

# Task Difficulty and Its Components: Are They Alike or Different across Different Macro-genres?

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## Abstract

Task difficulty across different macro-genres continues to remain among less attended areas in second language development studies. This study examined the correlation between task difficulty across the descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and expository macro-genres. The three components of task difficulty (i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress) were also compared in the four macro-genres. The design included the administration of short reading texts with comparable length and readability indices based on the four macro-genres followed by task difficulty questionnaire. The macro-genre-based reading texts along with the task difficulty questionnaire were administered to 50 EFL students in the University of Lorestan, Iran. Task difficulty questionnaire explored the learners' perceptions of task difficulty in the code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress domains. The results revealed that there were no significant differences among the task difficulty components in the four macro-genre-based text types. The findings also showed that there was no significant correlation between task difficulty of each macro-genre with those of the other genres except those of the narrative and expository genres. The findings hold implications for the use of macro-genres with different task difficulty indices in task-oriented programs, teacher training, and testing.

**Keywords:** Task Difficulty, Macro-genres, Reading Comprehension

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## **1. Introduction**

In language teaching literature, task as well as its components appear to play a special role in fulfilling the goals of the communicative approach. It is viewed as a pedagogical tool used by the language teachers and practitioners and a central unit for syllabus design and research (Williams & Burden, 1997). Due to the importance associated with task, a good number of studies (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Elder, Iwashita, & McNamara, 2002; Ellis, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1999) have explored different aspects of it. The studies unanimously have acknowledged the central importance of task in language teaching. Some studies (e.g., Abdolmanafi & Niknaghsh, 2013; Heydari & Ghazali, 2009; Jiang, 2012; Martinez & Murphy, 2011; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007; Skehan, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999) have investigated task difficulty components (i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress). It is not, however, clear whether the learner's competence and ability in tackling one macro-genre is correlated positively with his or her ability in tackling another type of macro-genre in the reading skill. There is still this gap in the literature if different macro-genres, due to different structures and linguistic properties which they appear to employ, would lead to different degrees of task difficulty experienced by L2 learners. In the present study an attempt is in place to shed some initial light on this less attended area of L2 learning.

## **2. Review of Literature**

Depending on their level of proficiency, intelligence, learning style, memory capacity, and language aptitude, and motivation, learners might place varying judgments on the difficulty of a particular task (Robinson, 2001). Such an

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individualistic perception of easiness or difficulty experienced by different L2 learners is assumed to be subject to variation across different types of reading materials which are commonly presented in L2 classrooms. It makes sense to argue that the topic of a particular passage might be in tune with the interest or learning style of some learners turning out to be in sharp contrast with those of some others. The former group is likely to judge the passage less difficult compared with the latter group of learners. Different macro-genres which feature different structures and linguistic properties can evidently account for some degree of inter-language variability as far as task difficulty experienced and reported by L2 learners is concerned. Below we turn to the defining features of narrative, descriptive, argumentative, and expository macro-genres and contemplate the effect which each of these macro-genres is likely to exercise on task difficulty. Different components of task difficulty, i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress, are also tackled briefly.

## **2.1. Macro-genres**

Four types of macro-genres (i.e., narrative, descriptive, argumentative, and expository) were employed in the current study. The first macro-genre used was the narrative macro-genre which is a well-established text type in language teaching literature and is also frequently employed for teaching and testing purposes by L2 practitioners. Such a text type usually involves creation of a story in response to some kind of stimulus. This macro-genre seems ideal as far as the manifestation of creativity and narration power among the L2 learners is concerned (Albert & Kormos, 2004). The narrative text type is contemplated to be associated with the improvement of the learners' intellectual powers of imagination and creativity which can, in turn, pave the way for regulatory and

imaginative functions of language to develop. Working with the narrative macro-genre helps language practitioners see clear sequences separate from all other mental functions (Best, Floyd, & McNamara, 2008). Psychologically viewed, using and developing the narration ability of the language learners is likely to lead to the establishment of mental disciplines and logical order in discourse.

Another type of macro-genre employed in teaching English to L2 learners is the descriptive macro-genre the purpose of which is to recreate, invent, or visually present a person, place, event, or action so that the reader can picture that which one is being described. The descriptive macro-genre can also be found in other rhetorical modes of language including journal writing and poetry (Diakidoy, Stylianou, Karefillidou, & Papageorgiou, 2004). The language used in the description has ostensible patterns. In producing linear descriptions of figures, for example, learners tend to facilitate the task by sequencing the content in one of a small number of ways, leading to specific patterns in the language (Al-Sohbani, 2014; Bax, 2006). The nature of objects physically related within a room whose layout is to be described can affect the order in which nouns are combined within prepositional phrases, and this, in turn, can affect the choice of preposition (Hyland, 2008). Psychologically viewed, the descriptive macro-genre is thought to lead to the language learners' improvement in logical reasoning and categorizing items in clear patterns.

The third type of macro-genre employed in the current study is the argumentative macro-genre. The argumentative macro-genre is a type of discourse genre in which efforts of the individuals to build support for their own position, at the same time that they are undermining support for an opponent's position, result in the continual negotiation of referential, social, and expressive meanings. It is not only viewed as a competitive process, but also

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as a cooperative act, which is an important characteristic of the discourse produced by participants (Nemeth & Kormoth, 2001).

The last macro-genre used in this study is the expository macro-genre. The expository macro-genre is thought to convey, describe, or explain non-fictional information (Yopp & Yopp, 2006). Such text types include structural organization of the concepts and propositions which differentiate them from the rest of texts. The aim of this macro-genre text type is to present people the facts, ideas, and to explain the historical events and social phenomena, to clarify the political opinions, and to test findings and evidence in different domains. It is also intended to explain all that is in need of explanation and clarification. The focus of the discourse in the expository macro-genre is generally on the central idea surrounded by supporting details (Samuelstuen & Braten, 2005). Learners' reasoning powers and explanation abilities may be strengthened through practicing the expository macro-genre tasks (Barbara & Samuels, 1983; Samuelstuen & Braten, 2005). Psychologically viewed, the expository macro-genre may spur the learners' motivation to keep on reading such texts. This, in turn, can result in improving the learners' proficiency in the reading skill, in general.

## **2.2. Task Difficulty**

A central issue in task-based language teaching involves the impact of task difficulty on L2 learners' performance in various aspects of language especially in the reading skill. Many of the previous empirical studies (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1999; Gilabert, 2007; Ishikawa, 2008; Kim, 2009; Robinson, 1995, 2001, 2007; Skehan & Foster, 1999) have examined the effects of task difficulty on L2 learners' oral task performance but relatively few studies (e.g., Ishikawa, 2006;

Kuiken & Vedder, 2008) have investigated the role of task difficulty in reading performance of the learners.

The four major approaches which are employed in task-based research are the psychological, sociocultural, structural, and cognitive (Kuiken & Vedder, 2008). Of these approaches, Robinson (2001, 2003, 2005) and Skehan and Foster (1999, 2001) used the cognitive approach in which the focus was on the cognitive processes used by learners while performing a task. They investigated how task complexity influenced the L2 learners' performance.

In Robinson's (2001) triadic componential framework, the task components are task complexity, task conditions, and task difficulty. This framework is based on the cognition hypothesis. According to Robinson and Gilabert (2007), the main pedagogic claim of the cognition hypothesis is that pedagogic tasks should be designed and sequenced on the basis of increases in their cognitive complexity. Robinson and Gilabert (2007) stated that the information about the effect of task complexity on language performance could be used to guide decision-making about sequencing tasks in syllabus design used for materials in the macro-genre text types for the language learners.

Task complexity is defined as the result of attentional, memory, reasoning, and other information processing demands imposed by the structure of the task on the language learner (Robinson, 2001). It is a cognitive process in nature which can be manipulated by teachers and syllabus designers before task performance (Ishikawa, 2006). Robinson (2005) believed that information about the effect of task complexity on language performance was helpful in designing tasks from simple to complex to gradually approximate real world tasks. Robinson (2001, 2003, 2005) also made a distinction between two dimensions of task complexity: resource-directing dimensions and resource-dispersing dimensions. He also believed that increasing task complexity along

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resource-directing dimensions could affect accuracy and complexity positively and fluency negatively. However, he stated that increasing task complexity along resource-dispersing dimensions caused problems for L2 learners not to access their current L2 knowledge.

In Robinson's (2001) triadic componential framework, task difficulty refers to the learners' perceptions of the difficulty of a certain task. Factors such as proficiency and anxiety affecting learners' perceptions of difficulty of macro-genre-based reading texts are difficult to identify before task performance. Therefore, they cannot be used as a basis for decision-making in sequencing tasks. Task conditions, as well, include participation factors and participant factors. Skehan (1998) defined task difficulty as a concept consisting of cognitive factors that could be manipulated during task design to obtain the desired elicitation of learner language. According to Skehan (1996, 1998), code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress are important in determining task difficulty. These are briefly sketched out below.

#### **2.2.1. Code Complexity**

Code complexity of a task includes linguistic as well as lexical complexity. Both linguistic complexity or variety and vocabulary load/variety play important roles in code complexity. Code complexity deals with the lexical items and the grammatical structures used in the texts. Idiomatic structure is, for instance, one of the factors affecting code complexity which, in turn, may affect the reading performance of the learners in macro-genres. Martinez and Murphy (2011) found that the use of idiomatic structures in reading texts can be detrimental to learners' reading performance. The more there are such structures in the reading texts, the more the learners would spend time to find out what they mean. Another point regarding code complexity is the way

teachers and instructors deal with the complicated lexical items in texts. Providing elaboration appears to be more useful for learners' text understanding than giving simplifications (Martinez & Murphy, 2011). Thus, in such cases, if the meanings of unfamiliar words are provided in the margins of reading texts, learners would do better in understanding the reading materials. Awareness of grammatical structures of the text is also an important variable affecting the learners' performance in reading texts (Heydari & Ghazali, 2009; Jiang, 2012). These structures, however, may be different in different discourse types. Furthermore, contextual clues in the texts can affect learners' reading performance significantly (Abdolmanafi & Niknaghsh, 2013). Lexical items (in terms of types and frequency) plus grammatical structures are, therefore, important variables that affect the code complexity of tasks and, consequently, the learners' reading performance.

### **2.2.2. Cognitive Complexity**

Cognitive complexity of a task refers to the cognitive processing and cognitive familiarity. It involves processing factors such as information type and organizational structures as well as the familiarity with the topic of discourse and genre type (Skehan, 1998). A factor which is supposed to affect the learners' performance in reading rhetorical and genre text types is schemata which are categorized into linguistic, formal, and content (Xiao-hui, Jun, & Wei-hui, 2007).

Linguistic schemata refer to readers' existing language proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. This basic language knowledge plays an important role in employing reading strategies and skills to function effectively in the reading task (Xiao-hui et al., 2007).



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Formal schemata refer to the organizational forms and rhetorical structures of written texts, including the knowledge of different text types and genres and the knowledge that various genres use different text structures, vocabulary, and grammar. Explicit teaching of such text structures can improve learners' reading comprehension significantly (Xiao-hui et al., 2007).

Content schemata refer to knowledge related to the content domain of reading materials which is the key to understanding a text type and genre. When both content and genre types are familiar to learners, they remember the most (Elder et al., 2010; Xiao-hui et al., 2007).

Norris et al. (1998) built on Skehan's (1998) framework to design syllabus-related performance assessments. Skehan's (1998) dimensions of cognitive demand have been adapted in the design of specific tasks. However, Norris et al. (1998, 2000) have found only moderate support for the proposed relationships between the combinations of cognitive factors with particular task types and actual task difficulty as manifested in task performance by candidates at a range of ability levels. One possible explanation, which would need to be explored empirically, is that the learner's factors such as anxiety, confidence, and motivation produce different levels of stress and engagement during task performance and that, as Slatyer et al. (2000) concluded, these interact in complex ways with the characteristics of the tasks themselves. The other cognitive component affecting the learners' perceptions of task difficulty is the structure of the task. A task with a tight and clear storyline structure is easier for processing and thus demands less attention and cognitive pressure on the task performers than a task with loose structure (Skehan, 1998).

Task content and topic familiarity are two more variables which are likely to affect task difficulty. Talking in an L2 about a topic with which the learners are familiar seems to result in more fluent and accurate understanding and

production (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007). In unfamiliar topics, on the other hand, less fluent and less accurate output but more complex language is expected to be produced. However, the most fluent task performance is elicited by the tasks which share a tightly-structured storyline (Robinson & Gilabert, 2007). In a study, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) investigated whether and how the degree of structure in a narrative task might influence L2 performance. The results of their study revealed that overall task structure had positive and significant effects on complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 production.

### **2.2.3. Communicative Stress**

Communicative stress of a task is concerned with time pressure, modality, scale, stakes, and control. This component of task difficulty, thus, refers to the logistics of task performance including the nature of the prompt provided and the number of participants. Research studies (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999) have shown that more complex tasks (in terms of time pressure and high degrees of control) direct learners' attention to context and divert attention away from form. Simple tasks, in contrast, generate more fluent and more accurate language, as opposed to more complex tasks which generate more complex language at the expense of accuracy and fluency.

It is assumed that the learner's perceptions of task difficulty of the four macro-genres as well as the components of code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress are different based on the type of genre text type they read. Task difficulty components of the descriptive macro-genre, for example, may be treated and perceived in a different way from those of the Narrative, argumentative, and expository genres.

As stated earlier, task difficulty is the learners' perceptions of a certain task difficulty which is associated with the lexical and grammatical structures among

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other factors employed in the text. Furthermore, each macro-genre text type has specific and particular text organization including specific grammatical structures and vocabularies which may be different in other text structures. This particularity in terms of text structural organization may provoke one's mind to hypothesize whether one can find any significant correlation between such macro-genre-based text types. In the ELT literature, many research studies (e.g., Abdolmanafi & Niknaghsh, 2013; Crossley & Greenfield, 2008; Heydari & Ghazali, 2009; Jiang, 2012) have been conducted in different areas of the reading skill, in general, and genres, in particular. However, there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding the correlations between task difficulties of the four major types of macro-genres which are vastly employed in educational settings for teaching purposes. To have a share in bridging such a felt gap in this area, the following research question is posed:

Is there any relationship among task difficulty of the descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative macro-genres?

Task difficulty has been investigated in various areas of ELT and in different contexts. For the learners' perceptions of and their performance in the components of task difficulty in the main types of macro-genres, however, a sense of gap is also felt in the literature. To fill the gap, the following research question is posed to address the second concern of the study:

How different would code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress as the components of task difficulty be in the descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and expository macro-genres?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Fifty EFL students were randomly (based on systematic randomization) selected as the intended sample for this study. The participants were second year male (n=21) and female (n=29) English students having at least seven years of experience in English in academic centers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 with an age mean of 19.6. Based on the scores they got from the proficiency test (a standard test administered to determine participants' proficiency level in English), the participants were judged to be at the intermediate level (the criterion for specifying the learners' level was taken from *Cambridge Guide to Exams and Levels*). All the test administration stages and the time duration for taking the test were announced to the participants, in advance. The participants reported having no special experience of attending formal or informal preparatory classes for genre-based reading texts, though they seemed to have some rough familiarity with concepts of task types and task components (based on the teachers' qualitative investigations and in-class questions). The participants reported Lacki (a regional language spoken in the north parts of Lorestan province) and Lori (the dominant language spoken in the center and some other regions of Lorestan province) as their first languages and Persian as their second language.

#### **3.2. Design**

This study employed a comparative-correlational design in which one component of task difficulty (e.g., code complexity) of one macro-genre (e.g., descriptive) was compared with that component of the other macro-genres

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through running one-way ANOVA. Pairwise comparisons of different macro-genres in terms of their difficulty were rendered through Pearson product correlation coefficient.

### **3.3. Materials**

In order to explore the learners' perceptions of task difficulty as well as the three components of it in the four types of macro-genres, Skehan's (1998) checklist, developed based on his triadic framework of task difficulty, was used. This checklist measured the learners' perceptions of task difficulty in the code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress domains. For reading comprehension, three short reading texts with the same length and readability indices for each of the four macro-genres were used. To prepare comparable reading texts in the four macro-genre text types, Coh-Metrix Common Core formula as the reading Text Ease and Readability Assessor (TERA), developed by Crossley and Greenfield (2008), were used. Moreover, in order to determine the proficiency level of the participants, a standard proficiency reading pre-test taken from *Barron's How to Prepare for the TOEFL Test: Test of English as a Foreign Language* (Sharpe, 2004) with the reliability index of .76 was used.

### **3.4. Procedures**

In the process of selecting the intended reading texts for the research, some passages for the four macro-genres were selected and their readability indices were computed through running the Coh-Metrix formula (Crossley & Greenfield, 2008) (TERA: text ease and readability assessor). Coh-Metrix analysis provided the readability indices for the selected reading texts.

Furthermore, in the pilot study for the selected reading passages administered to the pilot group (20 EFL majors), all the items meeting the item facility value between .25 and .75 and item discriminatory value more than .30 (see Baker, 1989) were selected to be used in the testing stage.

Then, texts falling in the intermediate range in each macro-genre (based on indices taken from applying the Coh-Metrix Common Core: Text Ease and Readability Assessor [Crossley & Greenfield, 2008]) were selected and were given to 80 EFL students. Based on Cambridge Guide to TEFL Exams and Levels, the students whose scores fell between 50% and 70% of the total score (taken from TOEFL proficiency Test) were judged as being in the intermediate level. Fifty participants with scores in the intermediate level range were, finally, selected as the research sample.

Twelve short reading texts with the same readability and length were prepared for administration. This was followed by constructing appropriate reading tests for the macro-genres. In the first week, descriptive macro-genre reading tests followed by distributing task difficulty questionnaires were administered. All the steps were taken just for one type of macro-genre text type in each session. With three days interval, the same steps were followed for the rest of other three macro-genres (i.e., narrative, argumentative, and expository). Moreover, to obtain more valid and reliable results, task difficulty questionnaire was translated into Persian. Learners' options in the task difficulty questionnaires were, then, compiled for statistical analysis. Correspondence between the original and Persian equivalents of each item in the questionnaire was judged by three experienced English teachers. The translation output was, finally, judged and approved of by an expert in the field.

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## 4. Results

### 4.1. Correlations among Task Difficulty of the Macro-genres

In each of the following tables, the results of the correlation between two macro-genres task difficulty as well as the significance scores are provided. As indicated in Table 1, the correlation between the descriptive and the narrative macro-genres' task difficulty did not reach statistical significance.

**Table 1. *Task Difficulty in the Descriptive and Narrative Macro-genres***

	Narrative macro-genre
Pearson correlation	.128
Sig. (One-tailed)	.188

The correlation between task difficulty of the argumentative and narrative macro-genres was not statistically significant,  $r = -.008$ ,  $p = .478$  (Table 2).

**Table 2. *Task Difficulty in the Argumentative and Narrative Macro-genres***

	Narrative macro-genre
Pearson correlation	-.008
Sig. (One-tailed)	.478

As shown in Table 3, no statistically significant correlation between task difficulty of the descriptive and expository macro-genres was found,  $r = -.053$ ,  $p = .356$ .

**Table 3. *Task Difficulty in the Descriptive and Expository Macro-genres***

	Expository macro-genre
Pearson correlation	-.053
Sig. (One-tailed)	.356

Results of Pearson correlation indicated that the relationship between the argumentative and expository macro-genres in task difficulty did not reach statistical significance,  $r = -.038$ ,  $p = .396$  (Table 4).

**Table 4. *Task Difficulty in the Argumentative and Expository Macro-genres***

	Expository macro-genre
Pearson correlation	-.038
Sig. (One-tailed)	.396

As indicated in Table 5, the correlation between task difficulty of the narrative and expository macro-genres reached the statistically significant level,  $r=.576$ ,  $p=.00$ .

**Table 5. *Task Difficulty in the Narrative and Expository Macro-genres***

	Expository macro-genre
Pearson correlation	.576
Sig. (One-tailed)	.00

The relationship between task difficulty of the argumentative and descriptive macro-genres was not statistically significant,  $r=.207$ ,  $p=.750$ .

**Table 6. *Task Difficulty in the Argumentative and Descriptive Macro-genres***

	Descriptive macro-genre
Pearson correlation	.207
Sig. (One-tailed)	.750

The general finding is that all the correlations among the variables in the groups regarding task difficulty of the macro-genres involved did not reach statistical significance except the one for the expository and narrative macro-genres.

#### **4.2. Results for Task Difficulty Components: Code Complexity, Cognitive Complexity, and Communicative Stress**

The largest mean score for code complexity belonged to the expository macro-genre ( $M=9$ ) followed by those of the argumentative, narrative, and descriptive



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macro-genres having 8, 7, and 6 mean scores, respectively. The mean scores for the cognitive complexity of the four macro-genres were 20, 18, 18, and 17, for the expository, argumentative, narrative, and descriptive macro-genres, respectively. For the communicative stress in the four macro-genres, the lowest mean score belonged to the expository macro-genre (M=19). The mean scores were equal in the argumentative, narrative, and descriptive macro-genres (M=20).

**Table 7. ANOVA for CC in the Four Genres**

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
BG	21.04	3	7.01	1.27	.303
WG	258.24	46	5.61		

BG= between groups, WG= within groups,

CC= code complexity

Each component of task difficulty (e.g., code complexity) in each macro-genre (e.g., descriptive) was compared with that of other three macro-genres through running one-way ANOVA.

The comparison conducted between code complexity of the descriptive macro-genre and those of the narrative, argumentative, and expository macro-genres revealed that there was no statistically significant difference observed between the groups involved,  $F(3, 46)=1.27, p=.303$  (Table 7).

In the comparison made between cognitive complexity of the descriptive macro-genre and those of the narrative, argumentative, and expository ones, the differences between the groups compared did not reach statistical significance,  $F(3, 46)=2.15, p=.106$  (Table 8).

**Table 8. ANOVA for CC in the Four Macro-genres**

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
BG	40.27	3	13.42	2.15	.106
WG	286.44	46	6.22		

BG = between groups, WG = within groups,  
CC = cognitive complexity

Results of one-way ANOVA comparison conducted between the communicative stress of the descriptive macro-genre with those of the narrative, argumentative, and expository macro-genres indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the groups compared in their perceptions of this component of task difficulty,  $F(3, 46) = .602, p = .617$  (Table 9).

**Table 9. ANOVA for CC in the Four Macro-Genres**

	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
BG	31.38	3	10.46	.602	.617
WG	799.89	46	17.38		

BG = between groups, WG = within groups, CC = communicative stress

The general finding was that there were no statistically significant differences among the three components of task difficulty (i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress) in the four macro-genres, though there were differences in descriptive statistics for the same components.

## **5. Discussion**

This study investigated the relationship between task difficulty of the four types of macro-genres (i.e., descriptive, narrative, argumentative, and expository). The components of task difficulty (i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity,

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and communicative stress) in these four types of macro-genres were also compared and examined through running one-way ANOVA.

Pairwise comparisons revealed no significant difference between the macro-genres involved in terms of their task difficulty; the relationship between task difficulty of the descriptive and narrative, argumentative and narrative, descriptive and expository, and argumentative and descriptive macro-genres did not reach statistical significance. The difference between the narrative and expository macro-genres, however, appeared to be an exception and reached statistical significance. The reading strategies employed in the descriptive and the narrative macro-genres along with the individual characteristics of the learners may have contributed to non-significant correlation between the tasks difficulties of these two macro-genres. The argumentative organization along with the special grammatical structures and lexical items used in the argumentative macro-genre may have led the learners to perceive the propositional concepts and structures of the two macro-genres different which, in turn, can have contributed to the perceptions of different degrees of task difficulty in the two macro-genres.

Psychologically viewed, learners come to each learning situation with varying degrees of learning styles (in terms of intensity); this may have encouraged the language learners to perceive task difficulty in the descriptive macro-genre different from the way they may have perceived that in the expository macro-genre. The bidirectional trend of information transfer employed in the argumentative macro-genre as opposed to the unidirectional of information transfer in the descriptive macro-genre may also be supposed to have brought about the differences observed in the argumentative and descriptive macro-genres.

The similarities (in terms of grammatical structures and lexical items along with the common background in the propositional concepts) observed between the narrative and the expository macro-genres may have contributed to the use and employment of similar strategies which, in turn, may have resulted in the task difficulty perceptions of language learners in these macro-genres in similar ways, a point which, hence, can have resulted in a significant correlation observed between them.

The lack of significant correlation between task difficulty of macro-genres with each other (except the narrative and expository macro-genres) may also be accounted for by resorting to psychological theories like dynamic achievement motivation. Dynamic achievement motivation theory (see Slade & Rush, 1991) postulates that individuals prefer more difficult tasks regardless of the level of achievement motivation experienced. Achievement motivation is expected to influence the initial level of task difficulty choice as well as the rate of shift to more difficult tasks. The learners may have already experienced some degrees of such motivation in reading the expository and narrative macro-genres. This psychological manner may, however, deteriorate and weaken when they proceed from one macro-genre to the next one.

The findings of the current study may also be related to the learners' passive failure (see Johnston, 2014). Passive failure is a psychological notion postulating that the learners experiencing such a state do not want to persist reading tasks having understanding problems involved in the genres. Passive failure can be generated by the learners' experiences prior to school, and outside as well as within school. This trait can be strengthened by the normative testing standards ruling the educational settings (see Johnston, 2014). The current finding may also be related to the learners' previous experience of

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having passive failure which discouraged them from giving more energy to reading as well as comprehending the macro-genres.

Another psychological theory which can be referred to for the learners' perceptions of task difficulty and its components in the four macro-genres is the attribution theory, first put forward by Weiner (1986). Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this interpretation relates to their thinking and behavior. Attribution theory, furthermore, assumes that people try to determine why people do what they do, i.e., attributing causes to behavior.

The lack of statistically significant relationships between task difficulties of macro-genres as well as that of task difficulty components in the current study can be related to some psychological characteristics of the learners. Arousal for task performance, interest in the subject matter of the macro-genres, goal-orientation toward performing the task might have made learners not perform as they did before (see Horvath, Herleman, & McKie, 2006). These psychological characteristics of the learners performing the macro-genres might have not been tapped strongly enough to persist reading the four macro-genre-based texts.

The findings of the current study are partially in line with those reported by Geva (1992), Chung (2000), and Ozono (2002) where statistically significant correlations between learners' performances in reading the narrative and expository genres were shown. The findings of the current study are also compatible with those reported by Hosseini and Rouhi (2015), Rouhi, Jafarigohar, Alavi, and Hosseini (2015), in which no significant correlation between the task difficulty of macro-genres employed was found. They attributed the lack of correlation between task difficulty in macro-genres to

variations observed in the content of provided macro-genre-based reading texts as well as the motivations and interests of language learners.

## **6. Conclusions**

The research on task difficulty and its comprising components in macro-genres is still at a rather early stage. Nevertheless, we can see that there is no significant correlation observed between the task difficulty perceived in one macro-genre and that of the other one (except the narrative and expository macro-genres). We can also see that there is no correlation between the components of task difficulty (i.e., code complexity, cognitive complexity, and communicative stress) in the four main types of macro-genres. In order to better understand task difficulty as well as task difficulty components in macro-genres, future research should take into account some of the issues highlighted in the current study. The correlation of the task difficulty as well as its components in one macro-genre with that of the other macro-genre needs to be studied in other situations as well as other language levels of the learners (i.e., elementary, advanced) more fully in order to better understand issues related to text-based and genre-oriented reading. However, it is still unclear as to what learning processes the language learners may go through when they are concerned with understanding a certain macro-genre-based reading text which make it different from those of other macro-genres. Hopefully as research data accumulates in this field, we will have a clearer understanding of how macro-genre-based reading text variation affects the learners' perceptions of task difficulty experienced from one macro-genre to the other macro-genre.

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