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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that "method" is not a relevant construct for fostering change in the second language classroom, and that concern with specific methods can divert educators' attention from important instructional issues. Teachers usually organize instruction around tasks rather than methods, and therefore it would be more useful to analyze, research, and evaluate the tasks to discover the features that promote language teaching and learning. However, it is argued that for this to be a successful approach, careful attention must be given to the judicious use of group work, to the kinds of tasks teachers and learners work on, and to optimal combinations of task type and group. (MSE)

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TASK, GROUP, AND TASK-GROUP INTERACTIONS

Michael H Long

1 AGAINST METHODS

Despite the range of important issues to consider when planning a language teaching program, books, journals and conference programs in our field reveal a pervasive preoccupation with methodology. Not all the claims made are about this "brand name" method or that (Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), Grammar Translation, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Counselling Learning, the Natural Approach, etc), but a large percentage deal with procedural issues in classrooms in one way or another. Much less attention overall is given to such areas as syllabus design, testing and evaluation, despite the fact that a lot of serious work has been taking place there, some of it producing quite radical innovations. Understandably, people want to know "how to teach", and as is usually the case when demand for a product is high, there are any number of people ready to tell them. Tips are plentiful, and can be quite useful on the rather rare occasions they have been evaluated first.

Underlying all the prescriptions and proscriptions about how to teach, all the books and articles advocating particular methods or reviewing methods are two basic assumptions. One is that discussion of methods makes a difference in the classroom. Yet it might be, for instance, that method is a useful construct in coursework in graduate level teacher education programs (although I know of no evidence of that), but fail to translate into changes in what teachers and learners actually do on Monday morning. A second, more fundamental assumption is that methods exist, outside books and discussions about methods, that is. Four bodies of evidence suggest that neither assumption is correct.

1.1 Prescribed Overlap

Even if implemented exactly as their inventors prescribe, methods overlap a good deal. Such superficially quite different methods as the ALM, the (Structural-Situational) Audio-Visual Method and the Silent Way (the first two of which, along with Grammar Translation, are probably still the most widely used), share much in common. All three are predominantly teacher-centered, use structural grading, provide minimal input (usually just a few model sen-

ences), attempt to elicit immediate production by learners of native-like target language constructions, prescribe "error correction" when the attempts fail (as they must), devote a majority of classroom time to (at best) pseudo communication, and assume communicative abilities evolve out of grammar, rather than the other way around. All three, that is, like most other methods and the vast majority of commercially published textbooks, proceed with complete indifference to the findings of twenty years of research on naturalistic and classroom language learning.

1.2 Lack of Conceptual Utility for Teachers

Numerous studies show that teachers of languages and other school subjects plan, conduct and recall their lessons, not in terms of methods, but rather as sequences of instructional activities, or tasks (for review, see Shavelson and Stern, 1981; Crookes, 1986). Such was the finding, for example, of an evaluation by Swaffer, Arens and Morgan (1982) of "comprehension" and "four skills" approaches to the teaching of German as a FL at the University of Texas. Despite having given teachers explicit training in the different methods, and despite the teachers then (supposedly) having taught using one or the other for a semester, Swaffer *et al* found through classroom observations and debriefing interviews at the end of the study that there was no clear distinction between the methods in the minds the two groups of teachers or in their classroom practices. They conclude:

"... defining methodologies in terms of characteristic activities has led to distinctions which are only ostensible, not real, i.e. not confirmable in classroom practice ... Apparently, *any* analysis of methodologies needs to commence with definitions of *task, order, and learning strategies*. This is the way we as foreign language teachers interpret the pragmatics of the classroom." (Swaffer, *et al* 1982: 32)

1.3 Homogeneity of Observed Classroom Procedures

Classroom observational studies consistently show very little difference in what teachers actually do, as opposed to what they have supposedly been trained to do and/or think they are doing. The same practices are reported across all kinds of classrooms despite differences in such factors as the "methods" teachers have been trained in (Dinsmore, 1985; Nunan, 1987), the theoretical orientation of the professional training they have received at the masters degree level and profess to hold (Long and Sato, 1983), the materials they are using (Phillips and

Shettlesworth, 1975; Long, Adams, McLean and Castanos, 1976; Ross, in press), teaching generations (Hoetker and Ahlbrand, 1969) and teaching experience (Pica and Long, 1986).

1.4 Null Findings of "Comparative Methods" Studies

Large-scale "comparative methods" studies have typically found either short-lived differences or no difference in the relative effectiveness of (supposedly) quite different methods, e.g. Grammar-Translation, ALM and Cognitive Code Learning (Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; Smith, 1970) and inductive and deductive approaches (von Elek and Oskarsson, 1975; Seliger, 1975). The reasons for the null findings are impossible to ascertain due to the absence of a systematic observational component in most of the studies, but at least three interpretations are possible. One is that, while at least some methods can be clearly differentiated in practice, the teachers in the different treatment groups in the comparative methods studies were either simply doing the same things or differing only in the relative frequencies with which they exhibited the same behaviours, as has since been found to be the case in so many of the studies which have documented what goes on inside classrooms (e.g. Spada, 1987). A second possibility is that methods exist but do not matter. A third, more radical view is that methods do not matter because they do not exist, at least, not where they would matter if they did exist, in the classroom.

The overlap in prescribed and proscribed practices noted earlier would be consistent with this last reading. In addition, there must be a blurring of distinctions due to the need for pedagogic variety in lessons. It is no doubt possible to maintain potentially important differences, such as the provision or withholding of feedback on form, for some time, e.g. the duration of a public demonstration lesson, and for short periods to accentuate salient (but as far as we know, psycholinguistically trivial) idiosyncracies, e.g. whether feedback is provided verbally or via hand signals. However, there must also be a natural tendency over the course of a semester or a year for teachers to exploit most of the rather limited range of procedural possibilities, rather than stick to a narrower prescribed set of options.

1.5 From Methods to Methodology

In sum, there really seems to be very little justification for the continuing debate about methods, let alone for the hunt for the single correct one. As far as we know, 'method' is an irrelevant construct when attempting to influence classroom language teaching. Worse, it may actually be counterproductive if it di-

verts us from issues which really do make a difference, among which, of course, are the many options available in *methodology*. Methodology is here defined broadly as the instructional strategies and learning processes employed by both teachers and learners in performing tasks which they engage in separately, in groups or as a whole class.

As numerous studies have shown, classroom processes do make a difference. First, they affect other classroom processes. The kinds of questions teachers ask affect the syntactic complexity and communicative potential of students' speech (Brock, 1986; Tollefson, 1988), for example. The kinds of "simplifications" employed in listening and reading materials affect student comprehension (Parker and Chaudron, 1987), and so on. More important in the long run, they affect at least some (presumably many) aspects of learning, although relatively little is known about learning consequences as yet (for review, see Chaudron, 1988). The question that arises, however, is what a relevant *unit of analysis* may be for examining and, where needed, altering these processes if "method" is not that unit, and what *intervention points* (Long and Crookes, 1986) we can identify to engineer such changes. I would like to claim that *task* is a viable candidate as the unit of analysis, and that *task-group interactions* constitute one of several potential intervention points suggested by classroom research.

2 METHODOLOGY IN AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PROGRAM DESIGN

2.1 The Need for Compatibility with Other Domains

Most applied linguists would agree that there are six major areas to consider in the design of a successful language teaching program: needs (and means) identification, syllabus, materials, methodology, testing and evaluation. Of these it can be argued that the most important is syllabus design, and that within syllabus design, as elsewhere, the central issue is choice of the unit of analysis: word, structure, notion, function, topic, situation or task (for review, see Long and Crookes, 1989). The unit selected is crucial for two reasons: first, because it closely reflects the program designer's and teacher's theories, implicit or explicit (Ramani, 1987), about second language learning, the process programs are designed to facilitate, and second, because the choice made affects decisions the designer takes in all the other five domains. 'Logically *should* affect' would perhaps be more accurate, since many poorly designed programs exist where theoretically incoherent options were selected. Task-based syllabuses and materials, for example, may be taught using classroom procedures, such as pattern drills and transformation exercises, which involve structurally graded language practice. Similarly, a needs identification may be carried out to identify the tasks

required in a particular occupation learners are preparing for, yet the syllabus be based not on what the needs identification says about the learners' needs but on what a linguistic analysis says about the target language's structures, notions or functions.

2.2 Task as the Unifying Unit of Analysis

An extensive rationale for selection of *task* as the unit of analysis in course design has been presented elsewhere (see e.g. Long, 1985; Long and Crookes, 1989), where a distinction is drawn between 'target tasks' and 'pedagogic tasks'. *Target tasks* are the things the learners will eventually do in English, at school or university, at work, in a vocational training program, on vacation, and so on - a non-technical, non-linguistic definition. In *task-based language teaching* as described by Long and Crookes, which target tasks are relevant for particular groups of learners is established by a task-based needs identification. After classification of the relevant target tasks into (target) *task types*, *pedagogic tasks* are derived and sequenced to form a *task syllabus*. *Pedagogic tasks* are the problem-solving activities teachers and learners work on in the classroom. Especially in the early stages, they are usually simpler approximations to the target tasks that have motivated their selection, not just linguistically, but also in terms of the substantive content of the task, the number of steps the learners have to take, the options they have to choose from, etc.

The rationale for choosing task as the unifying unit in program design, will not be repeated here. Suffice to say that most other potential units, including word, structure, notion and function - and synthetic syllabuses (Wilkins, 1972) and Type A syllabuses (White, 1988) in general - do not sit well with what is known about second language learning. There is no evidence that the commonly employed target language units in such syllabuses make meaningful acquisition units. Nor is there any evidence, contrary to what is assumed by synthetic, type A syllabuses and materials, that structures, notions, functions, etc can be acquired separately, singly, in linear additive fashion, or that they can be acquired prior to and separate from language use. There is overwhelming evidence against all those ideas, in fact. (For reviews, see e.g. Hatch, 1983; Ellis, 1985; Larsen-Freeman and Long, in press.) As Long and Crookes (1989) put it:

"(L)anguage learning is a psycholinguistic process, not a linguistic one, yet synthetic syllabuses consistently leave the learner out of the equation."

By way of contrast, analytic syllabuses and Type B syllabuses (Wilkins, 1972; White, 1988) in general, and those utilizing 'task' as the unit of analysis in particular, are at least *potentially* compatible with universal acquisition processes. To

give just one example, tasks can be combined with methodological options which allow for, but speed up, learners' progress through the obligatory stages in inter-language 'development sequences', e.g. a short-term orientation to task accomplishment, not language accuracy, but with a focus on form when certain conditions are met (Long, 1988a, 1988b). Developmental sequences have been well documented by second language acquisition researchers for such phenomena as word order, negation, interrogatives, articles, auxiliaries and relative clauses (see, e.g. Johnston, 1985), as has the inability of formal instruction to alter them in any fundamental way (see, e.g. Pienemann and Johnston, 1987; Ellis, in press).

Task-based syllabuses are also an advantage for those seeking an integrated approach to course design. They are compatible with task-based needs identifications, which are relatively easily conducted and more likely to be valid than identifications using linguistic units (for details and examples, see Long, 1985). They also combine well with communicatively oriented, task-based methodology. Indeed, Nunan (1989) has argued that the use of tasks tends to make the traditional syllabus/methodology split redundant.

... the distinction between syllabus design and methodology becomes difficult to sustain: one needs not only to specify both the content (or ends of learning) and the tasks (or means to those ends) but also to integrate them. This suggests a broad perspective on curriculum in which concurrent consideration is given to content, methodology and evaluation.

(Nunan, 1989: 15)

Tasks lend themselves to stimulating, intellectually challenging materials, especially those of a problem-solving nature, and as noted earlier, of a kind which seem meaningful to teachers planning and implementing lessons. They are well evaluated with criterion-referenced tests, and the kind of tangible products typically associated with task achievement should be attractive to program evaluators and consumers alike.

Needless to say, amidst all the advantages there are also some problems. These include establishing valid criteria for the selection and sequencing of pedagogic tasks (a problem with other units of analysis, too, of course), and various aspects of evaluation (Das, 1984). Further, as is well known by now, tasks of one sort or another have provided the basis for three distinct syllabus types: procedural (e.g. Prabhu, 1987), process (e.g. Breen, 1984, 1987) and task (e.g. Long, 1985; Long and Crookes, 1989), for some of which the "advantages" of tasks listed above would not be considered relevant at all. Some task-based syllabuses (e.g. Prabhu's procedural syllabus) are not derived from analyses of learners' needs, for example, much less analyses in terms of real world 'target tasks'; nor do they make a distinction between 'target tasks' and 'pedagogic tasks' (see Long, 1985, and for discussion, Nunan, 1989; Long and Crookes,

1989). Despite the brief history of task-based syllabuses, in fact, 'task', 'task-based' and 'task syllabus' already have a wide variety of uses and mis-uses. Most obvious in the latter category, several recent syllabuses and commercially published textbooks which claim to be 'task-based' are nothing of the sort, at least not in any of the senses outlined above, in which 'task' is the unit of analysis in at least some areas of a language teaching program. In some which even advertise themselves as structurally graded, 'task' is just a new word for 'exercise'.

3 GROUP WORK AND PEDAGOGIC TASKS

Differences in the various conceptions of task aside, some important questions for all those utilizing pedagogic tasks are the grouping of participants (teachers and/or learners) who work on tasks, the types of tasks they work on, and task-group interactions. We will take them in order.

3.1 Group Work

At least three basic groupings of interlocutors are possible in classrooms: individuals, groups (including dyads), and whole class, i.e. the teacher-fronted "lockstep" format, in which everyone (supposedly) attends to the same thing at the same time. All three arrangements undoubtedly have unique qualities and advantages, and our ultimate goal should be to ascertain empirically which ones serve which purposes best. They should be viewed as complementary, in other words, not in competition. That said, it is well known that individual and whole class work predominate the world over, often to the complete exclusion of group work, which is why it is easy to find oneself appearing to advocate group work "in preference to" the others. While badly organized group work is no better than badly organized lockstep work, group work is a very valuable but widely neglected asset, and also, it turns out, important for exploiting certain types of task. It is therefore worth briefly summarizing some of its general strengths before moving to the more subtle issues of task type and task-group interactions.

3.1.1 A pedagogic rationale

All other things being equal, group work (including pair work) has at least five major pedagogic benefits. (1) Group work increases the quantity of language practice opportunities. (2) Group work improves the quality of student talk in several ways. They can engage in what Barnes (1976) calls "exploratory" talk, and practice a functionally wider speech repertoire. (3) Group work

helps individualize instruction, potentially allowing students to work at their own pace, perhaps using different materials. (4) Group work can help improve the affective climate in the classroom, the intimacy of the small group setting often being especially valuable to shy or linguistically insecure students. Finally, (5) group work can help motivate learners because of the advantages referred to in (1) through (4) and because of the pedagogic variety it brings to a lesson.

3.1.2 A psycholinguistic rationale

A psycholinguistic rationale for group work has also been proposed. It is noted that the precision with which input can be adjusted to an interlocutor's comprehension abilities is likely to be greatly improved when the listener (or reader) is an individual (the other member of a dyad, for example) than a large group of people of inevitably differing proficiencies, i.e. the whole class. The more individualized negotiation for meaning which is possible in the small group format, in other words, should increase both the quantity and quality of comprehensible input available to students. There is, in turn, a variety of evidence for the necessity (although not, I believe, the sufficiency) of comprehensible input for language learning (for review, see Krashen, 1985; Long, 1981).

Classroom studies have shown that the negotiation work learners accomplish while talking together in unsupervised small groups (interlanguage talk) does not involve a decline in grammatical accuracy compared with the same learner's performance in lockstep work, which is exactly what would be expected from our knowledge of how interlanguage develop. The amount of negotiation work achieved in interlanguage talk is also greater than that in either lockstep work or native/non-native speaker conversation in pairs. Finally, classroom studies have found that the frequency of other-correction and completions by students is higher in group work than in lockstep teaching and not significantly different from that observed in native/non-native speaker conversations. Group members almost never miscorrect, and there is minimal incorporation of other students' errors. (For details and a review of studies, see Long and Porter, 1985.)

An important additional dimension to the psycholinguistic rationale has been provided by Bygate (1987), who begins with the observation that in conversations inside and outside classrooms, a good deal of spontaneous native speaker oral language production occurs, not in finite sentences, but in what he calls "satellite units" (SUs). SUs are defined as moodless utterances which lack a finite verb group ("Hands up", "Pencils down") and all other syntactically dependent units, finite or non-finite, that have been uttered in a turn which either (a) does not include a main finite clause to which the unit in question may be attached ("The man is riding a _____", left for a student to complete), or (b)

includes a related main finite clause, but one for which the dependent unit is syntactically superfluous, as when someone makes parenthetical additions or alterations to parts of an independent finite clause ("It was a boring paper, a long boring paper ... a dreadfully boring paper, one of his worst yet"). He cites numerous examples of SUs from a classroom study of group work to illustrate his claim, noting that they can consist of any dependent syntactic element, such as

Prepositional phrases:

S1: at the door

S2: yes in the same door I think

S1: besides the man who is leaving

S2: behind him

Verb groups:

S3: and the point is that we can start

S4: compare

S3: yes

Subordinate clauses:

S2: well that man I think he is a robber, a thief

S1: he might be

S2: because he is running with a handbag

S1: yeah

(examples from Bygate, 1987: 68)

Bygate points out that teacher-fronted, textbook driven oral practice is traditionally "clause-down", and advocates a reversal if the work is to promote language learning. Students need time and opportunities to explore the ways dependent SUs can be formed and then combined to make clauses. Intra-turn repairs and cross-turn cooperative dialog, especially as induced by the need to negotiate meaning while working on a problem-solving task in a small group, provide both time and a place - a view which fits very well, of course, with claims by Hatch (1978) and others to the effect that syntax develops out of conversation, rather than the other way round. It is not that talk containing SUs is impossible in principle in lockstep work. It is just that descriptive studies show it rarely occurs there, and that classroom experiments comparing the same tasks in teacher-fronted and small group formats consistently find the small group setting produces significantly more of it (Long, Adams, McLean and Castaños, 1976; Doughty and Pica, 1986; Rulon and McCreary, 1986; Deen, 1988).

The existence of both pedagogic and psycholinguistic rationales does not mean, of course, that all group work is valuable. The small group setting may simply be used to increase the quantity of work done on a useless task. Aston

(1986), for example, has pointed out how poorly designed problem-solving activities can lead to a lot of negotiation work (what he calls "trouble-shooting"), but work which may reflect learner frustration with too difficult a task, unshared participant backgrounds and a need to enhance rapport rather than a successful attempt to secure more appropriate input for acquisition purposes. In other words, valuable though group work is, especially but not only in large classes, the term itself has no real meaning until the 'work' done is specified, i.e. until format is linked to task.

3.2 Pedagogic Task Types

Embryonic taxonomies of pedagogic tasks have begun to appear in the second language literature, along with various proposals for assessing task difficulty and a even a list of (twenty) qualities of "good tasks" (for review, see Crookes, 1986; Candlin, 1987; Nunan, 1988a, 1988b, 1989). With few exceptions, the proposals make no reference to the classroom research on task types (or to any research findings at all, for that matter), although there has been well over a decade of such work on the topic. Given the way these things tend to work in our field, it is safe to assume that many others will follow, eventually leading to a data-free argument about whose taxonomy or list is "best".

Most classifications so far have been pedagogic. While pedagogic criteria will eventually be important for materials design, they must surely be of limited utility until we know how they relate to the *psycholinguistic* properties of tasks. I would like to suggest that a more productive approach would be to continue to search for objectively and (preferably easily) recognisable structural features of task types - task types, not tasks, or there will be no generalizability - which can be demonstrated to relate systematically to the relevant psycholinguistic properties, since it is the kinds of task which promote second *language learning* that we need to identify. There are few clear findings of this sort as yet, but at least three lines of work have begun to produce interesting results: studies relating task type to quantity and quality of interlanguage negotiation work, and to interlanguage complexity and destabilization.

Just which of the many psycholinguistic properties are 'relevant', of course, and so which studies are considered 'interesting', will vary according to one's views about how people learn languages. Two properties among several which interest me are the following. (1) What potential does a task type have for encouraging negotiation work, and in particular for stimulating (both) teachers and learners (a) to reformulate their own and others' utterances and (b) to attend closely to feedback (on their performance in general, not just on errors)? (2) What is a task type's potential for "stretching" learners' interlanguages, for pushing them to operate at the outer limits of their current abilities, especially to

use (a) as linguistically complex speech as possible, and (b) as much optional syntax as possible (where each is sociolinguistically appropriate), and in these and other ways, to expose their interlanguages to constant pressures for destabilization? Not all task types are equally useful in either of these areas. I will illustrate with just three examples of such relationships, although many other patterns are emerging from a rapidly expanding body of research. It should be stressed that both types of pedagogic tasks in each of the following pairs may still be useful in the classroom, even if one type is more useful than the other in the ways of interest here.

Where both negotiation work and interlanguage "stretching" and destabilization are concerned, evidence from classroom studies is generally consistent with the following three generalizations, assuming variables other than those mentioned are held constant in each comparison.

3.2.1 Two-way tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than one-way tasks

The one-way/two-way distinction (Long, 1980) refers to the way information is distributed at the outset of a task and the requirement that the structure of the task imposes on participants to exchange that information if they are to complete the task successfully. It is insufficient that information exchange can facilitate or improve task completion; for a task to be two-way, information exchange must be required for completion to be possible at all. One-way/two-way also has nothing to do with the number of participants. Nor is two-way the same as "information gap". One-way and two-way tasks are both information gap tasks, as that term is used in the pedagogic literature, but research has shown that it is two-way tasks, that are more conducive of negotiation work, for which many one-way tasks, and hence many information gap tasks, are quite useless, it turns out. Several studies support this generalization: for NS/NNS conversation, see, e.g. Long (1980), and for interlanguage talk, e.g. Doughty and Pica (1986).

An example may help clarify the distinction. A task in which one person (teacher or student) describes a picture which only he or she can see so that others can draw it is one-way. A task in which each member of (say) a four person group has exclusive access to information about a crime, all of which must be pooled before a villain can be identified, is two-way. For example, one student might hold information about the motives or lack of motive of six suspects, a second about their alibis, a third about the way the crime was committed, and a fourth about certain externally verified facts which, taken together, support some alibis but not others, and so on. None of the separate pieces of information is interpretable without the others, meaning that the group must

work cooperatively to exchange their information if the crime is to be solved.

3.2.2 Planned tasks "stretch" interlanguages further and promote destabilization more than unplanned tasks

Building on work by Ochs (1979) on linguistic differences between planned and unplanned native language discourse, Ellis (1987) and Crookes (in press) have manipulated degree of planning to assess its effects on written and oral work in a second language. Ochs found planned discourse, such as prepared lectures or expository texts, typically to contain more complex language and a wider variety of linguistic constructions (more relative clauses, noun modifiers, passives, and so on) than unplanned discourse, such as informal face to face conversations and personal letters. The L2 studies to date have shown that learners produce syntactically more complex language when given planning time than when performing the same tasks without planning or with less planning time.

Using a counterbalanced repeated measures design, Crookes (in press) studied the monologic speech of forty Japanese learners of English on two oral production tasks involving instructions on how to assemble Lego pieces to make a model house and the siting of buildings on the map of a town. All subjects completed one of two equivalently complex versions of each task. Half the subjects did one task after a ten-minute opportunity to plan the words, phrases and ideas (but not the exact sentences) they would use, and the other task after no opportunity to plan. The other subjects reversed the order of tasks and conditions. Crookes was careful to obtain evidence that learners actually had used the allotted time for planning in the form of written notes they were instructed to make but which were removed before they recorded their instructions. That is, he made sure the treatment had been "delivered". As predicted, Crookes found that the learners' speech was syntactically more complex on various measures, e.g. words, subordinate clauses and s-nodes per utterance, on both tasks after planning time. He also noted trends towards more target-like use of particular linguistic forms (articles) and use of a greater variety of words (higher type-token ratio) under the planning condition.

Crookes is cautious about drawing pedagogical implications from what was, after all, a tightly controlled laboratory experiment. He suggests, however, that whereas many writers on communicative language teaching (for good reasons) advocate provision of spontaneous language practice opportunities, teachers (and materials designers) might well consider systematically building planning opportunities for at least some tasks into their lessons, given the evidence that the same students on the same day can operate at a higher level, both quantitatively (the linguistic complexity measures) and, it appears likely, qualitatively

(developmentally more advanced in terms of percentage target-like use) if given planning opportunities. It seems quite reasonable to assume that, other things being equal, learners will improve faster if they engage in language work nearer the upper bounds of what they are currently capable than practice at levels below their current capacity.

This finding is of a different order from those concerning one-way and two-way tasks and other task types because it concerns a quality, degree of planning, which can in principle be manipulated, and fairly easily, for virtually any task with (potentially) the same results. One wonders what other features and conditions might be superimposed in this way to alter tasks in the classroom, possibly thereby creating new task types with significance for language performance and, presumably, language learning.

3.2.3 Closed tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than open tasks

Unlike the previous two claims, which have each been explicitly formulated and then tested in a number of studies, the proposal I am about to make concerning the relative merits of 'closed' and 'open' tasks reflects my own *post hoc* interpretation of a number of results, and should therefore be treated more cautiously. It has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in a second language study thus far. The argument, briefly, is as follows.

Negotiation for meaning is usually both fun and intellectually stimulating for teachers and learners alike if the materials writer is clever enough. It can also be hard work, however, most obviously when a task is too difficult for a particular group of learners in one or more ways. A least effort outlook will mean students (and some teachers, I suppose) will tend to avoid negotiation if the task itself does not demand it. Some tasks, even *within* other categories, such as one-way and two-way, elicit more negotiation work than others, some less, and some aspects of negotiation are probably more beneficial for language development than others.

The last point is well illustrated in research findings by Pica and her associates. In a study of NS/NNS conversation, Pica (1987) noted a tendency for NS interlocutors to model correct versions of NNSs' problematic utterances as confirmation checks following communicative trouble. While potentially very valuable in some respects, the seeming disadvantage was that the NNSs then had only to acknowledge in order to complete the discourse repair, rather than to attempt their own reformulations, as shown in this example:

NNS: I many fren

NS: You have many friends?

NNS: Yes

Pica, Holliday, Lewis and Morgenthaler (in press) found clarification requests, on the other hand, to be more successful at eliciting reformulations from learners, especially on tasks in which they had some control over the topic, a condition which can be built into a (two-way) task if the designer wishes, of course. Pica provides the following example:

NNS: ... you have a three which is ...
white square of which appears sharp

NS: Huh?

NNS: ... you have a three houses ...
one is no-no-not-*one* is not square
and *one* is square, but with a little
bit- a little small house

"Free conversation" is a particularly poor task in most respects where negotiation work is concerned, as can be seen in the consistent finding of a tendency for speakers in free conversation to treat topics briefly, to drop them altogether when serious trouble arises, to provide feedback to their interlocutors less often, to incorporate feedback from their interlocutors less often, and to recycle linguistic material less often than when the same speakers work together on various other "problem-solving" tasks.

Quantified demonstrations of these relationships can be found, among other places, in a study comparing the performance of the same fifteen dyads in free conversation and working on two so-called "problem-solving" tasks, Spot the Difference and Odd Man Out, by Crookes and Rulon (1985, 1988), who also provide a detailed discussion of possible causal relationships. Related findings of higher quantity and quality negotiation work have been reported favouring "convergent" over "divergent" tasks by Duff (1986), and (social, cooperative problem-solving) tasks combining "non-teaching goals and experiential processes" (e.g. construction of a Lego toy) over tasks emphasizing "teaching goals and expository processes" (e.g. instruction in the string-searching function of a laptop computer with the computer physically present) by Berwick (1988). Berwick's is the largest scale, most comprehensive study of these issues to date, and involved careful manipulation (singly and in combinations) of several variables, including task types, native language of teacher and learners, and the availability of visual support for tasks. There are several other relevant studies, too many to review here, and I have not done justice to the wealth of detail available even in those few I have mentioned.

The claim I would like to make is that a distinction between "open" and "closed" tasks would account for many (although by no means all) of the findings, and would be worth manipulating in a future study. The distinction is a modifi-

cation of one for a classification of questions first proposed, I believe, by Robinson and Rackstraw (1972), applied now to the classification of pedagogic tasks.

By an *open* task, I mean one in which participants know there is no predetermined correct solution, but instead a wide (in some cases, infinite) range of acceptable solutions. Free conversation, a debate, ranking favourite leisure time activities, explaining how something works (how you think it works, with no form of "test" of your interlocutor's competence after your explanation - not necessarily how it really works), and discussing and eventually choosing (individually or by consensus) the ten greatest world figures, would all be examples of 'open' tasks.

By a *closed* task, I mean one in which the task itself (as opposed to some construal put on it by the participants) requires that the speakers (or listeners, readers and writers, of course) attempt to reach either a single correct solution or one of a small, finite set of correct solutions determined beforehand by the designer of the task and again (crucially) known to the participants to have been so determined. There may only be one possible correct answer to who committed the crime, for example, exactly four differences between two otherwise identical pictures, only three countries out of ten whose GNP rose every year from 1975 to 1984, and so on. It is crucial that participants know whether the task is open or closed.

The idea is that the quantity and quality of negotiation for meaning will be higher on closed tasks, when participants know that task completion depends on their finding *the* answer, not settling on any answer they choose when the going gets rough and moving on to something else. The prediction is that, all other things being equal, closed tasks as defined above will elicit more topic and language recycling, more feedback, more incorporation, more rephrasing, more precision, and so on. These adjustments involve the kinds of reformulations noted earlier and are likely to lead to provision and incorporation of feedback, and hence, to interlanguage destabilization.

3.3 Task-group Interactions

In a study of Mexican university students of EFL working on (supposedly) "communicative" materials written by the research team, Long, Adams, McLean and Castaños (1976) compared language use in teacher-led, whole class discussions and in unsupervised pair work when participants were engaged in solving the same problem. This was to decide which of a list of characteristics (tool use, thought, etc) were unique to humans (I am ashamed to admit we wrote 'unique to *man*' in 1976) and which ones could be found in other animals. Contrary to our predictions, the materials had no apparent effect on the kinds of language use that transpired in the whole class discussions. Teachers continued to ask display questions, correct errors, drill target language constructions, and general-

ly to focus on forms, not communication. In the small group condition, however, which involved the student pairs doing the same task in an adjoining room at the same stage in the lesson, the materials seemed to "work". Students produced more talk, all of it with a focus on meaning, not language, a functionally wider range of talk, and more "exploratory" talk in Barnes' sense. We concluded, tentatively, that it was the *combination* of materials and grouping that had produced the result.

Similar findings have since been obtained in at least one other study. Pica and Doughty (1985) and Doughty and Pica (1986) compared various features of teacher and student talk, focussing primarily on negotiation work, on one-way and two-way "decision-making" tasks conducted in small group and teacher-fronted lockstep formats. Like other researchers (e.g. Porter, 1986), they found student speech was equally grammatical in both formats (as measured by the percentage of grammatical T-units), and that the students talked more and provided more other corrections and completions in the small groups. The two-way task involved each student planting flowers on a feltboard garden to which only he or she had access and which differed slightly from every other student's board, the object being for everyone to finish with the same final picture. Pica and Doughty report that the two-way task produced significantly more negotiation work than the one-way task in the small group setting, but found no effect for task type in the teacher-led lessons. When task type was held constant, significantly more negotiation work (the ratio of conversational adjustments to total T-units and fragments) was found in the small groups (four person groups and pairs) than in the lockstep, but differences between the pairs and the four person groups themselves were not significant.

On the basis of these two sets of results, it would seem that the amount and quality of language practice can sometimes depend not simply on the tasks or format employed, but, at least where some tasks and possibly some task types are concerned, upon the interaction of either task or task type and grouping. Both studies find the combination of communicative task with small group setting necessary to bring out the full potential of the task itself, and both find that a task's true potential may not be realised at all in a lockstep format.

How generalizable are these findings? At this point, we simply do not know. We need further studies of task-group interactions. It may be that well designed tasks are protected against the effects of one grouping arrangement or another. That would be the optimistic view, certainly. It might also turn out that these two studies were providing an early warning of a phenomenon that we would do well to investigate further. It would be a shame, after all, if we spent the next few years learning to do clever things with tasks only to have the effects of our work unintentionally preempted by the way those tasks were used in the classroom.

4 CONCLUSION

There is no evidence that "method" is a relevant construct for those interested in fostering change in classrooms. Worse, a concern with "methods" can divert us from methodological issues, which clearly are important. Methodology, however, will be treated more effectively as part of an integrated approach to program design, and the *task* has many advantages as the unit of analysis if that is the goal. It can serve in needs identification, syllabus design, materials writing, methodology, testing and evaluation alike. The potential of task-based language teaching for harnessing instructional and learning strategies in ways consistent with second language acquisition research findings is also considerable. If that potential is to be realised, however, careful attention needs to be given to the judicious use of group work, to the kinds of tasks teachers and learners work on, especially the psycholinguistic properties of task types, and to the optimal combinations of task types and groups, that is, to task-group interactions.

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