WRITING EXERCISES AND TASKS AS A GENRE

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics principles this study aims to analyze both writing exercises and tasks in an attempt to characterize them as genres (Eggins, 2004; Meurer et al, 2005). A number of 20 language activities (10 exercises and 10 tasks) devised to develop written expression in English as a foreign language were chosen from textbooks for beginning and intermediate level students, and analyzed considering their constituent stages, semantic attributes, and lexico-grammatical realizations. Results of the analysis revealed that Instructions, Example, and Input data are the potential functional stages in both writing exercises and tasks. Besides, some semantic attributes can make exercises closer to tasks, and tasks closer to exercises. Their different intentions result in different language outcomes in the context of culture they are used.

KEYWORDS: writing exercises; writing tasks; Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

In foreign/second language pedagogy, different text genres such as textbooks, dialogues, songs, exercises and tasks are used to enable the teacher to plan and organize his/her lessons.

Both exercises and tasks are pedagogical instruments that aim to enhance foreign or second language learning through a channel of communication between the activity designer and the learner. The result of this communication is the learner’s outcome (ELLIS, 2003), which can be realized verbally or non-verbally. The textual organization of a postcard, the drawing of a missing person based on an oral description, the simulation of a real-life encounter, and a gap-filling text with simple present verbs are examples of outcomes derived from tasks and exercises.

In the area of language materials design, a task and an exercise share the same elements, i.e., the instructions (oral or written) or rubrics (ALDERSON, 1986), which specify the purpose of the activity (ELLIS, 2003), and the input data that refer to the language material the learners are required to work on, the point of departure for the activity (NUNAN, 1989). In tasks, the input data generally involve samples of communicative language use through which the students are supposed to process the foreign/second language for an outcome. These samples can be presented in the form of written genres, with or without visual cues, such as a recipe, a birthday card, a petition, or in the form of spoken genres, such as a dialogue, a music clip, and a phone chat. In this sense, a task may contain other genres in its generic structure (to be developed later in this paper) that are used for the students to process language communicatively.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the schematic structure of language tasks and exercises intended to develop writing skills in English as a foreign/second language. The analysis is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) principles and aims at investigating these texts as genres (EGGINS, 2004; MEURER et al, 2005).

The following research questions were raised to guide the present study: (a) What is the generic identity of writing tasks and exercises designed for learning English as a foreign/second language (EF/SL)? (b) What are the semantic attributes of both writing exercises and tasks and how are these attributes lexico-grammatically realized?
The answers to these questions aim to enhance English teachers' awareness of the different meanings that writing exercises and tasks instantiate, and help them reflect critically when analyzing, evaluating, selecting and producing teaching materials.

2. Tasks and exercises as texts

In Halliday and Hasan’s words (1976), "a text is best regarded as a SEMANTIC unit: a unit not of form but of meaning" (p.2), which realizes three strands of meanings simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal and textual. These concomitant meanings are respectively associated – upwards – to the context of situation, through three aspects or variables, namely, field, tenor and mode. Field is related to the activity that is going on or the content of the text. Tenor has to do with the role relationship between the participants of the interaction. And Mode refers to the role that language itself is playing regarding the channel and the medium used to establish communication. Together, these three variables determine the register to be used in a given text. At the same time, the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings are respectively realized – downwards – to three lexico-grammatical systems: transitivity, mood, and theme-rheme. Thus, the lexical and grammatical choices of transitivity, mood, and theme-rheme made by the interactants also vary according to the context of situation, and it is in this sense that "language use is sensitive to context." (EGGINS, 2004, p.8).

In addition to the context of situation, SFL also points to the importance of a further stratum for the analysis of language use: the context of culture. According to Halliday (1999), the context of situation and the context of culture are in a way the same phenomenon in the sense that the latter is instantiated by specific occurrences of the context of situation, one stratum or level being an extension of the other.

Both tasks and exercises form a “unified whole” which establishes external relations with the context of situation and the context of culture of their occurrence, as well as internal relations through generic and cohesive elements within each text. From an external perspective, tasks and exercises are pedagogically proposed according to their context of culture, which is characterized by the teacher’s approach to language teaching and learning, and shared with the students. Therefore, such texts establish homophoric reference, that is, the students are supposed to understand these texts from their teaching context (e.g., as an instrument to practice a target language structure, to develop reading comprehension, to show previous knowledge).

Tasks differ from exercises in the sense that they carry different intentions. Tasks are meaning-oriented activities that emerge from a holistic perspective of language learning and from theories of implicit learning (ELLIS, 2003). In other words, any language learning that takes place is incidental or implicit. From this perspective, the learner is able to acquire language forms through meaning comprehension or production. For Ellis (2003, p.8), “the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that will promote language learning.”. Examples of tasks are: comparing given pictures to identify similarities and differences (PRABHU, 1987), listening to conversations to identify how people are feeling (XAVIER, 1999). These two tasks require linguistic and cognitive processing of the input, aiming at a communicative outcome. Therefore, "the outcome of a task can be judged in terms of content" (ELLIS, 2003, p.8). Within a pedagogic viewpoint, a task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form " (NUNAN, 1989, p.10).

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1 Implicit learning is learning without awareness (SCHMIDT, 2001, p.4)
Language exercises, on the other hand, are form-oriented activities that emerge from an itemized perspective of language teaching and learning. This means that such activities aim to elicit the deliberate use of a linguistic item previously taught in the textbook or by the teacher. Learning is therefore an intentional process, that is, through form manipulation the learner is able to acquire form. The purpose is to practice or master particular linguistic items or aspects of the target language. The communicative meaning is not the priority, but the realization of the semantic meaning of the sentences in terms of lexico-grammatical elements. In this perspective, examples of exercises may include the simulation of a real-life encounter to practice particular functions that were pre-taught by the teacher, and a gap-filling text with simple present verbs. In these exercises, the outcome can be judged in terms of language mastery. Pedagogically speaking, an exercise is a deliberate manipulation of a linguistic aspect by the learner who is supposed to learn and master it.

Although tasks and exercises have different purposes that motivate the use and usage (WIDDOWSON, 1978) of the target language respectively, they may be considered similar texts that belong to the realm of educational genres. For the purposes of this paper, a genre is defined as "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture" (MARTIN, 1984, p.25).

Tasks in the EF/SL teaching literature may involve any of the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), but in the present study we will focus on the identity of writing tasks. As production activities, writing tasks are generally used to develop communicative competence². Language exercises, in turn, can also involve the four language skills. Oral exercises, for instance, may be proposed in the form of drills (e.g., substitution or repetition). The outcome is the learners’ immediate response to the given stimulus. Reading exercises, on the other hand, are devised to draw the students’ attention to specific vocabulary in the text for translation or for corresponding synonyms or antonyms. Direct reference questions³ are sometimes proposed as well. In listening exercises, the learners are expected to collect vocabulary and utterances for their given meanings, to identify minimal pairs, and to recognize the correct words in a song, for instance. In this study, however, we will concentrate on writing exercises that have appeared in the so-called communicative English textbooks.

3. Method

A number of twenty writing activities (10 tasks and 10 exercises) were selected from three textbooks designed for EFL beginning and intermediate students. The textbooks have been used in different Brazilian educational contexts: secondary education (American Wow 1), private language courses and professional teacher education programs (Inside out – Intermediate and Interchange 1).

Most activities were collected from sections devoted to writing and then categorized into exercises and tasks according to the following criteria:

Writing exercises:

² Communicative competence is understood here from the same perspective as the one proposed by Canale (1983, p.5): it "refers to both knowledge and skill in using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication. Knowledge refers here to what one knows (consciously or unconsciously) about the language and about other aspects of communicative language use; skill refers to how well one can perform this knowledge in actual communication."

³ Direct reference questions are employed to practice language, rather than aid comprehension. They can be answered without understanding the text. (RIVAS, 1999)
- They have a linguistic purpose, i.e. they are intended to elicit structures that have been previously taught or structures to be learned intentionally during the activity;
- They prioritize semantic meaning.

Writing tasks:
- They have a communicative purpose, i.e. they are intended to elicit informational content for some social purpose;
- They prioritize pragmatic meaning, i.e. the use of language in context (WIDDOWSON, 1998).

While selecting the writing activities in the corresponding skill sections, we noticed that some activities might be considered reading tasks/exercises since they involve the copying of given information (i.e. words or phrases) in a gapped text, which seemed to require reading rather than writing skills. Due to that, these activities were discarded from the data set.

4. Data analysis

Based on Bakhtin, Eggins (2004, p.58) explains that “genres develop linguistic expression through a limited number of functional stages, occurring in a particular sequence.” The analysis of the writing exercises and tasks in this study revealed that the potential functional stages of these texts can be identified as: Instructions or Rubrics (Stage 1), Example (Stage 2), and Input data (Stage 3). These stages are not necessarily realized in this sequence, and they may vary according to the activity format or architecture. Besides, Stages 2 and 3 are not obligatory.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms Stage, Semantic Attribute, and Realization are used in a technical sense, as follows: Stage is the highest level element with a given main function in the genre (e.g., Instructions); Semantic Attribute, in its turn, refers to the elements or components that construe the specific meanings of the generic Stage; finally, Realization is the linguistic expression of the Attributes. In other words, Stages have Semantic Attributes which are realized by lexico-grammatical choices.

In order to identify the present stages (i.e. Instructions, Example, and Input data), functional and formal criteria were considered (EGGINS, 2004). The functional criterion is related to the function of the different constituent stages. For Eggins (ibid, p.60-61), "we recognize as stages only those sentences or groups of sentences which fulfill a function relative to the whole. We therefore only call something a stage if we can assign to it a functional label." The form criterion, on the other hand, refers to the structural elements of the different constituent stages.

In the next sub-sections we explore writing exercises and tasks regarding their Stages, Semantic Attributes, and Realizations.

4.1 Instructions Stage

The analysis of the data indicated that the Instructions Stage aims to inform the learner about what s/he is required to do in the activity (e.g., “write”, “rewrite”, “use”, “change”, “put”, “give”). In terms of its overall organization, this generic stage is characterized by commands which, in their turn, are lexico-grammatically realized by imperative clauses, sometimes together with declarative clauses and/or interrogative clauses (Fig. 1).
**Generic Stage: Instructions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Attribute: Commands</th>
<th>Lexico-grammatical realizations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Imperative clauses - imperative verbs + direct object (+ indirect object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Declarative clauses - simple present tense, simple present continuous (to be + ing), present perfect (has been + past participle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interrogative clauses - Wh-questions: What, How, How many..?), Is there...?, Have you eaten....?, modal can (Can your partner/ you...)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 1 - Instructions Stage**

The use of commands that are realized by categorical imperative clauses (e.g., "Write an email with a message about yourself") shows asymmetric power relations between the activity designer, who is the textbook writer in this study (i.e. an experienced EF/SL teacher, researcher or an applied linguist), and the learner. In following the textbook, it is the classroom teacher, however, who takes on the designer’s identity and legitimates the role of telling the learners what they are supposed to do in the activity.

Having used imperative verbs in the instructions, the designer creates a relationship between someone who masters the target language and someone who needs to learn it. As a result, the interactants play distinct roles of teacher and student, respectively. Due to this pedagogical relation, the designer's lexico-grammatical choices materialize a semi-formal and non-mitigated discourse addressed to both female and male students. The commands tend to be concise and self-explanatory, the verb "write" being the major action demanded in the activities.

The verbs used in the Instructions Stage elicit actions that require not only the act of writing ("write", "rewrite", "put") but also the act of reading or speaking ("Read the text and use it to write about you"; "Make a list and tell your partner"). The integration of other language skills into writing serves to bring the exercises and tasks closer to the interactive nature of language and language behavior.

Together with the imperative clauses, the Instructions Stage can be realized by declarative and/or interrogative clauses. The former are manifested in the present tense (simple, continuous or perfect), and may refer to the present or past time (e.g., "You have a house or an apartment for rent"; "The words in these sentences have been mixed up.").

The declarative clauses instantiate different meanings: (1) they can create a hypothetical situation for the language use ("You are looking for a house or an apartment to rent."); (2) they can serve to draw the learners' attention to some anomaly in the Input data Stage ("The words in these sentences have been mixed up."). In this command, the designer requires that the learners notice the scrambled words in the sentences provided; and (3) they can address some action to a second learner who is supposed to participate in the activity ("Two people write their own descriptions of the same picture."). In this case, the designer chooses the phrase “two people” to indicate the methodological procedure for the exercise performance.
The interrogative clauses, in turn, are another type of lexico-grammatical structure in the Instructions Stage. They foreground the interpersonal metafunction of language, thus implementing a kind of dialogue between the text and the students. Furthermore, in circumstances as represented in the next example, interrogatives may precede an imperative clause (e.g., "What do you have in your pencil case? Make a list and tell your partner."). In this case, the interrogative clause invites the learner to focus on objects to be lexicalized to fulfill the command, namely, a list of objects found in the learner’s pencil case. Each learner is thus supposed to write his/her own list based on his/her immediate context and personal belongings.

Moreover, the interrogative clauses can pose a challenge to the learner (e.g., "Can you guess who wrote them?"; "How many can you match?", "Can your partner guess the country?"). The modal 'can' adds interpersonal value to the instructions and attempts to enhance the learners' ability to deal with the next step after their writing has been finished. In this sense, the interrogative clauses also introduce a new linguistic skill (reading or speaking) aiming to give a communicative goal to the learners' outcome. For instance, having written a description, the students are challenged to guess who wrote it, or having written a classified ad, the students are asked to match the selling and buying ads on a bulletin board. When realized with this function, the interrogative clauses call for an action ("match", "guess"), which is not writing necessarily, but a different language skill that is introduced to promote learners' interaction and motivation.

Interrogative clauses can also be realized as rhetorical questions, which do not expect an answer ("Have you eaten out at a restaurant recently? How was it? Write a review of the restaurant and the meal you had there."). The function of these clauses is, again, to enhance the interpersonal component of the activity (in both exercises and tasks) and, when they precede an imperative clause as in the example just mentioned, they seem to foreground the experiential element or content of a particular event that the learners will need to write about.

Through interrogative and imperative clauses the commands may establish an exophoric reference with here-and-now objects or people that are identified in the immediate context of situation ("What do you have in your pencil case?"; "Now write a postcard to a classmate about your last vacation"; "Cut out pictures of people from magazines..."). The words "pencil case", "a classmate", and "people from magazines" connect the writing exercises/tasks with the external world (i.e. the outside of the text). In other commands, the learner can retrieve meaning from a context of culture shared with his/her classmates ("Write your letter to Tony and Shirley."). Tony and Shirley are fictitious characters introduced previously in the textbook. The students gradually come to know them throughout the units. These are the people with whom the learners are supposed to communicate through the exercises. The idea is to establish a communicative situation for language use having someone 'familiar' to write to.

Regarding sequencing, the Instructions Stage is temporally organized, suggesting the procedural route to be followed by the learners. This route or sequence of actions may involve implicit or explicit cohesion (Widdowson, 1978), or signaling (Hoey, 1983), depending on how the commands are combined in the text. The cohesion is implicit when there is no overt signal ("Read the following lines from different pop songs. Rewrite the underlined words in more formal English."). In this case, the first required action is "reading", and the second is "rewriting".

Some commands, however, use explicit signaling in the form of temporal textual themes (Eggins, 2004), such as “now” and “then”, to highlight the following step ("Now, compare your description with the other person's"; "Now write a postcard to a classmate about your last vacation. Then exchange postcards."). These temporal textual connectors are used to signal the last action the learners are supposed to perform. They also introduce another
language skill (reading/ speaking) as a result of the designer's intention to give the learners' writing either a communicative purpose, as in the tasks, or a linguistic purpose, as in the exercises (e.g., "Now put your reviews on the bulletin board. Is there a restaurant you would like to try?"). In this command, the learners are expected to read each other's reviews to decide the restaurant they would like to try.

The temporal sequence of actions can also be overtly signaled by non-verbal elements, as numbers and letters. They are supposed to organize the flow of commands and present one step at a time. The highest number (2 or above) indicates the last action while number "1" introduces the first. The textual connector "now" sometimes accompanies the last number so as to highlight the final step of the activity.

The numbers that introduce the steps of an activity (1., 2., etc) may sometimes misguide the learners or even teachers who may interpret them as different tasks/exercises, since numbers are also used to identify single activities. In this case, the adverb "now" helps to signal that a particular set of numbers is related to a sequence of superordinate actions. On the other hand, not all activities contain numbers that introduce interrelated actions. Similarly, not all activities are introduced by a number that differentiates one from the other (external sequencing of activities). There are cases in which a side headline rather than a number introduces a broad or main command (e.g., "Report writing - Work in groups and complete the following tasks."). In this case, the following tasks are numbered or introduced by letters, one depending on the other to be carried out, fitting into the task dependency principle (JOHNSON, 1981)

As a way to create the internal texture of a writing exercise/ a task, the Instructions Stage establishes some form of cohesion with the other stages, i.e. the Example Stage (Stage 2) and the Input data Stage (Stage 3). The following sections are intended to discuss these stages and this relation.

4.2 Example Stage

The Example Stage may be identified through its function in the writing tasks and exercises, which is to guide the learners in the way their texts should be written. It is therefore a model to be followed. It helps the learners achieve a successful outcome. The overall organization of this stage is shown in Fig.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Stage: Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semantic Attributes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Exemplification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Text familiarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexico-grammatical realizations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lexical items: &quot;For example&quot;; &quot;Example&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scrambled words for sentence formulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sentences for completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visual cues + sentence model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Texts as models (description, notes, letter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Texts as models (postcards, e-mails)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 2 - Example Stage
This stage can also be identified through its form of presentation. It is always detached from the Instructions Stage indicating a physical text boundary. It is often signaled by the expression "For example" in the writing exercises, providing the learners with an exemplification. In the writing tasks, on the other hand, the exemplification is not signaled explicitly, which may lead the learners to interpret it as a general idea of the text to be followed. Besides, the text instance does not seem to be a strict model due to its linguistic variety and density shown as suggestion for the learners' texts. The omission of the word "example" suggests some flexibility in the activity.

Not all tasks, in particular, contain the Example Stage in its text structure. It can be retrieved, however, from previous activities. For instance, in some commands nouns or noun phrases establish lexical cohesion with the Input data Stage of previous activities or even with the grammatical explanations presented in the textbook. In the command "[w]rite an e-mail with a message about yourself.", the word "e-mail" leads the students to retrieve the samples of e-mails which have been presented in the previous activity as input. These samples serve, therefore, as models for the students to write their own emails. This happens when the learners are required to write certain text genres, such as emails, multiple choice questionnaires, and reports that require some acquaintance with a given text structure and specific linguistic options.

The Instructions Stage can establish semantic dependency with the Example Stage through explicit signs (e.g., "Look at these examples of notes"; "Read this postcard. Now write a postcard [...]”). The phrases "these examples" and "this postcard" are both cataphoric referents, being in charge of linking both stages.

### 4.3 Input Data Stage

Like the Example Stage, the Input data Stage is optional in the schematic structure of writing tasks and exercises. As mentioned earlier, it refers to the language material to be read and analyzed for some outcome (e.g., it can be used to extract content, to be completed or modified). Its function is therefore different from that of the Example Stage, which provides input as a model for reproduction (as in the exercises) or as text familiarization (as in the tasks). The Input data Stage creates a physical text boundary with the Example Stage, as well as with the Instructions Stage, depending on the configurations of the constituent stages in the texts. The overall organization of this stage is shown in Fig. 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Stage: Input Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semantic Attributes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Language practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexico-grammatical realizations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For exercises only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sentences/ text for completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scrambled words for sentence formulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sentences for reformulation and linguistic addition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visual cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Text with key linguistic elements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig 3 - Input data Stage**
The Input data Stage was found only in the writing exercises, and it can involve a list of decontextualized sentences to be completed or rewritten, or a text to be completed or used to remove key linguistic items that will help the learners write their texts.

Although the Input data Stage and the Example Stage can share the same main semantic attribute (i.e. language practice), and thus be realized by the same lexico-grammatical structures, both stages fulfill different functions. While the Example Stage refers to the model on which the learners are supposed to follow for a successful outcome, the Input data Stage refers to the place where the linguistic items are indeed processed or practiced for an outcome.

When both stages coexist in the same writing exercise, the example shows the learners what to do with the language data, thus using the same structures as those provided in the Input data Stage (e.g., scrambled words for sentence formulation).

In some exercises, the Input data Stage is not realized verbally and has to be retrieved from the learners' immediate context of situations so as to indicate where the input can be found to be practiced or worked on (i.e. outside the text) (e.g., "What do you have in your pencil case?"; "Cut out pictures of people from magazines...").

It is the Instructions Stage that establishes connections with the Input data Stage through cataphoric referents (e.g., "Read the text and..."; "Change the words in red..."; Rewrite the underlined words..."; "The words in these sentences...."). These connections are lexico-grammatically realized through the definite article ("the"), noun phrases ("the words in red"; "the underlined words"), and demonstrative pronouns ("these"). This semantic dependency can also occur through other ties of cohesion. In the exercise below, for instance, the phrase "six true sentences" in the command is related to the six self-initiated sentences provided in the Input data Stage. The word that links both stages is "six", which is associated to the letters from (a) to (f) in the Input data Stage. The location reference expressed by the prepositional phrase “on a sheet of paper” determines where the writing must be carried out.

On a sheet of paper write six true sentences about yourself.
   a) I haven’t... since...
   b) I... for years
   c) I didn’t... yeasterday
   d) I was... + ing when ...
   e) I’ve ... several times
   f) I wasn’t ... + ing when ...

Inside Out

Pictures are non-verbal elements that can also be found in the schematic text structure of both writing exercises and tasks. In the exercises, they may appear in the Input data Stage, being necessary to elicit the learner's written outcome (e.g., "Write questions with How often do you...?"). In this exercise, the illustrations are important to show people's actions, and this enables the learners to write questions concerning the frequency of these actions using the target structure. In this case, the pictures have an impact on the learners' outcome. They serve as 'cues' (LITTLEWOOD, 1981) which help determine the content of what the learner is supposed to write.

The pictures can also be part of a text in the Input data Stage. In this case, they illustrate the content of the text. The images can have either an informative or an aesthetic function. In the writing tasks, in particular, the pictures seem to serve to beautify or make the textbook more attractive to the teacher and learners.
Both the exercises and tasks, taken in this study as educational genres, can contain genres of everyday life to bridge the gap between the pedagogical and the real world. From this standpoint, different text genres can be presented either in the Example Stage or in the Input data Stage, making the tasks and exercises an opportunity for the learners to process language through 'authentic' or fabricated texts, depending on designer's intention (meaning or form).

In the writing exercises, the text genres such as notes, letters, and descriptions are not derived from authentic sources since they have been roughly created to contextualize what has been taught or what will be presented to the learners. Similarly, the genres that are displayed in the writing tasks or those supposedly retrieved from previous activities, such as postcards, emails, and questionnaires, do not come from authentic sources either; however, the designer seems to consider 'real' samples of communicative use of language.

Due to the fact that both writing exercises and tasks may contain text genres in their potential text structure (in Stage 2 or 3), the notion of exercise and task seems crucial to the S/FL teaching and learning process since tasks/exercises tell the learners what to do with the genre. As Ellis (2003, p.150) explains: "the role for tasks here is obvious; they constitute the means by which learners can be provided with opportunities to communicate."

5. Discussion

The research questions have addressed the generic identity, semantic attributes and lexico-grammatical realizations of writing tasks and exercises designed for learning English as a foreign/second language. What both activities have in common is their schematic text structure that can be realized in three potential stages: the Instructions Stage, the Example Stage, and Input data Stage, the last two being optional elements. The Input data Stage, however, was not found in the writing tasks, which does not mean necessarily that it cannot be realized in this type of activity. In addition, what is curious is that the semantic attribute of the Stages 2 and 3, together with their linguistic realizations, share a number of identical features, including sentences for completion, visual cues, and scrambled words for sentence formulation.

The Instructions Stage is obligatory and is realized most often in the imperative mood (i.e. expressed as orders). It determines the action(s) to be performed by the learners. In this study, it is the textbook writer who formulates the commands, the authoritative figure who masters the second/foreign language and the teaching methodology. The classroom teacher, in his/her turn, manages the commands and the activity itself. The designer has the power to determine what the learners are supposed to learn, but it is the classroom teacher who takes the control over the activities through his/her teaching procedures or pedagogical actions. In this case, the teacher is 'free' to either subvert or endorse the way the activities are proposed, depending on the school context s/he works for. Subversion happens when the teacher modifies or decides to skip parts of the activity.

Still considering the identity of writing exercises and tasks, we can say that both activities share not only the same participants or interactants (textbook writer, teacher, and learners), but also similar field and mode.

The field is related to what the learners are supposed to write about. The topics involve personal information (everyday habits, belongings), information about the classmates (physical description), information about places (interesting countries, restaurants), real world exchanges (invitations, notes), and language knowledge (questions in the simple past tense; questions with 'how often', here-and-now vocabulary). The most traditional writing exercises deal with structural practice, whereas the upgraded exercises tend to incorporate some communicative principles. One of them is related to the interlocutor. Real or fictitious people
are considered in the exercise to promote 'real-life' interaction. The realism and the relevance of language use are intended to be achieved when the topic of the learners' writing is related to themselves or to their surrounding environment (friends, places they know, things they have).

Concerning the mode – the role language itself plays, the frequent occurrence of commands realized by categorical imperatives to demand writing actions from the learners creates the expectation that the learner must practice and learn general or specific pieces of language. Regarding the linguistic choices to be realized by the learners, the exercises differ from the tasks in the amount of control they take over the students' linguistic performance. In the exercises, this control is generally manifested explicitly in the Instructions Stage or in the Example Stage, highlighting the linguistic structures to be used by the learner. In the writing tasks, on the other hand, the control over the learner's linguistic performance is implicit and subtle. The learners are provided – in previous activities – with one or more versions of the same text genre to be written, or only one example is presented in the activity as option to be followed. In this case, the text does not focus on particular linguistic structures, but on the message content itself, taking loose linguistic control over the learners. Due to that, writing tasks are more open-ended than writing exercises, since they allow more linguistic choices to the learners.

Although there is a tone of demand in both activities through the imperative clauses, it is also possible to perceive a motivating facet in the instructions, which may be realized through interrogative clauses that pose a challenge to the learners besides highlighting the interpersonal side of the text.

The commands in the Instructions Stage in both writing exercises and tasks can determine what, whom, where, when, and why to write. The 'what' element is obligatory. It refers to the type of text the learner is supposed to write (e.g., "an email"; "a note"; "sentences"; "a list of objects").

The 'whom' component is related to two dimensions: the configuration of the class, signaled by single phrases as "Work in groups", "Form two groups", "Work with a partner", and the learners' interlocutor, that is, the person (real or fictitious, near or far) they are expected to write to. This dimension is signaled by noun phrases, such as "to your friend"; "Tony and Shirley", "another pair of students", and "a classmate".

The 'where' element refers to the physical space left in the activity for the learners to write their texts (their outcome). Not all activities, however, offer a blank space (or the 'where' element). When this happens, the learners are intended to use their own notebooks. On the other hand, some commands may signal the circumstance (EGGINS, 2004) regarding the place where the students should write their texts ("on a separate sheet of paper", "in class").

The 'when' attribute is related to the chronological sequence of the actions in the activity. These actions may be implicitly and explicitly signaled in the Instructions Stage. Overt signals include numbers, letters, and time adverbs.

The 'why' element is associated to the goal of the learners' writing, i.e. what the learners are supposed to do with their texts after having written them. The Instructions Stage may or may not establish a communicative goal for the learners' texts. In most writing tasks, for instance, the learner is expected to achieve a communicative goal with his/her text (e.g., to decide the restaurant to go, to read a postcard addressed to him/her, to guess who wrote a particular description). For that, the Instructions Stage requires language skills integration so that writing can be associated to reading and/or speaking, for instance. In this case, skill integration is signaled by other action verbs that are explicitly or implicitly realized in the Instructions Stage ("tell"; "exchange"; "ask"; "compare"; "read"; "Now put your reviews on the bulletin board. Is there a restaurant you would like to try?").
Not always, however, language skill integration presupposes a communicative goal. This happens when learner-learner interaction is proposed to exhaust the linguistic possibilities that were previously taught, and that can be used in the activity (e.g., "Now you compare your description with the other person’s"); "Make a list and tell your friend").

In sum, the elements 'what' and 'when' seem to be compulsory semantic attributes in the Instructions Stage of both writing tasks and exercises, being expressed through their commands, while 'whom', 'where', and 'why' are optional elements.

The Example Stage shows the learners how the text should be written for a successful outcome. It involves the 'how' semantic attribute. The language models provided may exert greater or lesser control over the learners' texts. Some models may impose the use of certain structures previously taught. In the writing tasks, however, the models contain language diversity and density that may inspire the learners to write their own texts. Besides, the language used in these models seems to reflect what people write in real life. There are also tasks that conduct the learners to previous activities where they can get one or more versions of the same text genre they are supposed to write. In this case, the Instructions Stage signals the instances through lexical links (e.g., "a multiple choice questionnaire", "an ad").

Visual devices are non-verbal realizations that may appear in both the Example Stage and the Input data Stage. They are used to elicit particular language structures, and to illustrate the topic of the text to be written (e.g., objects found in a pencil case; picture of a person removed from a magazine). In this case, the pictures are used to exemplify visually the possible content of the learner's text.

Whereas the Example Stage offers a linguistic model for the learners to base their texts on, the Input data Stage involves the language material the learners will have to work on so as to produce their writing (e.g., "... use it [the text] to write about you."); "your pencil case"; "people from magazines"). This material may be found inside or outside the activity, and be manifested verbally or non-verbally.

6. Final remarks

The analysis of writing tasks and exercises under the Systemic Functional Linguistics principles showed that the semantic attribute of the Instructions Stage (i.e. commands), through elements such as text type specification (what), interlocutor specification (whom), and goal specification for the learners' text (why) may:

(1) make exercises closer to tasks. In some writing exercises the commands demand language use in a context of situation. This happens when the learners are expected to write a text genre (e.g., a letter or a note to someone) under deliberate linguistic control over them, since exercises involve a linguistic purpose. Besides, some verbs that realize these commands require actions other than writing which enable the learners to integrate reading and speaking, for instance, into writing, highlighting the interactive nature of language. However, this integration does not result necessarily in a communicative goal for the learners' texts. In other words, learners can be required to write to someone and then interact with a classmate for a linguistic purpose (e.g., compare descriptions, tell your partner your list of objects).

The provision of a context for language use, as well as commands with interpersonal verbs ("exchange", "tell"), may lead teachers to confuse an exercise with a task. In this case, the underlying purpose of each activity needs to be recognized (linguistic or communicative).

(2) make a task closer to an exercise. In some writing tasks, the lack of an interlocutor for the learners' writing may indicate a feature of a traditional exercise (e.g., "Write an e-mail with a message about yourself"). Even though 'writing an e-mail' involves pragmatic meaning (language use in a communicative context), the context of situation is partially given considering that the learners are not told whom their email should be written to.
Even though tasks and exercises belong to the same genre (i.e. educational, pedagogical) and can be identified by the same functional stages, it is possible to distinguish them in their intentions for the language use. Regardless of the writing exercises consider or not an interactive context for language use, their purpose is to encourage the students to practice either the linguistic items that were previously presented in the textbook or new lexical forms that are intended to be fully explored. The writing tasks, on the other hand, are expected to consider a communicative context for language use that may encourage meaning exchange rather than form exchange. Due to this difference, the context of culture where both texts are used has different expectations in terms of language outcome. While writing exercises involve predictable language items, writing tasks search for diffuse language items.

References