

**Tasks in instructed  
language learning:  
What makes them more or  
less complex?**

Gabriele Pallotti

*University of Modena and Reggio Emilia*

# What is a task?

A task is an activity in which

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communicative problem to solve;
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority;
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

(Skehan 1998: 95)

# Examples of tasks

- Choosing among different options for organizing a school-trip;
- Placing objects on a map following a partner's instructions
- Finding an agreement in a group for ranking certain items (e.g. best 5 films/songs/dishes ever)

# Examples of non-tasks

- A cloze exercise
- Reading a text to answer comprehension questions
- A pattern drill

# The CEFR and tasks

Classroom tasks, whether reflecting 'real-life' use or essentially 'pedagogic' in nature, are communicative to the extent that they require learners to comprehend, negotiate and express meaning in order to achieve a communicative goal. The emphasis in a communicative task is on successful task completion and consequently the primary focus is on meaning as learners realise their communicative intentions. However, in the case of tasks designed for language learning or teaching purposes, performance is concerned both with meaning and the way meanings are comprehended, expressed and negotiated. A changing balance needs to be established between attention to meaning and form, fluency and accuracy, in the overall selection and sequencing of tasks so that both task performance and language learning progress can be facilitated and appropriately acknowledged. (7.1)

# Tasks and language teaching

- Communicative Language Teaching and tasks
- A task-based syllabus

vs

- A syllabus including tasks



**‘Complex’ or ‘difficult’?**

# What is 'complex'

1. 'made up of interconnected parts, intricate' (Collins dictionary) 'composed of two or more parts' (Merriam-Webster) > *com* (together) + *plectere* (to braid)

→ Complexity of task structure = structural intricacy

2. 'hard to separate, analyze, or solve' (Merriam-Webster);

→ Complexity for a human being = difficulty; can be subjective (for someone) or objective (for everyone)

# Task Complexity: definition

Complex<sub>2</sub> = difficult

For Robinson (2001: 28): “task complexity is the result of the **attentional, memory, reasoning**, and other information **processing demands** imposed by the **structure of the task** on the language learner. These differences in information processing demands, resulting from design characteristics, are relatively fixed and **invariant**”.

i.e. ‘objectively difficult’

Complex<sub>1</sub> = structurally intricate

Asking for information on the phone is **less complex<sub>1</sub>** (fewer elements involved in the task) and **more complex<sub>2</sub>** (more cognitively and interactionally demanding) than asking face-to-face.

A sudoku with fewer numbers is **less complex<sub>1</sub>** and **more complex<sub>2</sub>**

# A third meaning of 'complex'

'Complex' can also be applied to the language produced on the task: 'more complex' language = more varied lexicon and morphosyntax; more subordination; longer clauses etc.

This is why 'difficult' seems to be less ambiguous than 'complex', and it will thus be used here, in the sense of 'objectively difficult' (which often, but not always, depends on the task being composed of many elements)

# Why discussing task difficulty?

- Task sequencing in the syllabus
- Choosing the right tasks for the class  
(“Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development” = optimal difficulty = challenging but possible)
- Adjusting the difficulty of existing tasks to meet individual students’ level
- Selecting appropriate tasks for assessment

# Defining 'difficult'

A task is more difficult if:

- it requires more attention, cognitive processing, effort

AND/OR

- it requires higher-level abilities (usually acquired after lower-level abilities)



- Resource-directing difficulty
  - speaking about abstract, intricate issues is more difficult AND it leads to producing more complex, advanced language
- Resource-dispersing difficulty
  - speaking about a certain issue with little time and high background noise is more difficult BUT it doesn't lead to producing more complex, advanced language (perhaps the opposite)

(based on Robinson, 2001)

# Source of difficulty **in** and **around** the task

Difficulties **around** the task = task  
conditions

Difficulties **in** the task = task features

# Task conditions (around the task)

- +/- time (before or during performance)
- support (topic contextualization, linguistic resources given in advance, models to follow, clear instructions)
- interferences (background noise, weak audio signal)

# Task features (in the task). 1 Linguistic aspects

<b>Less difficult</b>	<b>More difficult</b>
Basic and repetitive grammar	Varied and complex grammar
Basic and repetitive vocabulary	Varied and complex vocabulary
Basic and repetitive speech acts	Varied and complex speech acts
Standard forms in the input	Marked forms in the input
Receptive skills	Productive skills

Put the ball near the table  
Put the shoe under the bed  
Put the little car next to the lake  
Put the dog near the house

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

# Task features (in the task). 2 Cognitive aspects

<b>Less difficult</b>	<b>More difficult</b>
few elements	many elements
concrete	abstract
here-and-now	there-and-then
familiar	unfamiliar
simple cognitive operations (listing, identifying, counting)	complex cognitive operations (problem-solving, organizing, inferencing, comparing)
few steps	several steps
one, two simple input sources	several, complex input sources

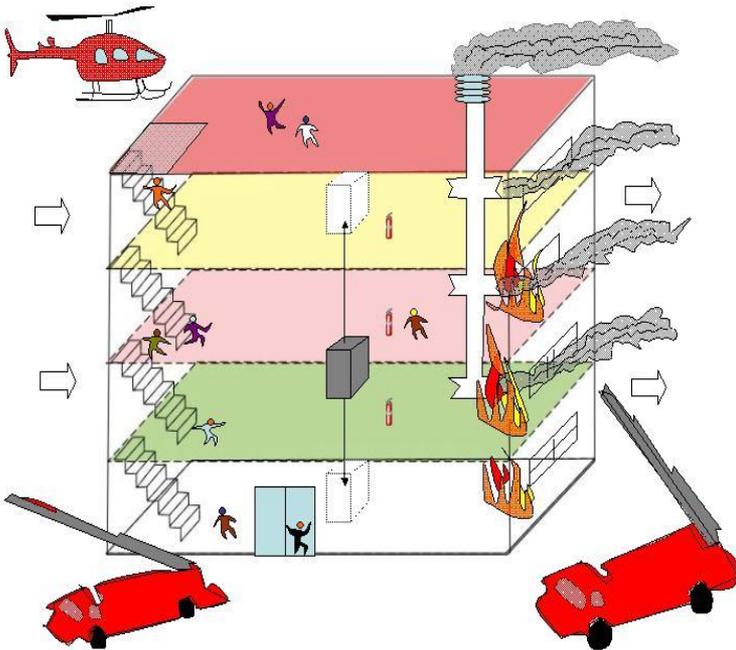
## SIMPLE

Many resources (two fire trucks and a helicopter, that can be used simultaneously)

No particular characters to be rescued

Few unconnected factors (people in safe places, smoke blowing away from building, static fire)

(Gilabert, Baròn and Llanes, 2009)

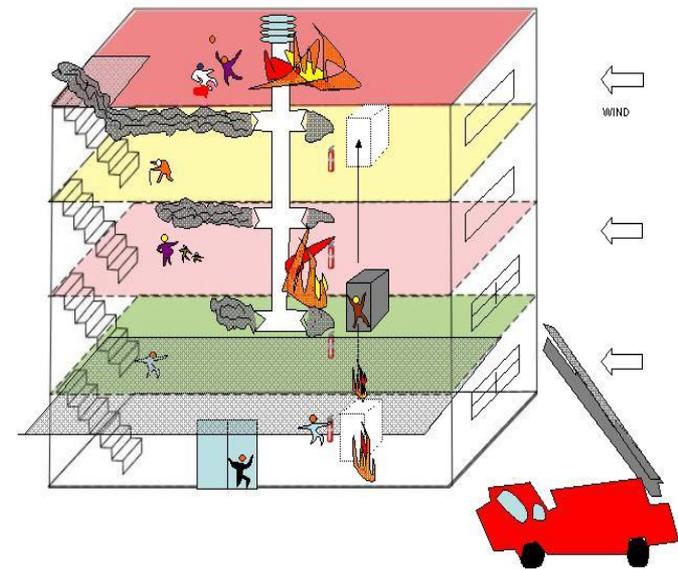


## COMPLEX

Few resources (one fire truck > priorities)

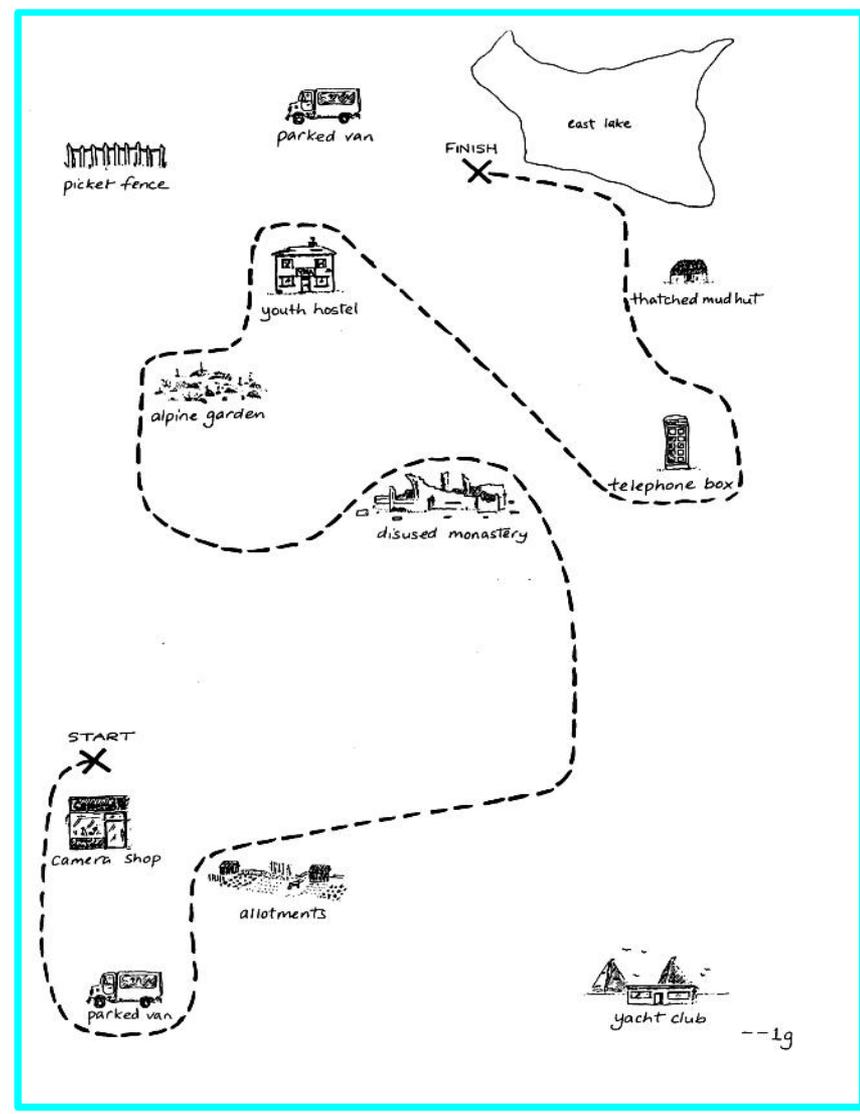
Particular characters (an elderly man, a pregnant woman with children, a severely injured person)

Intricately connected factors (fires moving towards the people, smoke blowing into the building through ventilation system)



# Task features (in the task). 3 Interactional aspects

<b>Less difficult</b>	<b>More difficult</b>
responsive role	initiating role
face-to-face	no eye-contact (phone, behind screen)
divergent outcome	convergent outcome (need to agree)
slow/scarce turn exchange	rapid/frequent turn exchange
simple, standard social relationships	face-threatening acts, potential imposition and conflict
2 participants	3+ participants



**easy:** 2 participants, simple social relationship;  
**difficult:** no eye contact; convergent outcome with partially different information (need to negotiate);  
**diff/easy:** initiating/responding role

# (1) Be careful with medicine

Compare the four different medicines that your friend brought home from the pharmacy. Can all of the medicines be taken at the same time? If not, which one(s) should not be taken together?

<b>Linguistic aspects</b>	<b>Cognitive aspects</b>
Basic and repetitive grammar and vocabulary	few elements
Standard input	concrete
Receptive skills	here-and-now
	few steps
	simple cognitive operations (identifying information)
	One set of similar input sources

## (2) Choose an appropriate restaurant

First read through the advertisements for two new restaurants. Then read through the two reviews of the restaurants. Finally, write an email to your friend explaining why you want to go to one but not the other this evening for dinner.

Linguistic aspects	Cognitive aspects
Basic and repetitive grammar and vocabulary	Few elements
Standard input	Concrete
Receptive skills	There-and-then
Productive skills	Few steps
	Two simple input sources
	Relatively simple cognitive operations (comparing information, deciding)

# (3) Sports nutrition

Listen to the figures taken from a radio program about sports nutrition and the longevity of athletes. Take notes as necessary. After listening, create two lists based on the information provided. One list should rank the sports according to the average number of calories burned (from most to least) in ten minutes of playing. The other list should rank the sports according to the likelihood of injury (from least to most) when participating in the sport.

Linguistic aspects	Cognitive aspects
Repetitive grammar and vocabulary	Several elements of the same kind
Standard input	Relatively concrete
Aural receptive skills	Here-and-now
Productive skills	3 steps (listening, note-taking, ranking)
	One input source
	Relatively simple cognitive operations (comparing information, ranking)

# (4) Convince your friend to quit smoking those nasty cigars

Read the following article about the health risks involved in smoking cigars. Then read the brief e-mail message from your friend extolling the virtues of cigar smoking. Now write an e-mail response, arguing for your friend to quit smoking cigars. Try to counter the points raised in the message from your friend by using evidence from the article.

Linguistic aspects	Cognitive aspects
Relatively simple grammar and vocabulary	Several elements to be considered
Standard input	Relatively abstract
Receptive skills	There-and-then
Productive skills	several steps (reading, comparing, drafting an outline, writing)
	Two contradictory input sources

# (5) Deciding on a movie

Read your friend's notes describing when he can go to the movies and what kind of film he would like to see. Then listen to the list of movies from your local movie theater. Pay careful attention to the show-times and the brief movie descriptions. Note titles and times that seem appropriate. Now match up your friend 's times with any of the films that fit both. Call your friend and leave a message on his answering machine giving pertinent information about your choices. Finally, suggest one film that seems preferable to you (be sure to state a reason for your preference).

<b>Linguistic aspects</b>	<b>Cognitive aspects</b>
Relatively simple grammar; relatively specialized vocabulary	Several elements
Relatively standard input	Relatively concrete
Aural receptive skills	There-and-then
Oral productive skills	several steps (reading, listening, note-taking, comparing, drafting an outline, writing)
	Two complex input sources

# (6) Gathering information about mobile phones

A friend has asked your advice for buying a new mobile phone. He has indicated a certain number of features the mobile phone should have and his budget limits. Find out the relevant information by listening to three radio commercials advertising special offers on mobile phones and by consulting a number of Internet pages from online stores and specialized forums. After you have gathered enough information, write up an email (no more than one page) with your recommendations and the reasons for them.

Linguistic aspects	Cognitive aspects
Relatively simple grammar; complex, technical vocabulary	Several elements
Relatively standard input	Relatively concrete
Aural receptive skills	There-and-then
Written productive skills	Several steps (reading, listening, note-taking, comparing, drafting an outline, writing)
	Several input sources

A study on interlanguage variation across  
tasks

(Pallotti et al., 2011)

# The study

- Subjects
  - 6 NNS female high school students, 4-8 yrs in Italy
  - 2 NS female high school students
- Data collection
  - Longitudinal, 4 yrs, similar tasks every year
- Audio and video recordings

# Day 1

Aim: elicitation with procedures traditionally used in SLA research

## Tasks

- Interview
- Notice the difference between two pictures
- Film retelling: Modern times
- Story retelling: Frog where are you?

# Day 2

Aim: elicitation with alternative, more communicative procedures

## Tasks

- Map task with peer
- Map task with adult
- Task “the best mobile phone”
- Task “plan a schooltrip”

# Treasure chest

- Success in each task provides a clue for solving the puzzle
- Real prizes
- A number of helpers:
  - Researcher (game leader)
  - Adult (team member in two tasks)
  - Adult and adolescent experts on the phone
  - Shop assistants on the phone

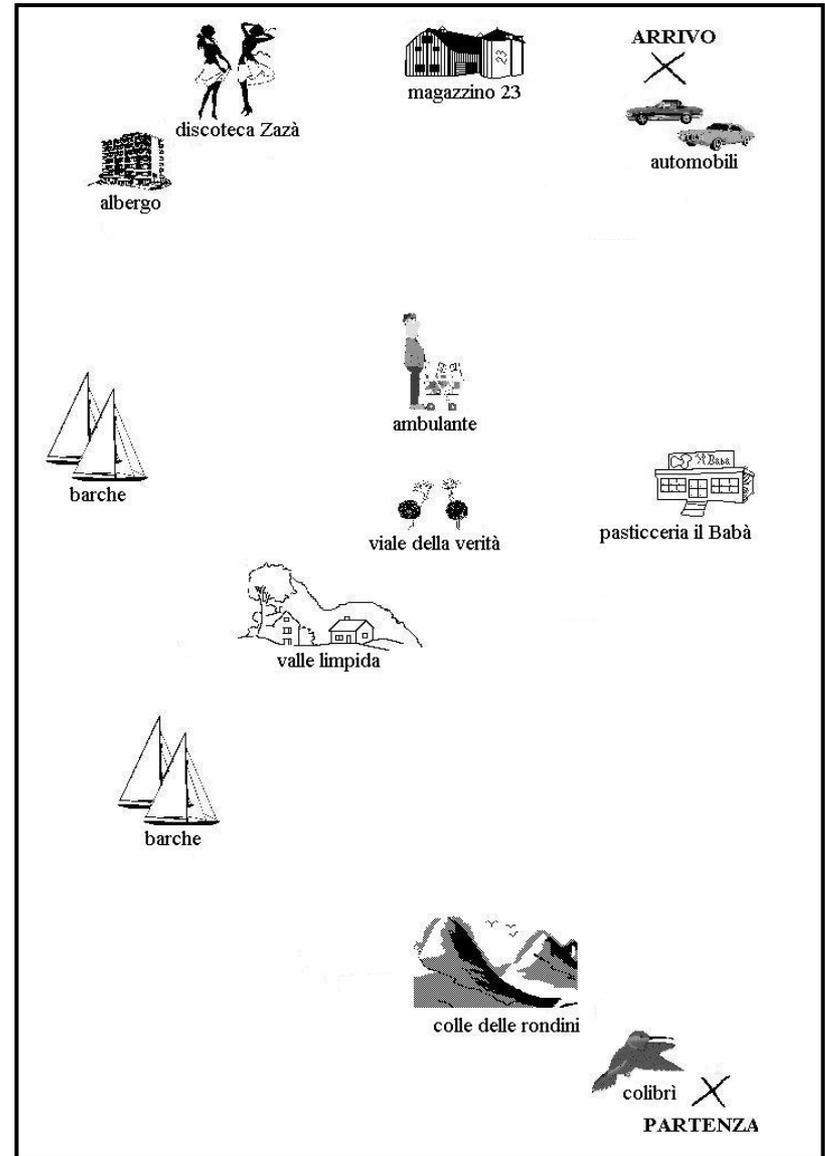
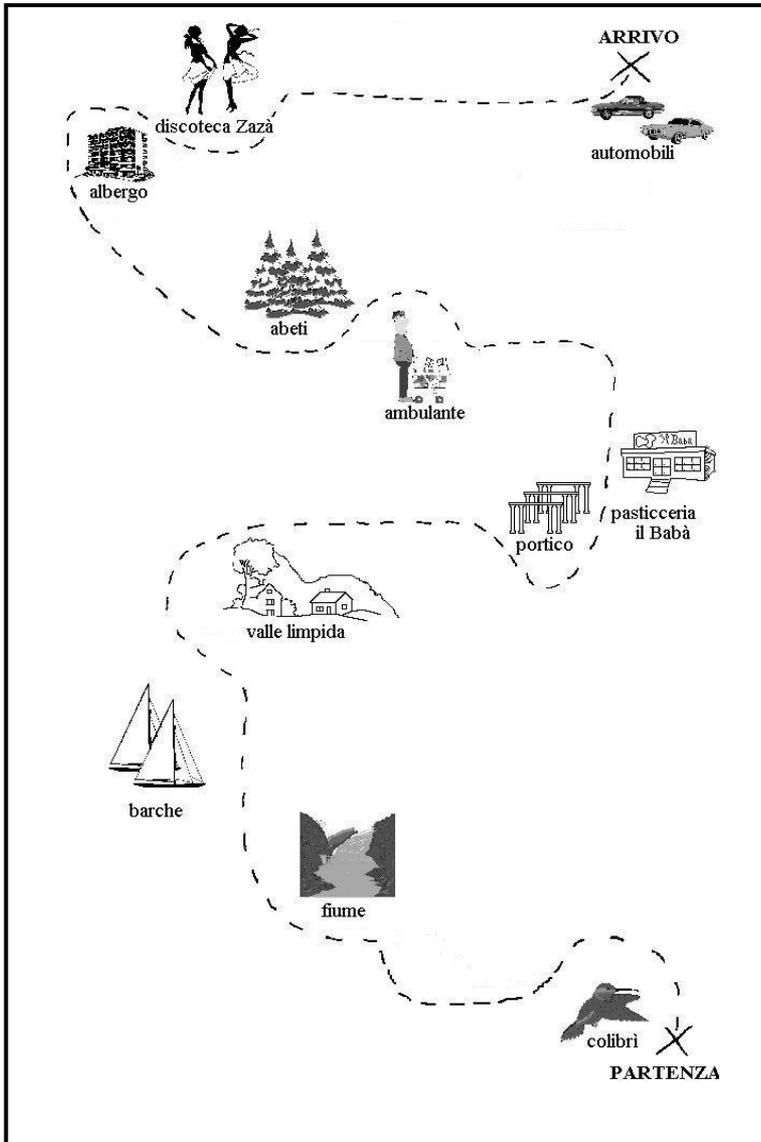
# Map task

- Aim
  - Describing to the interlocutor a path on a map, without eye-contact and with slightly different maps
- Participants
  - Student (giver)
  - Other student or adult (follower)

# Map A giver

/

# Map B follower



<b>Linguistic aspects</b>	<b>Cognitive aspects</b>
Simple grammar and vocabulary	Few elements
Relatively standard input (depends on peer)	Concrete
Aural receptive skills	Here-and-now
Oral productive skills	Few repetitive steps
	One input source

<b>Interactional aspects</b>
Initiating/responsive role
No eye-contact
Relatively convergent outcome
Slow turn exchange
Simple, standard social relationships
2 participants

# Task “the best mobile phone”

- Aim
  - Choosing among 6 mobile phones one that is handy, with a good camera and under 200 euros
- Participants
  - Two players; young expert on the phone; shop assistants on the phone
- Task
  - Participants call stores to get information on availability and prices; they call an expert peer to get advice
  - Then they choose a phone with the required features

# Mobile phones

## Nokia 3220

### Caratteristiche

Fotocamera:.....  
.....

Altre informazioni:.....  
.....  
.....

Prezzo: .....



## Sony Ericsson Z600

### Caratteristiche

Fotocamera:.....  
.....

Altre informazioni:.....  
.....  
.....

Prezzo: .....



## Motorola C975

### Caratteristiche

Fotocamera:.....  
.....

Altre informazioni:.....  
.....  
.....

Prezzo: .....



## Samsung SGH-A800

### Caratteristiche

Fotocamera:.....  
.....

Altre informazioni:.....  
.....  
.....

Prezzo: .....



# Phone numbers



## NUMERI UTILI

3M Musica	079 232 020
Autorimessa " <u>Capramozza</u> "	051 583 610
<u>B.T.E.L.</u> Viaggi	059 224 112
<u>C.R.E.M.</u> Punto 187	059 363 154
Camping <u>Salamaghe</u>	0784 844 604
Centro fotocopie	079 276 010
Corte del sole	0374 58 165
CTM 3 Vacanze	059 371 240
<u>Euronics</u>	079 261 213
Farmacia Valenti	079 272 123
Giramondo	059 347 124
<u>Gulliver</u> Libreria	079 234 475
Hotel/ ristorante Su <u>Bardosu</u>	0785 43 289
Il Labirinto	079 980 496
Ingegneria 2000	06 474 41 69/ 06 474 66 09
Koinè	079 275 638
L'isola che non c'è	079 232 549
Libreria <u>Azuni</u>	079 233 454
Megachip	328 294 17 96
<u>Megate</u> - <u>Tim</u>	059 847 039
<u>Mel bookstore</u>	051 220 310
<u>Ra.Gio.Cart.</u>	079 277 634
Simon e Simon	051 649 29 96
<u>Sistel</u> informatica	0784 34 280
Spazio D'Arte	079 272 944
<u>Telecom Italia</u> - Negozio Diretto	059 221 319
Ufficio assicurazioni AXA	0375 42 249

<b>Linguistic aspects</b>	<b>Cognitive aspects</b>
Simple grammar; specialized vocabulary	Several elements
Relatively standard input (depends on interlocutor)	Concrete
Aural receptive skills	Here-and-now + there-and-then
Oral productive skills	Several complex steps (reasoning, note-taking, asking for information, synthesizing)
	Several input sources

<b>Interactional aspects</b>
Mostly initiating turns
No eye-contact (on phone)
Convergent outcome
Fast turn exchange
Simple social relationships (with peer) / Formal social relationships (with shop assistants)
2 participants

# Easier tasks or easier ways to participate?

Involving the whole class

Projects in primary schools

See [www.comune.re.it/interlingua](http://www.comune.re.it/interlingua) (in Italian)

# References

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