The rationale behind *Task-Based Language Learning: Insights From and for L2 Writing* is the belief that research within the task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework can be enriched and advanced by investigating the complex phenomenon of writing. The volume is published in a series devoted to the dissemination of TBLT issues and practices, and is intended not only for specialists who are pursuing TBLT as an area of focus, but also for anyone who is thinking about broadening his or her research using TBLT. There are 11 chapters with three thematic sections (theory, research, and coda).

Chapter 1 introduces the volume’s overarching themes and discusses definitions of tasks from two perspectives: TBLT and second language (L2) writing. Byrnes and Manchón have brought together 10 scholars from several different theoretical traditions who employ a variety of empirical approaches in diverse contexts and who investigate a wide range of L2 writing task types.

Section I, “Tenets, Methods, and Findings in Task-Oriented Theory and Research: The Case of Writing,” addresses TBLT’s underlying theoretical constructs, approaches, and research methods, and exemplifies how a task can be expanded with particular insights from L2 writing. Chapter 2 by Manchón and Chapter 3 by Macaro draw on cognitive theories of writing research (e.g., Hayes, 1996) and look specifically at how TBLT can expand from a focus on task manipulation and task performance to task involvement, by addressing the learner-internal dimension of tasks and learner agency in task execution within the complex cognitive activity of writing. Manchón explores how researching learners and their individual differences in task interpretation and execution can help to define the domain of L2 writing as well as enlarge TBLT research.

In a similar vein, Macaro examines the relationship between task, a learner’s linguistic knowledge, and a learner’s strategic behavior. He offers valuable insights into the tripartite relationship among these three constructs with a case study of two L2 learners of French, who, although they seem to have the same linguistic resources, employ a completely different set of strategies when writing. Macaro argues that “to believe that one can manipulate externally task requirements and then merely look at the outcome seems to me to be a very limited type
of research, not to say naïve, given the independence that a student can bring to the task of writing” (p. 75).

Chapter 4 by Byrnes addresses a different perspective on the relationship between TBLT and writing, and examines the meaning-making (form-meaning-function) potential of genre-based writing tasks, which places learners as historically and culturally embedded individual and social beings. She finds that, by using genre-based writing tasks, learners are better able to develop advanced forms of *multiple literacies* and confront the reality of the educational environments within which they operate.

The six chapters in Section II, “Empirical Findings,” address the language learning potential of writing tasks, particularly task performance within diverse contexts with varying learner variables. Chapters 5 through 9 focus on different ways of carrying out a writing task and the effect on learning, particularly task repetition, task implementation, task complexity, and the modality of the task at hand. In Chapter 5, Nitta and Baba address the long-standing belief within TBLT research traditions of the value of task repetition. Employing a dynamic systems perspective (see Larsen-Freeman, 2009), their longitudinal study of the impact of written task repetition concludes that the benefits of writing tasks are not immediate, but may possibly have long-term facilitative effects. Adams, Amani, Newton, and Nik in Chapter 6 also take a tenet from the TBLT research agenda, in this case the effects of planning on L2 oral production, finding that different types of planning promote different aspects of written production and therefore different learning opportunities. Finally, the study reported by Ruiz-Funes (Chapter 7), on task complexity in academic writing, suggests that there is tension between syntactic complexity and accuracy and fluency in relation to task complexity. Additionally, there is a language learning potential when writing tasks are carried out (i.e., writing to learn).

The next two chapters, by Kormos (Chapter 8) and Tavakoli (Chapter 9), tackle the issue of task modality effects, and they complement each other regarding the nature of whether cognitive complexity affects writing tasks. These two chapters provide empirical validation for the theoretical perspectives introduced in the volume’s Section I.

The last chapter in Section II contains a provocative discussion by Byrnes, who takes an explicitly education-oriented view to address the question of how “L2 writing development with advanced levels might best be fostered through genre-oriented TBLT instruction” (p. 257). This chapter complements her earlier chapter in Section I, in which she describes language development as the increase of textual meaning making through genre-based writing tasks, especially using the construct of grammatical metaphor as understood in systemic functional linguistics.

REVIEWS 743
One of the main strengths of Section II is that these chapters connect back to Section I and anticipate what is ahead in Section III, which helps readers navigate the book’s main themes. However, the chapters in this section are complex in that they address many issues related to task factors (e.g., task design, task complexity, task implementation) and learner factors (e.g., interlocutor and learner dynamics), and at times it is difficult to link the chapter’s purpose to the book’s overarching theme. All the chapters in this section contain clear explications of research methodology that will be helpful to any readers who may wish to replicate the studies in their own contexts.

Section III, “Coda,” returns to the volume’s central tenet, which is to enrich and advance the second language acquisition (SLA) domain of task in light of L2 writing. This final chapter by Byrnes and Manchón summarizes the book’s contribution to TBLT theory and research and includes suggestions for further research presented thematically as four strands: (1) learner-internal perspectives, (2) a learning orientation, (3) a textual meaning-making orientation, and (4) a curricular orientation. These four strands offer readers a number of interesting research ideas and directions.

Although tasks are important research tools and learning mechanisms in both SLA and L2 writing research domains, there has been little collaboration between researchers operating within these historically separate domains. This edited volume addresses that gap, and provides readers with richly textured opportunities that can show how TBLT and L2 writing research can inform each other. L2 writing scholars who are interested in the interface between L2 writing and task-based SLA would find this book beneficial for research. An enhancement to the volume overall might have been a glossary of terminology and more signposting throughout Section II about which insight is the focus of each specific chapter—insights from or for L2 writing.

Although its main purpose is to foster fuller appreciation for the construct of task, this volume nevertheless contributes to an understanding of L2 learning in instructed settings, and presents insights for our understanding of the learning and teaching of L2 writing. Although the research agenda and the interfaces between SLA, TBLT, and L2 writing have been discussed and debated previously (e.g., Ortega, 2012), no earlier book is as successful in systematically illustrating and connecting the benefits of these two distinct areas of inquiry. Byrnes and Manchón’s volume may be viewed as an innovative exploration of where we are now and where we may be able to go in the future.

All in all, Byrnes and Manchón offer a “journey through the theoretical explorations and research findings” (p. 17) of the relationship between TBLT and L2 writing research from a range of
complementing perspectives. The volume weaves together research and theory and is a valuable resource for scholars, researchers, teachers, and graduate students of L2 writing.

REFERENCES


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