of behavior. Covington (2000) noted that these types of behavior are essentially self-protective mechanisms that are manifestly reflective of a self-handicapping conduct.

The classroom-anchored nature of goal orientation enables better researchability for the concept of motivation which can be hardly dissociated from task difficulty. Goal orientation research provides a clear account of how one's perception of difficulty relates to the level of and type of difficulty inherent in a given task. Cumming (2006), concurring with this line of theorizing, states that "research on motivation has mostly involved survey studies that analyze the attitudes of groups of students, not the goals of specific learners in particular circumstances of language learning" (p. 3). Each goal orientation, however, represents a number of achievement values whereby learners define and judge their success and failure. These achievement values transform into cognitive and affective decisions that shape one's perception of task difficulty. In other words, what seems to be difficult for one individual affiliated with a given goal orientation may not necessarily apply to another individual with a different goal orientation.

The study reported in this paper has been in some way inspired by the position of Ortega (1999) that research "needs to recognize and account for individual differences, which may otherwise obscure the findings" (p. 136). Despite her awareness of learner orientations (i.e., communication oriented versus accuracy-oriented), she did not dichotomize *a priori* her informants on the basis of such orientations, thus admitting her indecision that she did "not want to reopen the old research agenda regarding (usually unoperationalized) dichotomies of learner type" (Ortega, 1999, p. 136). Building on this methodological concern, the present study focused on whether goal orientations may

affect L2/FL learners' perceptions of task difficulty and motivation. The study, therefore, aimed to address the following questions:

1) Does goal orientation exist as an ID variable in L2/FL classrooms?
2) Does goal orientation predict L2/FL learners' view of task difficulty and motivation?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

A group of 211 full-time students participated in the present study during the university year 2006-2007. The participants were enrolled in their first year of a three-year program offered by the Department of English at the University of Manouba, Tunisia (a yearly intake of approximately 600 students). Female students outnumbered the male students (females: N = 172; males: N = 39). Their age ranged from 19 to 23 years. The mean length of time they studied English was 6.7 years. As native speakers of Tunisian Arabic, they learned their English exclusively in a classroom environment, thus having little opportunity to use English for communicative purposes outside the classroom setting.

This sample represented a fairly homogeneous group in terms of their schooling history and their English proficiency level. Such selection was intended to control individual differences in favor of the goal orientation variable. There was common agreement among all the teachers that their students' proficiency level was intermediate. They reported that the course materials they were using were taken from resources intended for intermediate L2/FL learners.

2.2. Instruments and procedures

A Goal-orientation Questionnaire was developed to gain an incisive account of students' goal orientation (Appendix A). Its main objective was to determine to which goal area the student participants would belong. It comprised two 5-point Likert scales that were expected to document data related to the two levels of goal orientation. Each scale consisted of 10 items. The first scale focused on MGO (e.g., sample item 8: "I like speaking tasks best when they make me learn new things"). The second scale aimed to assess PGO (e.g., sample item 14: "I prefer my task performance to be graded only when I do well"). All the 20 items had to be assessed on a Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1).

The Goal-orientation Questionnaire design was inspired by well-cited instruments (e.g., Midgley et al., 1998; Skaalvik, 1997). The distribution of the questionnaire items at one scale observed a sequence that was symmetrical to the allocation of items at the other scale. In other words, Items 1 (i.e., indicating risk-taking behavior) and 11 (i.e., indicating risk-avoiding behavior) shared the concept of risk management as it was the case for Items 2 (i.e., indicating intrinsic evaluation of achievement) and 12 (i.e., indicating extrinsic evaluation of achievement) which shared the concept of achievement evaluation.

The expected orthogonal relationship between the two item sequences, one at a time, would make the respondents relatively set on one scale and not the other. Also, it is relevant to note that the questionnaire followed a closed-response design and it was expected to provide a greater ease of response and reliability than an open-ended response design. However, some open-ended questions were later used in interview protocols to explain the choices of the respondents. The follow-up interview followed a *semi-structured* style. It was composed of written open-ended questions and spontaneous questions the purpose of which was to tap participants' (N = 11) feedback about their prior narrative task performances, their degree of satisfaction with these performances, and how interesting they found the experiment. The interview aimed to elicit additional information hardly obtained by the questionnaire. The questions that arise naturally during the course of an interview would encourage the interviewees to better convey their ideas in an in-depth way.

Based on the results elicited from the Goal-orientation Questionnaire, 30 participants[†] were selected to perform three narrative tasks under different sequencing conditions (i.e., Task 1 = - Familiarity/+ Planning; Task 2 = + Familiarity/- Planning; Task 3 = + Familiarity/+ Planning). The narrative tasks used in the present study were composed of stories based on sequenced picture prompts. They were based on one discourse mode where tellers described events in a watch-and-tell style. The 11 picture prompts in each task represented common narrative scripts (e.g., winning a jackpot, a success story of an athlete, and a rock band biography). In order to examine the participants' familiarity with the experimental tasks, the first three items of the Post-task Questionnaire measured the extent of such familiarity. As to the planning factor, to ensure the minimally planned condition (Task 2), the participants were given only one minute of preparation time. They were given ten minutes of preparation time in Tasks 1 and 3 to consolidate the planning condition.

A Post-task questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered to these participants after performing the narrative tasks. It measured the performer's perceptions of task familiarity (Items 1, 2, and 3), task difficulty (Items 4, 5, and 6), and task motivation (Items 7, 8, and 9). By way of illustration, the first three items were meant to document students' prior experience with similar narrative tasks (e.g., Item 1: "Before working on this task, I had the opportunity to do similar narrative tasks"). On the whole, 87 questionnaire responses were collected after the three task performance episodes.

3. Results

3.1. Goal-orientation Questionnaire results

In order to check the distribution of the data collected from the questionnaire, a descriptive analysis across the two administration episodes was conducted. Skewness results in Table 1 indicate that the questionnaire responses were normally distributed at both ends. The symmetric distribution falls in balance between positively skewed MGO figures and negatively skewed PGO figures. However, mean scores from the second administration episode are fairly higher than those from the first administration episode. For instance, the respondents scored higher on Item 9 at the level of the second episode ($M = 3.14$) than the first episode ($M = 2.81$), as is respectively the case for Item 20 where the respondents scored higher in the second episode ($M = 3.21$) than in the first episode ($M = 3.01$). The consistent increase of mean score at the second wave of questionnaire administration indicates that the second sample (N= 109) were the best scorers among the initial sample (N= 211). Consequently, the affiliation of the former sample with a given goal orientation was reasonably more obvious than that of the latter.

To test the reliability of the two questionnaire scales, an Item-reliability analysis was conducted. It reported high coefficient alphas for both goal scales and across data from the two episodes of questionnaire administration. That is, as the MGO scale achieved high and consistent alpha values (i.e., $\alpha = .904$ and $\alpha = .908$) along the two data collection episodes, so did the PGO scale (i.e., $\alpha = .875$ and $\alpha = .897$).

[†] Raw questionnaire scores were calculated to identify the best scorers at each goal orientation end. More than half of the participants (N = 109) were retained after applying a cut-off score as a screening procedure. These participants completed the same questionnaire they had taken previously to re-examine its reliability. Eventually, the 30 best scorers were chosen for the next experimental step of task performance.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for and reliability of MGO/PGO subscales

| Scale | Administration episode 1 (N = 211) | | | | | Administration episode 2 (N =109) | | | | |
| | Frequencies estimate | | | Reliability | | Frequencies estimate | | | Reliability | |
	Mean	SD	Skew	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted	Mean	SD	Skew	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's α if Item Deleted
MGO scale				*Alpha = .904*					*Alpha = .908*	
1	2.99	1.41	.015	.595	.898	3.21	1.40	-.220	.718	.895
2	3.03	1.44	.056	.654	.894	3.06	1.30	-.052	.693	.897
3	2.94	1.40	.090	.669	.893	3.16	1.42	-.123	.665	.899
4	2.93	1.43	.148	.707	.891	3.16	1.36	-.176	.619	.901
5	2.94	1.27	.023	.647	.895	3.06	1.25	-.047	.682	.898
6	2.98	1.41	.086	.724	.890	2.94	1.26	.037	.606	.902
7	2.82	1.38	.286	.624	.896	3.07	1.34	-.089	.587	.903
8	2.93	1.26	.054	.653	.894	3.02	1.31	.016	.605	.902
9	2.81	1.36	.225	.652	.894	3.14	1.40	-.086	.754	.893
10	3.05	1.41	-.011	.658	.894	3.16	1.37	-.022	.749	.893
PGO scale				*Alpha = .875*					*Alpha = .897*	
11	2.83	1.41	.042	.579	.864	3.17	1.36	-.238	.662	.886
12	2.94	1.44	.081	.584	.864	3.26	1.44	-.104	.691	.884
13	2.81	1.36	.243	.570	.864	3.21	1.36	-.055	.664	.886
14	2.81	1.33	.205	.675	.856	3.04	1.38	-.024	.646	.887
15	2.91	1.27	.180	.541	.866	2.91	1.24	.087	.564	.892
16	2.75	1.39	.201	.673	.856	2.86	1.33	.161	.565	.892
17	2.66	1.24	.403	.616	.861	2.86	1.27	.376	.710	.883
18	2.86	1.34	.143	.641	.859	2.99	1.38	.038	.549	.893
19	2.89	1.35	.088	.595	.863	3.17	1.51	.143	.681	.885
20	3.01	1.37	-.017	.489	.871	3.21	1.37	-.214	.709	.883

In order to verify the content validity of the questionnaire, a Principal Components analysis was also performed on the 20 items across the two administration episodes. The matrix in Table 2 provides information which supports a two-component solution. The first ten items sort on Component 1 and the last ten items sorted on Component 2. According to the results from Table 2, Component 1 has high and positive loadings on the MGO scale in Administration episode 1 (i.e., range between .60 (Item 1) and .77 (Item 6)) and in Administration episode 2 (i.e., range between .64 (Item 8) and .78 (Item 1)). In contrast, Component 2 had low and negative loadings on the same scale. The range of loadings was between -.06 (Item 10) and -.28 (Item 1) in Administration episode 1 and between -.09 (Item 4) and -.28 (Item 10) in Administration episode 2. The PGO scale shows the reverse loading patterns. Component 1 presents low and negative loadings as low as -.09 (Item 12) and -.10 (Item 18) whereas Component 2 has high and positive loadings (e.g., Item 14 = .75) in Administration episode 1 and a fairly similar distribution (e.g., Item 19 =.75) in Administration episode 2.

Table 2. Factor analysis of MGO/PGO items

		MGO scale									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Admin. 1	1	.60	.63	.73	.75	.73	.77	.63	.70	.70	.76
	2	-28	-19	-16	-19	-12	-20	-22	-18	-20	-06
Admin. 2	1	.78	.75	.69	.72	.71	.67	.75	.64	.74	.76
	2	-17	-18	-24	-09	-23	-17	-20	-22	-16	-28

PGO scale									
11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
-13	-09	-15	-15	-10	-21	-14	-23	-29	-14
.67	.57	.65	.75	.64	.71	.70	.66	.62	.57
-18	-23	-26	-19	-24	-19	-21	-10	-15	-23
.72	.68	.69	.70	.60	.62	.72	.64	.75	.74

Note: Admin. = Administration episode 1 ($N = 211$) and 2 ($N = 109$).

Results following the Principal Components analysis validated the twofold dimensionality of the goal orientation variable. The content validity of the Goal-orientation Questionnaire is evidenced by the literally low/negative versus high/positive loadings between the two extracted components at each scale. The two-component solution is defined as follows: a) Component 1 stands for the MGO scale which covers Items 1 to 10 and b) Component 2 stands for PGO scale which covers Items 11 to 20. Overall, results from the Item analysis and Principal Components analysis respectively confirmed significant reliability and content validity for the Goal-orientation Questionnaire. The data corroborated Hypothesis 1, consolidating goal orientation as a research-worthy variable in a L2/FL classroom context.

3.2. Post-task Questionnaire results

Table 3 presents strong correlation results across the three areas which the questionnaire was intended to measure. The highest of these positive correlation coefficients figured in the 'difficulty' scale ($r = .93$, $p <.01$) and the lowest in the 'motivation' scale ($r = .55$, $p <.01$). It is worth mentioning that all the intra-scale coefficients were bigger than those between scales. For instance, the familiarity intra-scale correlations of Item 3 (e.g., $r = .75$, $p <.01$) outweighed all the four inter-scale correlations (e.g., the highest being $r = .43$, $p <.05$). These distribution patterns suggest that the nine items were largely representative of one area over the other two.

The results also provided evidence about the internal consistency of the scales was significantly high and that these scales independently measured what they were intended to measure. However, Table 3 displays 13 instances of significant inter-scale coefficients where the difficulty/motivation concentration captured all of the highest, yet negative correlation values. These data suggested that high task difficulty was strongly related to the lack of motivation and vice versa.

Table 3. Correlations within and between the three Post-task Questionnaire scales

		Familiarity			Difficulty			Motivation		
		Item 1	*Item 2*	*Item 3*	*Item 1*	*Item 2*	*Item 3*	*Item 1*	*Item 2*	*Item 3*
Familiarity	*Item 1*	—	.75**	.66**	.44*	.31	.27	-.24	-.10	-.13
	Item 2		—	.75**	.25	.28	.31	-.08	.08	.01
	Item 3			—	.43*	.42*	.47*	-.39*	-.21	-.26
Difficulty	*Item 1*				—	.93**	.71**	-.59**	-.57**	-.54**
	Item 2					—	.71**	-.63**	-.59**	-.50**
	Item 3						—	-.35	-.44*	-.54**
Motivation	*Item 1*							—	.65**	.55**
	Item 2								—	.70**
	Item 3									—

Note: * $p < .05$ (2-tailed); ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed); *N* = 87.

The findings reported in Table 4 refer to the distribution of the participants' assessment of the difficulty they experienced with the three tasks, regardless of their goal affiliation. The lowest estimates of difficulty spread over the three subscales of Task 3 such as DIFF 9 (*M* = 2.40, *SD* = 1.13). Because this task was subjected to both planned and familiar conditions, evidence for difficulty was least associated with the existence of familiarity and planning. Conversely, minimally planned tasks (Task 2) and unfamiliar tasks (Task 1) were found to be particularly associated with difficulty. More specifically, difficulty was strongly related to minimal planning and less so to the lack of familiarity. Results suggested that tasks become cognitively demanding (i) when performers have little background knowledge of similar tasks and (ii) even more strenuous when performers are given insufficient pre-task planning time.

Table 4. Distribution of perceived difficulty responses to the tasks

	N	Mean	SD
Task 1			
DIFF1	29	3.36	1.56
DIFF2	29	3.48	1.48
DIFF3	29	3.30	1.45
Task 2			
DIFF4	28	4.46	0.92
DIFF5	28	4.54	0.69
DIFF6	28	4.43	0.96
Task 3			
DIFF7	30	2.40	1.35
DIFF8	30	2.63	1.38
DIFF9	30	2.40	1.13

Note: *N* =87

ANOVA results in Table 5 showed a strong statistical significance for the effect of both goal orientation and task sequencing conditions on the participants' motivation evidenced by the significant difference found in the effect of goal orientation on motivation (F (1, 86) = 16.39, p < .05). Such difference appeared to be even more significant than that of the task-originated conditions of familiarity and planning in their effect on motivation (F (2, 87) = 4.84, p = .010). More interestingly, the statistical difference in the effect of goal orientation and task conditions on motivation is equally significant (F (2, 87) = 6.32, p = .003). This statistical significance implies that one's goal orientation interacts with one's response to task demands, and so moderating one's motivation for a given task. However, the analysis of variance did not determine which of the two goal orientation levels was more/less impervious to task conditions nor did it establish how motivation appears under each of these goal levels.

Table 5. Between-subjects effects of goal orientation and tasks on motivation

Source	Mean Square	*Df*	*F*	Sig.
Goal orientation	19.68	1	16.39	.000
Task	5.80	2	4.84	.010
Goal x Task	7.58	2	6.32	.003

Note: The mean difference is significant at the .05 level

Follow-up descriptive statistics reported in Table 6 provide a more detailed picture of the relationship between goal orientation and motivation across the three experimental task conditions. Two patterns of difference were detected between the scores related to the highly demanding tasks (i.e., Task 1 and Task 2) and the scores related to less demanding tasks (i.e., Task 3). When it comes to the demanding task conditions, the MGO goal group showed more motivation during task engagement than the PGO goal group, especially when the narrative tasks were unfamiliar to the participants (i.e., MGO = 4.07> PGO = 2.36 in Task 1). The reverse was the case for these participants when they performed Task 3 under the relaxed conditions of + Familiarity/+ Planning. This time, the PGO goal group showed more motivation than the MGO goal group (i.e., MGO = 3.87 < PGO = 4.12).

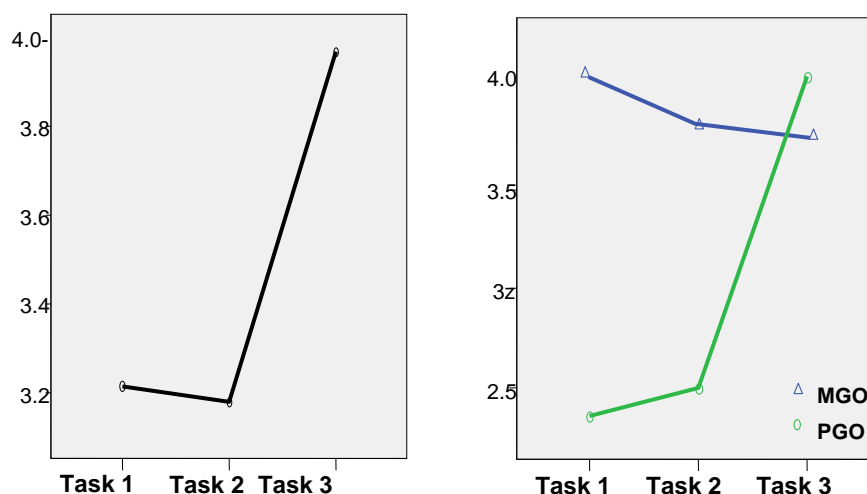Table 6. Distribution of motivation scores among goal orientation groups

Goal orientation	Task	Mean	*SD*	N
MGO	Task 1	4.07	.99	14
	Task 2	3.86	1.29	14
	Task 3	3.87	.83	15
PGO	Task 1	2.36	1.22	14
	Task 2	2.50	1.23	15
	Task 3	4.12	.96	15

Note: N = 87

The patterns of difference between the two goal groups concerning their motivation echoed their changeable perceptions of task difficulty. Figure 1 displays evidence for how the operationalization of IDs, such as goal orientation, may offer a more complex picture of the relationship between task difficulty and motivation. More specifically, the distribution of motivation in the first line plot (left) seems to draw a commonplace picture of motivation (i.e., high difficulty = low motivation). However, the second line plot decomposes this picture, intimating that the MGO goal group was reversing the initial difficulty-motivation pattern. In other words, these individuals showed a positive attitude

towards the demanding nature of Tasks 1 (i.e., due to unfamiliarity) and 2 (i.e., due to minimal planning). However, their extent of motivation dropped conspicuously at the level of Task 3, the least demanding of the three tasks. In sum, their perception of difficulty was not a debilitating factor that hampered their task engagement, which was contrary to the PGO group, whose motivation was affected negatively by the amount of difficulty of the tasks. These results confirmed Hypothesis 2 that Goal orientation affects L2/FL learners' motivation for and perceptions of task difficulty.

Figure 1. Changes in motivation perceptions across task sequencing conditions

4. Discussion

Results from the 211 completed questionnaires confirmed the reliability and the consistency of the Goal-orientation Questionnaire as a sampling instrument. Equally verified over two administration episodes (Table 2) was the content validity of the questionnaire items which proved their factorability into a two-component solution yielded by factor analysis, building on a set of empirically verified instruments (e.g., Midgley et al., 1998; Skaalvik, 1997). The configuration of goal orientation aligned with the two-dimensional paradigm prevailing in goal literature, as opposed to the competing models such as the multiple-goal model that subdivides PGO into *Performance-approach* orientation and *Performance-avoid* orientation (see Elliott, 1999).

The two-dimensional goal orientation profile supported by the present study echoed Ortega's categorization of L2/Fl learners where the personality traits of the 'communication-oriented' learners as risk-takers and process-focused are typical of MGO individuals and the personality-traits of 'accuracy-oriented' learners are commonplace in the description of PGO individuals. Hence, delimiting goal orientation into two researchable units of analysis may add regularity and a firm footing for future L2/FL research attendant to the study of goal orientation as a central ID factor in the equation.

The psychometric properties of the Post-task questionnaire reliability and content validity were substantiated. These results confirmed the distribution of task conditions along the three tasks during the experimental phase (Task 1= - familiarity, Task 2 = - planning, and Task 3= + Familiarity/+ Planning). The purpose of these results was to operationalize difficulty from an ID perspective. Instead of considering participant factors as an anomalous component in the process of defining task difficulty features, Elder et al. (2002) argued that "there may be some value in canvassing test-takers' perceptions of task difficulty to determine how influential these are in test performance" (p. 350). The findings elicited by the Post-task Questionnaire in this study meshed with an "interactive approach" to task difficulty (Iwashita et al., 2001, p. 411) because the inherent features of difficulty cannot be literally dissected from individual differences. Hence, any changes in the effect of difficulty on

performance were accounted for by comparing the performance of the two goal groups across the experimental task conditions.

The two line plots presented in Figure 1 illustrated how such variation figured along the two goal-orientation groups. This scope of variability has been further documented by interview data collected from 11 students (MGO = 6 students; PGO = 5 students) after the experimental procedure. The PGO interviewees reported their profound anxiety about and hypersensitivity towards errors due to task difficulty, and so they were overwhelmed by a self-defeating feeling that they failed their tasks. Concurring with the Post-task Questionnaire data, they found task unfamiliarity as an indicator of difficulty. Three among the five PGO interviewees attributed their feeling of anxiety to their unfamiliarity with the task(s). However, the more familiar they become with the task conditions, the less inhibited they felt. Where fear from making mistakes due to task difficulty was the most recurrent theme among the five PGO interviewees, five out of six MGO interviewees expressed a positive position towards errors being a natural feature of task difficulty. They demonstrated a relaxed attitude towards errors as a necessary ingredient in the language learning process. This stance has been substantially evidenced in goal research (e.g., Midgley et al., 1998).

The two goal orientation groups also reported completely disparate views of the tasks they performed. The PGO goal group systematically associated difficulty with anxiety whereas the MGO goal group considered difficulty as necessary for learning. Therefore, what was motivating for one goal group was squarely disheartening for the other goal group. In this vein, some MGO participants voiced their lack of interest in performing unchallenging, tasks especially towards the end of the experiment (Task 3) while the PGO group showed more eagerness to perform the very same tasks as they grew more familiar with them. This assertion accords with the account of Plough and Gass (1993) that task familiarity does not necessarily have a positive effect on task completion because, as Skehan (1998) once posited, familiarity may make some type of learners feel the "staleness of doing something they might find unchallenging" (p. 113).

In light of the lack of a standard scale of task difficulty, the results of the Post-task Questionnaire did not only identify difficulty features *post hoc*, they also confirmed the *a priori* sequencing effect of task conditions such as familiarity and planning, as has been the standard in mainstream task-based research. In view of that, reporting the participants' estimates of difficulty concurred with the study's effort to give more substance to the scope of the learner differences in researching pedagogic tasks. The empirical support for the speakers' perceptions of task difficulty has provided *a posteriori* estimate of difficulty to ensure that the operationalization of task conditions was not simplistically confined to preset estimates of difficulty (e.g., Skehan, 1998). Understanding what seems to be highly difficult for one learner does not necessarily yield the same response pattern for another learner. In this study, the integration of goal orientation in the statistical treatment of the data enabled us to capture the extent of ID variation in a systematic way.

5. Conclusion

This paper documented an active role for L2/FL learners' perceptions of difficulty and motivation. Building on the interaction goal-by-task effect, the results established that goal orientation is a noteworthy ID factor in L2/FL classrooms. This psycholinguistic reality which has been long obscured in mainstream task-based research, which ironically has a tradition to lean on feeder disciplines such as psychology. The results also suggested that a learner's goal affiliation account for his/her perception of the difficulty of and motivation for a given task.

Some participants (MGO) developed a positive response to highly demanding tasks and their motivation exacerbated when they lost the sense of challenge when they performed undemanding tasks. The converse was the case for another type of learners (PGO) whose sense of achievement depreciated in the face of demanding tasks, yet their motivation was reinstated when tasks were less taxing. Also the PGO participants showed more vulnerability to unfamiliar tasks than their MGO counterparts. In light of these results, the picture of task-based engagement through goal orientations

seems to be more representative of the reality of L2/FL classroom, although it remains to prove whether other learner differences would provide equally systematic and insightful results.

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Appendix A

Goal-orientation Questionnaire

Circle one number for each statement to mark your level of (dis)agreement (5=Very true; 1=Very untrue).

SA= Strongly agree, A= Agree, N= Neither, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree						
	Section 1	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
1	Challenging tasks that arouse my curiosity are important to me	1	2	3	4	5
2	I am confident I will do well in the speaking task no matter how difficult it is	1	2	3	4	5
3	It does not matter for me if the speaking task is graded	1	2	3	4	5
4	I prefer connecting task content to my personal experience	1	2	3	4	5
5	When I face difficulty in performing a speaking task, I always try different ways until it is finished	1	2	3	4	5
6	I do not mind making many mistakes if I learn from them	1	2	3	4	5
7	I feel more successful when I see my speaking skill improving	1	2	3	4	5
8	I like speaking tasks best when they make me learn new things	1	2	3	4	5
9	I prefer using notes rather than memorizing parts of the task content	1	2	3	4	5
10	I cannot be satisfied with my performance just because I receive a positive reaction from my teacher	1	2	3	4	5
	Section 2	**SA**	**A**	**N**	**D**	**SD**
11	Performing better than the other students makes me confident	1	2	3	4	5
12	The opinions my classmates hold about my speaking performance are so important to me	1	2	3	4	5
13	Demonstrating my speaking skills to others is always important	1	2	3	4	5
14	I prefer my task performance to be graded only when I do well	1	2	3	4	5
15	I feel successful in my speaking task when I avoid many mistakes	1	2	3	4	5
16	I prefer memorizing to improvising in order to handle the difficult parts of the task	1	2	3	4	5
17	I feel more comfortable with familiar tasks rather than new ones	1	2	3	4	5
18	My constant fear of failure always motivates me to be successful	1	2	3	4	5
19	I do not want to take risks when I feel unable to complete the task	1	2	3	4	5
20	I prefer waiting to see how others perform the task so that I will not make the same mistakes	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix B

Post-task Questionnaire

Circle one number for each statement to mark your level of (dis)agreement (5 = Very true; 1 = Very untrue).

1) Before working on this task, I had the opportunity to do similar narrative tasks						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
2) Before working on this task, I was sure about what to do with the pictures						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
3) After working on this task, I expect to do more similar narrative tasks						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
4) Before working on this task, I expected it to be hard to complete						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
5) While working on this task, I felt it was hard to complete it						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
6) After working on this task, I felt relieved to complete it						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
7) Before working on this task, I felt it would be an interesting experience						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
8) While doing this task, I felt it was enjoyable to have some moments of pressure						
True	*5*	*4*	*3*	*2*	*1*	*Untrue*
9) After working on this task, I felt I was eager for more tasks like this						
True	5	4	3	2	1	Untrue