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An Inquiry into EFL Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Task Complexity in Writing: Sketching the Terrain for a Substantial Task Difficulty Index

Khadidja Zaidi*
University of Frères Mentouri, Constantine 1 (Algeria)
khadidja.zaidi@univ-oeb.dz

Pr. Youcef Beghoul
University of Frères Mentouri, Constantine 1 (Algeria)
beghoul.youcef@umc.edu.dz

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Abstract:

This study seeks to examine the influence of task complexity on English as a foreign language students' and teachers' perceptions of task difficulty. Thus, thirty students, in the Department of English, Oum El Bouaghi University, Algeria performed four argumentative writing tasks, varied in complexity along ± strategic planning and causal reasoning, following a repeated measures design. Then, they gauged the difficulty of each task and indicated the features that influenced the appraisal via a questionnaire. Furthermore, thirty teachers, from the same department, answered the questionnaire to rate the tasks' difficulty and discuss their reasons. The descriptive analysis demonstrated that both respondents rated the fourth task as the most difficult. The qualitative analysis showed that the prevalent themes were mostly related to the cognitive factors of tasks. These results have compelling pedagogical implications that contribute to the establishment of a basic task difficulty index in writing.

Keywords:

Task-Based Language Teaching, Task Complexity, Task Difficulty, English as a Foreign Language Writing, Causal Reasoning, Strategic Planning.

Introduction:

In tandem with the development of task-based language teaching (TBLT), a bulk of research has regarded the issue of designing and sequencing pedagogic tasks in the convenient fashion. Patently, the early endeavours to investigate and determine task difficulty, among which Prabhu (1987)[1] and Nunan (1989)[2], have been chiefly interested in grading tasks from easy to complex and framing the necessary factors that determine such sequence. In this respect, task attributes, types, and implementation conditions have heretofore endured as basic variables to portray the impact of task complexity on language performance. This is with more emphasis on the oral mode. Some research works that teased out the effect of task complexity on writing performance have also emerged (Ellis & Yuan, 2004[3]; Ong & Zhang, 2010[4]; Kuiken & Vedder[5], 2007; Kormos, 2011[6]; Frear & Bitchener, 2015[7]; Ruiz-Funes, 2015[8]) though is a neglected area of analysis hitherto (Rahimi, 2018)[9].

*The corresponding author: Khadidja Zaidi

This, accordingly, resulted in an alluring matter for designating and delineating task difficulty and its relationship with task complexity; yet, how students and teachers perceive that difficulty is still disregarded, viz. in EFL writing. Evidently, the two rudimentary models that have affected that research are the Limited Attentional Capacity Model and the Cognition Hypothesis. Both frameworks, in fact, have put forward opposed premises concerning the effectiveness of task complexity on learners' performance and their specific perceptions of task difficulty. This line of inspection has affirmed that task difficulty insights equate ostensibly with increases in task complexity, and, notably, the indicated criteria that justify them together with those of teachers continue to be less examined and are in need as well of further explorations. The latter can provide an effective understanding of the way to design tasks in the language learning/teaching context and be conducive to syllabus designers and language educators to depict and use better, fruitful components of language teaching (Tavakoli, 2009[10]; Rahimi, 2018; Awwad, 2019[11]).

Based on the previous findings and inspired predominantly by the work of Tavakoli (2009) and that of Awwad (2019), this study seeks to add to the existing results. This is via implementing a structured access of task complexity in writing, namely, probing into the perceptions of English as a foreign language (EFL) students and teachers to inspect the set of features that effected the identification and gauge of task difficulty, employing a mixed-method procedure. This in turn, pre-eminently, contributes to design a requisite index of such difficulty and explore if the suggested contemporary frameworks are a reflection of these perceptions or an exposure to novel knowledge thus far.

1- Literature Review

In what follows is an account of the basic analyses that have taken place with regard to task complexity and task difficulty.

1-1 The Distinction between Task Difficulty and Task Complexity

Of distinct interest is the difference and relationship between task complexity and task difficulty that continue to be a core part in researches and negotiations of task sequencing. In cognitive psychology, task difficulty level has been identified with cognitive load, which, as a concept, refers to the enforced load a single task exercises on learners and is related to mental load and effort where attentional sources are allotted to meet task demands (Paas, Van Merrienboer, & Adam, 1994)[12]. In this regard, mental effort, Sasayama (2016)[13] noted, can be linked to task difficulty perceptions; even so, it considers the real effort individuals participate in contrasting the intended demands of tasks. This indicates a feasible interconnection between the mental effort in which a learner engages and task design control; task difficulty is contemplated with subjective complexity based on the stakeholders insights of the way they rate the difficulty of tasks whereas task complexity reflects objective complexity ascribed to the task inherent demands (Awwad, 2019). In addition, the review of task difficulty has taken place to attest that the design of task complexity coheres with task difficulty perceptions, that is, learner's prevailing evaluation of a certain task, and thus it has been recognised as a conception that scrutinises and approves the procedural implementation of task characteristics, Cho (2018)[14] further explained.

In the model, known as the Trade-off Effect Hypothesis, Skehan (1996)[15] maintained that there exists no borderline between task difficulty and task complexity. The latter, being delineated, refers to the mass of attention tasks call from the learners. Therefore, it was suggested to categorise task complexity at three levels. First, code complexity concerns the linguistic demands of tasks. Second, cognitive complexity is related to cognitive demands, such as familiarity of the task, topic, or discourse and cognitive processing that includes the organisation of information, the mount of computation whilst performing the task, and sufficiency and clarity of information. Third, communicative stress in which the conditions tasks are performed, for instance, time pressure, scale,

modality, stake, or possibility for control. These are in addition to learners' features as intelligence, amount of imagination, and personal experience that can affect task accomplishment. The rudimentary premise of such model then is that attentional sources are finite and the execution of complex tasks lessens their already accessible amount; this can make learners centre on meaning over form. Put plainly, any increase in task complexity is likely to point learners' attention to promote task content (fluency) at the expense of accuracy and complexity of language output.

Conversely, Robinson (2001[16], 2007[17]) claimed for numerous and uncompetitive attentional pools learners can reach and made plain the distinction between (cognitive) task complexity and task difficulty. The former "… is the result of the attentional, memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task to the language learner" (Robinson, 2001, p. 29). Therefore, task complexity resides in the cognitive aspects of tasks that are controlled to expand or reduce the cognitive demands created on learners during task performance. On the other hand, task difficulty alludes to learners' factors mirrored in their perceptions of why tasks are difficult, including affective variables (e.g. anxiety, motivation, confidence) and ability variables (e.g. aptitude, working memory, intelligence). In addition, Robinson and Gilabert (2007)[18] contended, the third element in the scheme includes task conditions. These are totally tied to interactive task factors, including participation variables (± open solution, ± one-way flow, and ± convergent solution, for example) or participant variables (± same gender, ± familiarity, ± same proficiency). Interestingly, the researchers separated task complexity into two groups: resource-directing variables and resource-dispersing variables. The first set of factors concerns the conceptual task demands, and, by way of illustration, includes the tasks that call for reasoning (± reasoning demands, being causal, spatial, or intentional, the number of elements to delineate; ± few elements, or the events, dislocated in place or time, to elucidate; ± here-and-now). Resource-directing variables are conducive to interlanguage development and, to encounter the boost in those demands, drive learners to greater accuracy and complexity at the expense of fluency. As for resource-dispersing variables that concern the procedural task demands, the accessibility of planning time **(±** planning), the pertinent knowledge learners have (± prior knowledge), ± task structure, and the number of the tasks to accomplish (± single task) are certain exemplars. Thus, rising the task complexity, in this regard, scatters learners' attention over several aspects of language performance and thereupon worsens task performance, with regard to the three language aspects: accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Relying on such framework, importantly, the present research operationalised task complexity at the two levels of ± causal reasoning demands and ± strategic planning. By definition, causal reasoning is "… reasoning about causal events and relationships between them" (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007, p. 165), and therefore learners are supposed to provide reasons that support their arguments. As for strategic planning, it is one kind of pre-task planning where learners are given the time to plan what to say in the task and how to express it (Ellis, 2005)[19].

1-2 Precursory Research on Perceptions of Task Difficulty in Writing

Most of the research scrutinising the effect of task complexity with regard to learners' task difficulty perceptions, the ones of teachers, and those of the couple disregarded the aspects of task complexity that affected these insights and the existence of any relatedness among them. This line of investigation, Awwad (2019) contended, has focused mainly on oral performance. Thus, evidently, there is a paucity of research on task difficulty perceptions in writing where certain studies have explored such inquiry, among which the following ones.

Frear (2013)[20], in an investigation that involved second language (L2), ninety four learners at the intermediate level, who studied in three different schools in Auckland, investigated task complexity effects on writing. To fulfil such aim, the participants

performed three letter-writing tasks that ranged in complexity along number of elements and reasoning demands in addition to allotting 10 minutes for pre-task planning and 10 minutes for post-task editing time in task 2 and task 3. The findings revealed that increasing task complexity negatively affected subordinate clauses; nevertheless, a notable increase was observed with adjectival clauses. A six-point Likert-scale questionnaire was also employed to reflect learners' perceptions of the performed tasks and their completion, exemplified in task motivation that arise from their construal of task features, and whether those perceptions correlated with task complexity effects on the complexity of language. It was found that three questions among eleven, related to task relevance and expectancy, did have remarkable correlations at a certain degree.

Based on a quantitative, within-subjects analysis, Sanajou, Zohali, and Zabihi (2017)[21] inspected the impact of task complexity on EFL students' perceptions of task difficulty via a nine-scale questionnaire. The students, from an Iranian University, answered the questionnaire after performing a single and a dual narrative writing task. In the former, they were requested to write the story line of a comic cartoon whereas in the latter they were expected to detect the string of the disarranged pictures then proceed to writing the story. The results, finally, designated that the complex task greatly influenced students' task difficulty perceptions at the level of difficulty, stress, and interest with no significant differences for confidence and motivation. This implies the supremacy of cognitive demands perceived by learners as a key aspect that adds to task difficulty.

In a research that involved sixty L2 learners, with an upper-intermediate level, who studied English in four main schools in Iran, Rahimi (2018) examined the influence of raising task complexity in two argumentative writing tasks. The cognitive complexity per task was manipulated along the rate of reasoning demanded and the number of elements to approach. In order to decide the difficulty of the tasks, learners, on a scale of 0 (totally disagree) to 100 (totally agree), instead of the five-point Likert scale, where the first two items, among ten others, especially rate the determined task difficulty in addition to the call for justifying the choice. Furthermore, ten skilled writing teachers answered the question that calls for responses about which task to write an argue essay about is more difficult for such level of learners and, surely, to justify their judgement. The results obviously revealed, according to the researcher, that all participants perceived the task with six projects necessitating a higher degree of reasoning to be more difficult than the one that contains only three-projects and requires lower reasoning amount. This pointed to the fact that task complexity was manipulated aptly and meant the expediency of open-ended questions procedure in affirming the features related to task complexity.

Xu, Zhang, and Gaffney (2021)[22] scrutinised the effectiveness of task complexity in L2 writing. The investigation enrolled ninety two Chinese students who got separated into three groups: the first one comprised thirty one students who carried out a single-task while the second and third ones that included thirty and thirty one students in two separate experimental groups, respectively, performed the dual-task. Principally, learners completed two argumentative writing tasks whose complexity was handled through ± few elements and ± reasoning demands, then the classes completed a paper questionnaire ranked on a nine-point scale ranging from very easy to very difficult, where one item judged the members' perceptions towards mental effort and the other rated their feelings of task difficulty. Apparently, as reported, the complex task was appraised more difficult and, thus, more mental effort exerting than its simpler counterpart.

2- Research Methodology

A glance at the preceding researches fairly shows that the two already mentioned schemas are capable so far to pinpoint task difficulty along variables of task complexity; the problem, nonetheless, lies in the features that determine that difficulty or the elements that control such complexity. Moreover, as noted in the previous sections, exploring how

learners and teachers perceive task difficulty, in light with aspects of task complexity, mainly in EFL writing, as one of the alluring areas of research, is still scant and needs supplementary investigations to take place. Likewise, to scan those perceptions through analysing data in a descriptive and qualitative modus of operandi can add to current inquiries. Hence, this examination targets to fill such lacunas out by delving into both EFL insiders' insights of task difficulty, following preceding researches and depending on those insights. The study predominantly goes in pursuit of mapping the ground to found a critical index of task difficulty in EFL writing.

Interestingly, the inspection followed a mixed methodology. First, the repeated-measures design, "… in which a single participant is observed and measured on more than one level of an independent variable rather than measuring different individuals on each level of the independent variable" (Beins, 2019, p. 215)[23], was opted for. This means that the same group of participants was noticed on different levels of a specific independent variable (task complexity) and not just on a single level, which constituted the first phase of the study. Here, students performed four versions of the argumentative writing tasks that were sequenced for task complexity. The latter was manipulated along two levels of resource-directing and resource-dispersing variables: ± causal reasoning demands and ± strategic planning. After that, and for the sake of this research, a task difficulty questionnaire was administered to learners and sent to the teachers' e-mails to rate the difficulty of those tasks and, then, was analysed in both a descriptive and a qualitative approach as the second phase. To this end, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do EFL students and teachers, in the Department of English, Oum El Bouaghi University, rate the difficulty of four argumentative writing tasks manipulated by the two variables: ± causal reasoning demands and ± strategic planning?
2. What aspects affected EFL students and teachers to ascertain task difficulty?
3. What parallels and distinctions exist, if any, amid EFL students and teachers perceptions of task difficulty?

2-1 Means of Research

After being exposed to the argumentative writing mode (two sessions), students were asked, over four separate sessions, to perform individually four versions of argumentative writing tasks (See Appendix A), for one hour and a half per task. As such, each task was designed by manipulating the two variables: ± causal reasoning demands and ± strategic planning. Students were allotted 10 minutes planning time before they performed Task 1, the simple version, and were not supposed to think about reasons as the teacher already gave them the requisite reasons to use when writing their essays and contend about the idea that money cannot warrant happiness. In Task 2, the medium complex, version 1, students were not allotted planning time before performing the task, but here again, they were not expected to think about the reasons which were provided by the teacher beforehand to use when writing the essay and argue if parents are considered the best teachers. For Task 3, the medium complex, version 2, students were allotted 10 minutes planning time before they executed the task but, contrary to Task 1 and 2, were supposed to provide reasons on whether beauty is mainly linked to inner beauty or not. For Task 4, the most complex, learners were deprived of planning time and were supposed to provide reasons to write the essays and maintain if technology had ruined the kinds of relationships people make and had affected social interaction negatively. It should be noted that the topics of the tasks were adapted from the IELTS Book (2021)[24].

Moreover, a paper-based retrospective questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered to the students instantly after the actual performance of all tasks to extract data needed in the investigation. The questionnaire, adhering to samples worked out in previous researches, comprised four questions, one for each task. The questions judged the difficulty of the four

tasks on a six-point scale varied from 1 (extremely easy), 2 (easy), 3 (somewhat easy), 4 (somewhat difficult), 5 (difficult) to 6 (extremely difficult) and next vindicate the judgement via four open-ended questions, one per task as well. The questionnaire, in a modified version displaying the tasks and how their complexity was manipulated right before the related questions, was also sent to teachers' e-mail addresses, which requested rating the tasks' difficulty and the reasons that explain the discernment.

2-2 Participants

The target population of the study included two-hundred twenty three students, at the third year, in the Department of English, Oum El Bouaghi University, during the academic year 2021/ 2022. In fact, the administration already separated the students into eight groups that each encompassed thirty to thirty-five students. The choice of such population was due to the fact that the argumentative essay, which forms a basic variable in the research study, was part of the syllabus, and students were at the upper-intermediate level and were qualified to take part in the experiment. Correspondingly, thirty students, who constituted the sample, answered the four tasks and responded to the administered questionnaire. Besides, thirty EFL teachers, twenty nine full-time teachers and one part-time teacher, from a pool of fifty three, who taught writing in the preceding years or are still teaching it (*M*= 4.65), in the same department, were solicited to answer the questionnaire.

3- Results

This section presents the descriptive and the qualitative results of the questionnaire.

3-1 Descriptive Results Display

The examination, a propos the prime research question, that sought to see how respondents rated the difficulty of the four argumentative writing tasks, manipulated by ± strategic planning and ± causal reasoning demands, along a six-point scale that started from 1 (extremely easy), 2 (easy), 3 (somewhat easy), 4 (somewhat difficult), 5 (difficult) to 6 (extremely difficult) revealed certain descriptive results.

Concerning the students, the fourth task, operationalised over + causal reasoning, – strategic planning, was deemed the most difficult task **(***M***=** 4.43, *SD* = 1.194). It was preceded by the third task (+ causal reasoning demands, + strategic planning) (*M*= 3.87, *SD*= .819) and the second task (– causal reasoning demands, – strategic planning) (*M*= 2.90, *SD*= .607). Hence, the first task (– causal reasoning demands, + strategic planning) clearly was perceived the easiest task among all the tasks (*M*= 2.40, *SD*= .675). Figure (1) displays how students rated each task in terms of difficulty.

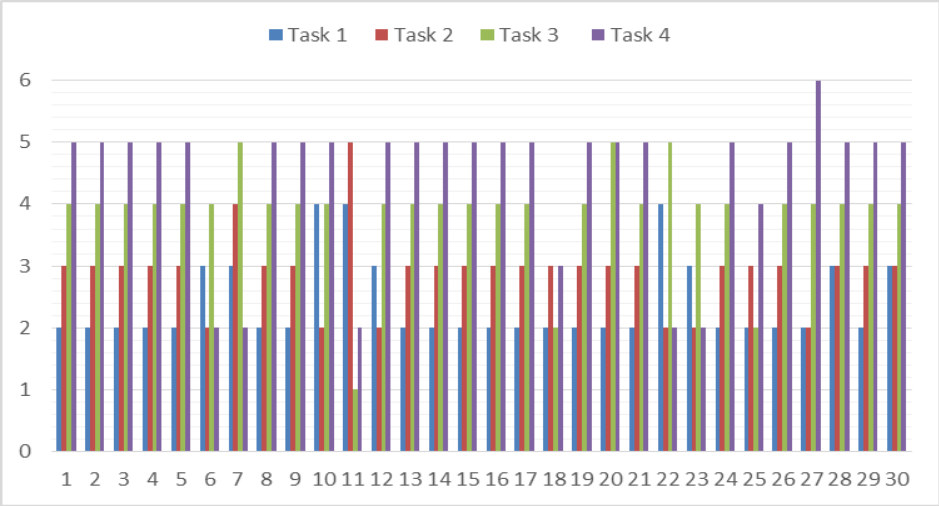

Figure :(01) Students' Rate of Tasks' Difficulty

As far as the teachers' answers are concerned, the descriptive analysis of the results exhibited that teachers rated the tasks in a similar manner to that of students. Accordingly, Task 4 was viewed the most difficult one compared to the other tasks (*M*= 5.07, *SD*=1.015; Task 3 (*M*= 4.13, *SD*= .973) and Task 2 (*M*= 3.17, *SD*= .950) were judged as less difficult whereas Task 1 (*M*= 2.20, *SD*= .761) was regarded the easiest one. Figure 2 shows how teachers scaled each task's difficulty.

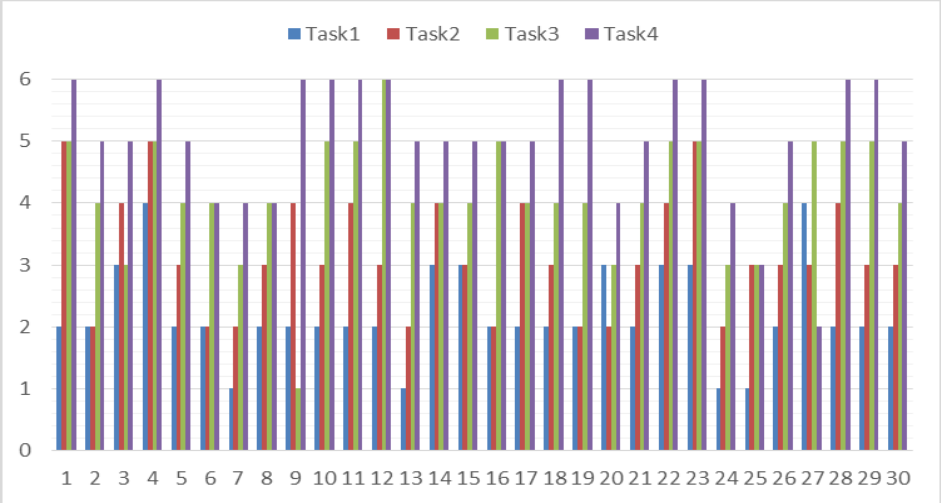

Figure :(2) Teachers' Rate of Tasks' Difficulty

Table (1) below shows the frequencies of students' and teachers' rates of task difficulty where the fourth task was rated the most difficult with the highest frequency of 22 times for the option 'difficult' and 12 times for the option 'extremely difficult'.

Respondents' Rate of Task Difficulty	Frequency					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Students' Rate of Task 1 Difficulty		21	6	3		
Teachers' Rate of Task 1 Difficulty	4	18	6	2		
Students' Rate of Task 2 Difficulty		6	22	1	1	
Teachers' rate of Task 2 Difficulty		8	12	7	3	
Students' rate of Task 3 Difficulty	1	2		24	3	
Teachers' Rate Task 3 Difficulty	1		5	13	10	1
Students' rate of Task 4 Difficulty		5	1	1	22	1
Teachers' rate of Task 4 Difficulty		1	1	5	11	12

Table (01): Frequencies of Students' and Teachers' Rate of Task Difficulty

As for the qualitative part, responses of the students considered four main themes. They are the cognitive demands of tasks grouped into cognitive task-design aspects, 170 answers including 98 answers (28.82%) and 72 answers (21.18%) mentioned ± causal reasoning and ± strategic planning, respectively. This in addition to task-intrinsic cognitive demands,

related to the content and structure of the tasks performed (114 answers; 33.53%), time pressure in 28 answers (8.24%), affective variables (23 answers that equal a percentage of 6.76). The same themes were noted by teachers in the same order of occurrence (171 (57%), 76 (25.33%), 20 (6.67%), and 18 (6%) for each theme mentioned before, except for the linguistic demands and proficiency level that appeared in students' or teachers' comments, taking the percentage of 1.47% and 5%, respectively. This implies a great similarity among them in identifying and scaling task difficulty together with the aspects that affected the decision.

3-2 Qualitative Results Display

For the second basic research question that aimed to investigate the reasons establishing participants' appraisal of the tasks and thereupon influencing their perceptions, the qualitative data of the students and the teachers were scrutinised. To fulfil such aim, the researcher used a thematic analysis, a method that helps to record and code qualitative data into different themes, Braun, et al (2019)[25] asserted, which mainly include familiarisation, generating codes, and constructing themes. Following the three guidelines, thus, and after getting familiar with the data, reading and rereading it carefully, the preliminary coding phase took place by giving codes to each reason of the respondents, and then the coded dataset were grouped under different themes for each task. It should be mentioned that highlighting the answers in different colours that fit any specific theme was useful to create, group related themes together, or revise them. Finally, the two sets of data were compared to find out any similarities or differences and examine which framework, among the two discussed above, mirror the perceptions of students and teachers in this study, and thereby suggest the main themes that establish the suggested index of difficulty.

Firstly, as regards students, the recurrent theme was linked to task-design cognitive demands. 98 answers (28.82%) and 72 answers (21.18%), out of 340, mentioned causal reasoning and strategic planning, respectively. For instance, the last task was perceived the most difficult due to higher causal reasoning demands and strategic planning time deprival, and the first task that exercised less causal reasoning demands and gave the space for planning time was rated the easiest. Here are some of the reasons supplied by students to clarify the rate of Task 1, Task 3, and Task 4 as easy, somewhat difficult, and difficult, in the order mentioned:

- It was easy because the teacher gave us time to organize our ideas. Also, she gave us guiding reasons.
- We were not given the guiding reasons although the teacher gave us 10 min before writing.
- The teacher did not give us time to organize our ideas.
  She did not give us guiding reasons.

The second theme that emerged in 114 answers (33.53%) was related to task-intrinsic cognitive demands, mainly linked to the content and structure of the tasks. Thus, 92 comments (27.06%) answers were tied to the topics of the essays, and in this case, turned around topic familiarity. For instance, some students claimed they knew the topic and had ideas about it (being dealt with in the Oral Expression module, one student affirmed, or watched in TV programmes, another student noted); it was interesting, easy, clear, and debatable in tasks that placed less cognitive demands, which led to being more motivated to write. However, when rating the two last tasks, the topics, for some they were difficult to handle; for instance, one student noted that the topic of beauty was a bit philosophical in its nature. In addition, the use of quotes to introduce the topics was attractive and beneficial in the tasks together all of the clear instructions and the organization of the guiding reasons made it enjoyable to handle the tasks even the difficult ones (10 responses, 2.94%). Finally, other comments referred to the argumentative essay genre where task instructions required agreeing/disagreeing about the given statements (6 answers; 1.76%)

as one student explained '… I mean the argumentative essay, I was trying to write in a good way, and at the same time pay attention to the structure of the essay', which is difficult and troublesome as the task of writing itself (6 comments). Next are other comments that pinpoint some of these variables:

- The topic was interesting and easy. Task 1
- We also discussed the topic with the Oral Expression's teacher in the first semester. Watching the movie of "The Beauty and the Beast" helped me. Task 3
- I do not have a lot of ideas about the topic. Task 4
- The quotes were very helpful for making the topic clearer. Task 4

The third theme that appeared when scanning the data was time pressure that attributed to the perceptions of the tasks' difficulty. Hence, 28 answers (8.24%) maintained that they spent less time in the first two tasks whereas in the last two ones they needed more time to finish writing the essays. This is especially with regard to not being provided with guiding reasons (which increased reasoning demands in students' views) or strategic planning as in Task 4, or vice versa as in Task 1 and 2. The next comments exemplify such theme.

- The time was very helpful and enough for me to write and finish my essay. Task 1
- The time was suitable for writing the essay. Task 2
- I spent much time in Task 4 compared to the previous tasks.
- I think that this is the most difficult because 1 hour and a half is not enough to write a whole essay starting from the introduction to the conclusion without any guiding reasons or ideas. Task 4

The fourth emerging theme was related to the affective variables (23 answers that equal a percentage of 6.76%). Specifically, for Task 1 and 2, students mentioned they were exited, motivated, interested contrary to Task 3 and 4 where they claimed being stressed, less motivated, and anxious. This was due to topic familiarity and knowledge, not writing at home, or other extraneous factors (being hungry and not taking breakfast, coming late due to transportation problems, nice weather and calm classroom atmosphere, having three sessions in the morning and one in the evening), which did make a difference and led students to perceive the tasks difficult or easy. These ideas were expressed as follows:

- I was motivated to write about the topic because I have a lot of ideas about. Task 1
- The topic was amazing; I wrote about it using my own emotions. Task 3
- I am not interested to write about the topic as I have no idea about it. Task 3
- I wasn't motivated. Task 4
- I think after midday I had a writer block. Task 3
- I wasn't motivated and came late because of the transportation, so I was disturbed and did not work well as usual. Task 4
- I didn't have breakfast. Task 4

Concerning the linguistic demands, the fifth least occurring theme, 5 answers (1.47%) held that they needed key vocabulary and even could not find or organise the ideas in the last task compared to the first task, as an example, which was easy and required simple vocabulary (one student, 3.33%).

- I forgot the key words and faced a little bit of difficulty in the organisation of the ideas.
- The expressions needed are not difficult.

As regards teachers, the first theme that frequently emerged included the task-induced cognitive demands. Among 300 responses, 171 (57%) referred either to causal reasoning demands or strategic planning, that is 86 comments (28.67%) and 85 comments (28.33%) for each feature. So, the manipulation of task complexity over – causal reasoning and – strategic planning made teachers claim for the extreme difficulty of Task 4 compared to the previous ones and attributed the judgement due to high reasoning demands, as students were not provided with guiding reasons that lessen those demands, and the absence of the

strategic planning time. Here are three examples of teachers' answers that illustrate such idea:

- This task is the most difficult of the four. Students are not provided with any ideas to guide their writing. In addition, students are not allotted any time to plan for the essay to consider the arguments they should include carefully.
- In my opinion, the "planning time" given to students is of extreme importance. Not being given the time to actively think of reasons, language accuracy, transitions, and examples would only make the students more stressed out. Hence, their ability will be almost entirely shifted to accomplishing the task (finding reasons), and it will be hindered by stress. They will be writing on the go, which means that their priority will be to find reasons.
- Here, students are confronted to a double difficulty: that of 'planning time' and that of providing their own reasons to write their essays.

For Task 3, teachers advocated the idea that the job of students is still difficult as no guiding reasons were given, despite the fact that they were allotted with strategic planning time, which is surely beneficial, as the following comment indicates:

- I would rate this task as somewhat difficult. Its difficulty comes from the fact that the students are not provided with the major ideas to discuss in the essay, as in previous tasks. It is not difficult or extremely difficult because the students still have the chance to think about such ideas in the 10 times allotted to them.

In addition to that, concerning the least difficult tasks, teachers also maintained that minimising the cognitive demands on students through giving the guiding reasons that contributed to lesser reasoning demands and allotting ten minutes for strategic planning made the first task less difficult; in what follows is a sample of the teacher's answers regarding appraisal of Task 1 easiness:

- I believe that this task should have been fairly easy for most students as they had three essential variables that contribute to making this task an effortless one. First, they are provided with reasons. One of the most tiresome and overwhelming explanations as to why students find difficulties in writing essays is that they are required to make much mental effort to think of pros and cons (as far as argumentative essays are concerned). Since these are neatly provided to them by the researcher, all they need to do is elaborate upon these reasons in order to construct their essays. Second, the allocated planning time is surely beneficial to them because it gives them the opportunity to methodically arrange their thoughts and elaborations as well as the structure of their essays (as in which reasons should go in what order). This also gives them the opportunity to arrange transitional expressions that would guarantee a golden thread that pervades throughout the essay.

The following theme that mostly appeared in teachers' comments was related to the cognitive task-intrinsic demands. First, the content of the task, namely, topic familiarity occurred with frequency of 45 comments i.e. a percentage that equals 15%. The reasons given by teachers to comment about the difficulty of the last tasks were, in most cases, tied to the topics, being described more cognitively demanding, requiring good background, as well as their nature (philosophical, one teacher noted), or interesting, easy, familiar, common, or already dealt with every day as in the first two tasks. Second come the task instructions (19 comments, 6.33%), which were the clear prompt and instructions (9 comments; 3%, the organised layout of the given reasons (2 comments; 0.67%), and the use of quotes (8 comments, 2.67%). All were helpful, even in difficult tasks, and could even interact with affective variables to stimulate interest, involvement, and motivation of learners, teachers claimed. As an example, considering the third variable mentioned in the last teacher's answer provided above, she referred to this theme, in particular:

- Third, the topic is very interesting (who does not possibly want to talk about money?). The way in which the topic is articulated and the topic itself are more than

enough to keep the students absorbed and interested, which eventually contributes to the easiness of the task.

A similar argument was noted in another teacher's response, with regard to Task 4, that helped to confront its difficulty:

- Besides, the use of the quote may facilitate the comprehension of the topic and paves the way for the students to construct a strong thesis statement on which the arguments will be based.

In addition to that, four comments (1.33%) traced the difficulty of the writing task in itself and the argumentative writing mode as being troublesome and requiring time and highly cognitive processes (8 responses, 2.67%), and the next two comments clearly implied that teachers took the second aspect, for example, into consideration when they judged the tasks' difficulty:

- … the argumentative essay is not an easy type of essays, comparing it with the descriptive or narrative essays. It requires a good plan that necessitates enough time.
- That type of analysis requires analysis of relations which is part of high cognitive reasoning.

A third theme mentioned by teachers (6.67%, 20 comments) was related to time pressure. When rating difficult tasks, teachers noted that Task 3 and especially Task 4 could exercise a kind of time pressure on learners as they struggled to think about the convincing reasons as well as the organization of the essays, as the following statement conveys:

- The fourth task in which students are given no time for pre-task planning is extremely difficult, as the students will spend so much time trying to identify their stance with regard to the topic and to figure out answers to questions like: what are they supposed to discuss in the essay? What kind of relationships, in specific?

On the contrary, as in the first task, one teacher wrote:

- The students may finish the task within a time span of 1 hour and a half and may easily succeed in building a strong, convincing essay with the use of the readymade arguments.

Affective variables, under task difficulty component, is another occurring theme reported by teachers (18 answers, 6%), namely stress and motivation that could be the result of the manipulation of task complexity variables, notably, in Task 4, as one teacher commented:

- Without pre-given elements and time for planning, students would find themselves writing whatever comes to their mind, which would probably generate messy essays that need to be re-planned and revised many times. The writing would be demotivating and the product would be weak in most cases.

In addition to that, 15 answers (5%) were related to proficiency level (ability variables), that resides to task difficulty as well, which influenced teachers when scaling the tasks' difficulty. As an example, one teacher, commenting about the last task, explained:

- Bearing in mind the students level in writing, I dare to say that they would be 'breathless', not to say 'unable' to write an acceptable essay.

However, as one of the teachers replied, rating the first task as easy:

- If I consider third year undergraduate students to be the target, I would rate this task as easy.

4- Similarities and Differences among Students' and Teachers' Perceptions

In order to answer the third research question that looked for the similarities and differences between students' and teachers' perceptions, and after analysing the reasons that affected the appraisal of the four tasks, these are the main remarks. Importantly, as shown in the descriptive analysis, all respondents rated the last task as the most difficult task, though 'extremely difficult' option was more prevalent in teachers' arguments than in

the students' ones, which included 'difficult' as the highest rate. However, Task 3 and Task 2 were regarded somewhat difficult and somewhat easy, respectively, and, expectedly, Task 1 was rated the easiest. The qualitative analysis, furthermore, indicated many similarities. Concerning the themes mentioned, the most predominant one was the cognitive demands of tasks. This is linked to either to task-design aspects (exemplified in the control along causal reasoning and strategic planning variables or to the tasks' intrinsic features with regard to the content and structure. This is exemplified in the topics (familiar, interesting, common, easy, or vice versa) and the tasks' instructions (layout of the reasons given or clarity of the prompt, argumentative discourse genre, or difficulty of the writing task) that influenced both groups of respondents to rate tasks' difficulty. The other shared themes included time pressure, affective variables as stress and motivation, or ability variables as proficiency level, which was only mentioned in the teachers' responses). The sole difference was related to the linguistic demands of tasks as such theme was reported only by students

5- Discussion of the Results

As indicated above in the descriptive analysis, both EFL students and teachers conceived the last task, operationalised along + causal reasoning and – strategic planning, as the most difficult task with respect to the previous tasks. These results espouse the findings of prior researches and the predictions of the two models and, thus, stipulated that any increase in task complexity greatly affected the perceptions regarding task difficulty and that respondents assessed the tasks raised in complexity more difficult than their counterparts. This essentially can be interpreted that task complexity in this research was manipulated properly and carefully.

Turning to the qualitative part, it was noted that task complexity manipulation affected greatly the perceptions of both groups of respondents. Thereupon, the two reported prevailing themes included the task-determined cognitive factors, arising from the varying levels of task complexity with respect to the degree of causal reasoning and provision or absence of the strategic planning time, together with the task-intrinsic cognitive features, emanating from task content or structure. Such themes match the ones suggested by Robinson, which again meet the cognitive complexity feature in Skehan's typology. Notably, the linguistic demands were only mentioned by students and not teachers, which goes in line with Robinson's Hypothesis, and as Awwad (2019) argued, this scheme includes not any reference to the language needed to approach a given task as an aspect that impacts learners' perceptions of task difficulty. However, in Skehan's model, the linguistic demands were mentioned under the umbrella of code complexity that relates to the linguistic structures needed to complete any task. A feasible clarification for the findings is that both participants valued the cognitive factors and considered them indispensable as they fairly adhere to the difficulty of tasks. Moreover, time pressure and affective or ability variables, organised under communicative stress and learner factors within the frame of the second model, were also indicated as aspects that determined task difficulty. This may play a crucial role in task completion, especially when high time pressures exist, which is attributed to the obvious influence of time pressure on motivation and stress levels. This can be explained by the fact that both variables can correlate together and therefore influence each other positively or negatively. So, the results reveal that the aspects detected parallel, to a large extent, both taxonomies of aspects of task complexity or difficulty, a point that can fairly show the convenience and reliability of such schemas to adhere to when searching for indices of task difficulty in EFL writing.

At the end, it can be argued for the value of open-ended questions, which helped to analyse task complexity features and the effect they do exert on EFL students or teachers perceptions of task difficulty, and, on this account, they can be adequately advantageous to design a necessary index of task difficulty in writing.

Conclusion :

An in-depth glance at the previous findings plainly indicated that task complexity manipulation over the two variables: causal reasoning and strategic planning greatly influenced the students' and teachers' perceptions of task difficulty. The findings revealed that the cognitive factors, as the respondents assured, are key features that surely affected task difficulty perceptions in addition to time pressure, affective and ability variables, and linguistic demands. These themes, enlightened in this investigation, should be integrated in and be the basis for other indices of task difficulty in writing.

Notably, EFL teachers and syllabus designers need to regard these factors if they aim to choose, map, or array language teaching tasks appropriately. Moreover, the perceptions of students and teachers are fundamental as long as they show the tasks they consider more difficult and those of considerable level of difficulty. To illustrate, in addition to cognitive variables, another key factor that needs careful examination is the fact that writing itself is an arduous task. This is especially when dealing with certain discourse modes such as the argumentative essay that was proved to be challenging in many previous studies. It requires teachers to value its difficulty when designing related tasks, taking especially into account time boundaries to be elevated when task complexity increases, the affective or ability variables, and the linguistic demands that could, to a large extent, affect task performance.

Another thorny issue concerns language testing. The study showed that learners indicated some themes, which emerged from their evaluation of task difficulty and were guided by the design of task complexity features. Therefore, teachers need to check the tasks they use in the classroom to guarantee the best ways of assessment, and as Tavakoli (2009) emphasised, it is necessary that language tests depend on tasks that have convenient degrees regarding the cognitive or the linguistic requirements for unbiased, reliable assessments. Hence, examining those perceptions would guide to get useful insights about the tasks that can bring about better achievement in writing.

Finally, it is important to point out certain limitations of the current study. First, it used a retrospective questionnaire; future studies need to rely on certain advanced tools as think-aloud protocols or interviews. As proficiency level was noted by teachers, other studies can also investigate its effect on learners' perceptions of task difficulty. In addition, controlling task complexity over other variables rather than the ones used in this study and investigating other types of writing, such as descriptive or narrative essays, are warranted to add to the findings and delve much deeper into the issue of task complexity and its impact on task difficulty perceptions.

Appendices

Appendix A : The Four Argumentative Tasks

Task 1: – causal reasoning demands, + strategic planning

Topic: The American journalist George Horace Lorimer wrote, "It's good to have money and the things that money can buy, but it's good, too, to check up once in a while and make sure you haven't lost the things that money cannot buy." Do you agree or disagree with this statement and that money cannot guarantee happiness?

Use the following information to develop your essays.

Pro (The Writer's Views)	Con (Opponents' Views & Refutation)
- Money can just make people temporarily happy. • The satisfaction obtained when people have the chance to buy whatever they want at any moment could only be limited to a finite period of time. • If people get involved in tough situations, even money cannot afford them happiness.	- Psychological research provides strong evidence that there is a close connection between money and happiness. • Money is necessary in every one's daily life to buy all necessities and get satisfied. **Refutation** - Buying all basic needs does not necessarily mean being totally happy.

- Money is not the sole necessary aspect that can make people happy. • Money can never buy friends, love, or respect. • Good emotions and memories cannot not be replaced or even bought by money.	• There are some people who do not feel happy nor satisfied despite all what they possess as they pursue love and affection of their close family members and friends. • There are others who are sick or disabled and accept to be poor but healthy.

Task 2: – causal reasoning demands, – strategic planning

Topic: Hillary Clinton once maintained "Parents are teachers, and home is a child's first and most important classroom." Do you agree or disagree with this statement and whether parents are the best teachers for their children or not?

Use the following information to write your essays.

Pro (The Writer's Views)	Con (Opponents' Views & Refutation)
- Parents are the first and earliest teachers of their children. • Parents teach children numerous valuable things and be engaged to nurture them and mould their personalities. • Children consider parents to be their ultimate role models, and parents can depend on that to teach them and be good examples. - No one knows children more than parents do. • Parents are likely to attend to their kids' needs as they are mostly close, caring, and affectionate, which creates a better learning environment. • Parents are more familiar with their children's learning strategies and are able to discover the finest methods to teach them.	- Parents are less professional than teachers to teach kids academic subjects. • Only teachers are capable to instruct and guide children in their academic career using the latest techniques. **Refutation** • Parents, today, take a great responsibility in their children's education path. • Using new technological tools, parents can teach children as they consult the new teaching programmes and techniques.

Task 3: + causal reasoning demands, + strategic planning

Topic: The Romance Novelist Kate Angell affirmed that "Outer beauty attracts, but inner beauty captivates." Do you agree or disagree with the previous statement and that beauty is mostly related to inner beauty not the opposite?

Task 4: + causal reasoning demands, – strategic planning

Topic: "I fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots", Albert Einstein asserted. Do you agree or disagree with the previous statement and that technology has ruined the kinds of relationships people make and affected social interaction negatively?

Appendix B : The Questionnaire

1. How do you rate the difficulty of Task 1/ 2/ 3/ 4?

1. extremely easy 2. easy 3. somewhat easy 4. somewhat difficult
5. difficult 6. extremely difficult

2. Justify your judgement by giving any reasons of which you can think that contribute to the difficulty/ easiness of each task.

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