Abstract: This article presents and analyzes speech data from secondary-level learners of Spanish who are engaged in a problem-solving speaking task commonly used in classrooms and in research. It applies a Vygotskian perspective to understand the nature of selected aspects of their speech activity, such as talk about the task, talk about the talk, and the use of English. The findings suggest that encoding-decoding perspectives, prevalent in much second language research on learner-to-learner speech activity, are inappropriate for capturing and understanding what these learners are attempting to accomplish during their face-to-face activity. In other words, not all speech activity between classroom learners during classroom communicative tasks is necessarily communicative in intent.

Key Words: discourse, speech activity, Vygotsky, classroom-based research, foreign language learning, language learning tasks, communication

Introduction

Drawing from information-processing models of first language production (see Crookes 1991, for a review of second language speech production research), second and foreign language learning research assumes that student discourse is the result of encoding, decoding, and modifying internal representations of the new language. Verbal interaction is operationalized, as Pica et al. (1991:353) point out, as a series of signal-response exchanges in which learners attempt to understand the literal meaning of the utterances that the language forms and structures encode (our emphasis). Thus, analysis of target language interactions during communicative tasks is often confined to uncovering the ways interlocutors unwrap linguistic messages and achieve literal comprehension through requests for clarification and comprehension checking. Support for such analysis derives from second language acquisition theory, which maintains that through these kinds of discourse negotiations language is made comprehensible and is thus available for linguistic processing in the learner (Pica 1987).

This conceptualization of human communication, often referred to as the “conduit metaphor,” according to Reddy (1979) portrays the receiver’s task as one of simple “extraction” (288), thereby trivializing the function of the reader or listener (308). Bickhard, moreover, maintains that this encoding-decoding view of communication is logically incoherent and is an aporia (see Bickhard 1992 for a thorough discussion of the impossibility of encodingism). According to Bickhard (in press):

- encodings are stand-ins, and stand-ins require representation to be stood-in for.... Encodings are known correspondences, and known correspondences require prior knowledge of what the correspondences are with.... The point is that encodings only change the form of already existent representation. Encodings do not and cannot account for the emergence of novel representations.... Clearly such emergence occurs, and, therefore, encodingism cannot suffice ... the origins problem and the incoherence problem are all versions of that basic ontological circularity in any strict encodingism.
For Bickhard, then, the encoding-decoding perspective fails to capture how utterances interact with social realities, evoking transformations of the social situation as well as constituting them. At best, encoding and decoding reflect only the most ordinary and instrumental aspects of language use, i.e., message transmission and reception (see also Wertsch [1991: 67]).

This article proposes that this dominant encoding-decoding view serves only to obscure our investigations of what foreign language learners are actually trying to achieve during verbal interaction in problem-solving tasks of the sort that are becoming more popular in today's second and foreign language classrooms (Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993) by limiting it to the literal comprehension of each other's verbal output, and the building up of internal linguistic representations. Nunan (1992) succinctly summarizes previous second language investigations of verbal interaction when he states that in these studies the language produced by learners is reduced to, and reproduced as, a set of figures and numbers that are manipulated in various ways. For example, it is common in second language studies of verbal interaction to estimate the amount of negotiation of meaning that occurs under certain experimental conditions (e.g., information-gap tasks carried out in small group versus with the teacher) by counting the number of times the learners use clarification requests such as "What do you mean by X?" Statistical analysis is then used to ascertain whether one condition was more likely than the other to promote significantly more negotiation of meaning.

Nunan doubts the usefulness of such studies because they have one great drawback: they exclude the very thing that we are most interested in, i.e., language itself and the activity of the learners. More specifically, these studies fail to uncover how speaking is used as a strategic tool for cognizing and constructing tasks, meaning, and shared situational definitions. Nunan goes further to argue that "such studies are narrowly conceived and executed,... are over represented in the literature,... have unduly influenced the second language research agenda,... and have given us an incomplete picture of second language acquisition” (15). We would add that by acknowledging the impossibility of analyzing second language discourse as simply encoding and decoding, we are in a position to extend the study of second language interaction beyond simple message transmission and comprehension and revisit learner verbal production during interaction with new questions and greater insight into the role of speaking as cognitive activity (Ahmed 1988; Donato 1988). We contend that what is gained by reappraising the encoding approach is a more refined psycholinguistic understanding of what learners are trying to achieve during verbal interaction. Further, this knowledge has an applied value. To be sure, it can ultimately change foreign language teaching practice in a way that has yet been achieved. Enabling teachers to understand better the verbal performance of their students during communicative tasks (e.g., why they may use their native language during problem-solving tasks) can unfasten the constraints on language use in many second and foreign language classrooms.

**Vygotskyan Psycholinguistic Theory**

Recently, a series of studies on the role of speaking in second language interactions have attempted to go beyond this encoding-decoding perspective of second language interaction (e.g., Ahmed 1988; Diaz and Klingler 1991; Donato 1994; Lantolf and Appel 1994; McCaffery 1992). These studies are theoretically motivated by the work of L. S. Vygotsky (1896–1934), a Soviet psychologist, semiotician, and pedagogue whose ideas on the interrelations of thinking and speaking have laid the groundwork for a sociocultural theory of sign-mediated human action. Vygotskyan psycholinguistic theory, in contrast to the encoding-decoding perspective, maintains that since thinking is mediated by semiotic systems, notably language, speaking is cognitive activity...
(Vygotsky 1986). For Vygotsky, thinking and speaking are inherently linked. A brief review is necessary, however, of a basic principle of Vygotskyan theory, the principle of semiotic mediation, prior to discussion of this principle in the light of second language interaction during problem-solving tasks between third-year high school learners of Spanish.

**Semiotic Mediation**

For Vygotsky, linguistic signs are used to organize, plan, and coordinate one's own actions or the actions of others. As Wertsch and Toma (in press) point out, the use of signs as a tool of thought does not simply facilitate mental actions that could have otherwise occurred in their absence. Rather, it alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions just as a technical tool alters the process of labor (Vygotsky 1981). Thinking for Vygotsky involves, therefore, both the persons and the mediational means they use, i.e., language. Rather than separate individuals from the semiotic systems mediating their activity, as is implied in encoding-decoding perspectives of speech production, both the individual and the linguistic tools must be understood as an irreducible whole. Insisting upon the inseparability of the individual from the semiotic systems mediating and constituting action can lead to more robust descriptions of the cognitive function of speaking for conducting human activity.

Vygotsky's notion of semiotic mediation therefore enables richer and more robust understandings of foreign language learners in a classroom setting by focusing on what students are trying to achieve through their verbal interactions during classroom speaking tasks in the second language. This focus contrasts with encoding-decoding perspectives that often attend to the linguistic digressions from native speaker norms (or how native speakers encode meanings and how error-ridden learner production can be in comparison) or on verbal negotiations whereby seemingly already existent representations are converged upon by conversational participants (or how learners work toward mutual comprehension of each other's encodings). A Vygotskyan approach views speaking as the very instrument that simultaneously constitutes and constructs learners' interactions in the target language with respect to the target language itself, the task as it is presented and understood by the participants, the goals learners set for completing tasks, and their orientation to the task and to each other. In short, the focus of attention in a Vygotskyan analysis is on interpreting how speaking creates a shared social reality and maintains that individuals speak to plan and carry out task-relevant actions rather than encode and decode in order to speak (Donato 1994). As Frawley and Lantolf (1985) have argued, all forms of discourse during speech activity are *relevant* and *revelatory* of the cognitive disposition of the participants involved in the task. Thoughts and actions are forged in language. Using a Vygotskyan framework, therefore, allows us to move second language learning into the realm of human ontogenetic development.

The following study shows how a Vygotskyan analysis of second language verbal interaction can extend beyond the encoding-decoding framework of second language research by providing specific examples from student production during a two-way information-gap task that reveal the interrelatedness of speaking and thinking. These data serve as a backdrop for a discussion of the importance of understanding what learners are accomplishing through speaking during classroom tasks and how the results of this study can respond to perplexing concerns about group interaction in the foreign language classroom.

**The Study**

The present study is a reanalysis of data taken from eight pairs of third-year high school learners of Spanish and utilized in an earlier study (Brooks 1992) during which the students participated in a two-way infor-
mation-gap type activity. The purpose of selecting this activity type was to use one kind of experimental task common to the study of conversational negotiations (e.g., Doughty and Pica 1986; Gass and Varonis 1985; Pica and Doughty 1985, 1988; Varonis and Gass 1986). The specific jig-saw task diagrams are presented in figures 1a and 1b. During data collection, student pairs sat opposite each other but with a wooden barrier between them. They were directed to work with one another in Spanish to find out and draw in what the other had on his or her part of the diagram that was both similar to and different from the other's diagrams. When finished, the partners (theoretically) will each have drawn a representation of the same diagram. (For further discussion, see Brooks and Niendorf 1993). The conversations were both audio and video recorded. Procedures established by Green and Wallat (1981) for verbatim transcription of the conversations were followed. Each transcript was then explored and analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

The intention in the present study is not to analyze these interactions as has been done previously (i.e., the codification and quantification of discourse patterns that, in the end, remove us from the very material of interest) but rather to investigate how speaking during a two-way information-gap task collaboratively influences and builds a shared social reality between the participants. A Vygotskyan approach is useful in this respect because it redresses some of the limitations of studies such as the ones summarized above by Nunan (1992) by providing a well-developed framework for understanding the constitutive role of speaking for the creation of shared social worlds and intersubjective encounters (Rommetveit 1979).

For this study we look at three specific instrumental functions of speaking identified by Ahmed (1988) during dyadic problem-solving interactions: (1) speaking as

![Figure 1A](image-url)
object regulation, (2) speaking as shared orientation, and (3) speaking as goal formation. More specifically, speaking as object regulation refers to how speaking enables learners to think about, make sense of, and control the task itself (object) as it is presented to them. Speaking as shared orientation refers to the ways that speaking structures experience by establishing a shared social reality and joint perspective on the task or, as Rommetveit (1979: 94) calls it, “states of intersubjectivity.” Finally, speaking as goal formation pertains to the way that learner discourse is pressed into service to construct individual or cooperative goals or plans during interaction (Jones and Gerhard 1967). We believe that these mediating functions during speaking are highly germane to the study of group interaction during communicative tasks in foreign language classrooms because they do not neglect the learners as co-constructors and sense-makers of their own interactions with respect to the task and to each other. Moreover, speaking and thinking are closely linked and are seen as co-constituting the total activity of the learners.

I. Speaking as Object Regulation

In any verbal interaction, speakers must relate not only to what is being said but the activity of saying it as well. In other words, in addition to issuing verbal propositions (sending messages) to an interlocutor, speakers also engage in “metatalk.” Metatalk is talk by the participants about the task at hand and the discourse that constitutes the task. Metatalk, however, is frequently discouraged in second-language classrooms as it can be considered non-relevant and undesirable since most metatalk, especially among novices, tends to occur in the L1. The following examples show how metatalk is an important component of discursive activity in both initiating and sustaining further discourse. In other words, metatalk serves to promote verbal interaction and is one type of verbal metacognition.

Example A:
S2 029 yo tengo arriba (he’s referring to the roof of the house; he has full drawing of house on his diagram)
S1 030 y debajo
S2 031 y abajo
In this example, S1 not only realizes that he has used a word in French (\textit{faire}, line 093) he eventually feels that progress in the task is not going well at the moment and expresses this realization overtly in line 101. Nevertheless, S2 is able to gain control for S1 and to continue with the task following line 102. These two learners are clearly working with one another to accomplish the problem-solving task as presented, which is not an easy process for them, especially given that this was the first (and only!) opportunity they had ever had in their three years of Spanish to participate in this kind of problem-solving task. Their frustration is therefore normal but does not prevent them from completing the task quite well.

The importance of these examples of student speech activity from two different dyads is to demonstrate that not all task talk is about the task or encoding and decoding messages, nor should it be, but often is about the talk itself. This observation is critical in that it provides the conditions for learners to arrive at a common language for establishing intersubjectivity (Rommetveit 1979). Indeed, throughout the eight different recorded conversations there are many separate instances of metatalk that occurred and appeared to serve as a means of extending discourse in new directions and sustaining verbal interaction (e.g., “that's not a Spanish word,” “I like that word/we have to use that one,” “I know what you're talking about,” “Hey, what's the verb for that?,” “I don't know what that means”).

What is also interesting is that this metatalk occurred in English, a situation routinely observed in foreign language settings during small group work, especially from among lower proficiency level learners, though it also has been found to occur among intermediate level learners in a university setting as well (Donato and Brooks 1994). Why this occurs, more importantly, is explained by Vygotskian theory. Metatalk is essentially metacognition “out loud.” Metacognition in his theory is semiotically constructed, primarily through language. That these statements should be explicitly made in the students' native language,
moreover, is not at all surpring. The examples above, which could have been
discarded from some analyses (because produc-
duction was not in L2), in fact serve to en-
able the learners to establish control of the
discourse and the task by explicitly com-
menting on their linguistic tools used in its
construction. What is more important,
these learners are able to continue their
interactions after having commented on
their own and their interlocutor’s language.

We are not suggesting that the use of the
L1 during L2 interactions is to be encour-
gaed necessarily but rather that it is a nor-
mal psycholinguistic process that facilitates
L2 production and allows the learners both
to initiate and sustain verbal interaction
with one another (Donato and Lantolf
1990). In short, verbal thinking mediates
one’s relationship with the new language
and with language itself (in this case, the
learners’ L1) and is quite necessary and
natural. Moreover, it is characteristic of for-

gl language learner discourse, especially
for tasks with which they are not yet famil-

II. Speaking as Shared Orientation

Orientation refers to how individuals
approach a given task and the steps they
take in achieving the goals they have set for
themselves. Closely related to the discourse
of speakers about task-related talk, orienta-
tional talk serves to focus joint attention on
the problem to be solved and relates to how
a task will be carried out. As Talyzina (1981)
points out, the actions taken to orient one-
self to a task are highly idiosyncratic and
can be defined only in reference to the in-
dividuals involved and not on the basis of
externally defined and imposed task re-
quirements. This is an important point to
emphasize, especially for the conduct of
classroom small-group tasks, since often it
is assumed that these activities will be ap-
proached in the same way by all students.
Discourse serves to orient oneself and oth-
ers and is therefore verbal thinking about
the construction of the activity. It is not
merely the sending of the propositional con-
tents of the activity to a partner. The follow-
ing example demonstrates how discourse is
used to construct joint orientation to the
two-way information-gap task.

Example C
S1  166 I like that word we have to use
    167 that one
    168 ¿qué tienes?
S2  169 no
S1  170 ¿no tienes?
S2  171 (no response)
S1  172 ¿nada?
S2  173 hold it hold it
S1  174 uno dos tres
S2  175 sí en el en el
    176 uno dos tres

S1 suddenly changes the direction of the
discussion; she has figured out a way to
establish reference points on diagrams,
which will serve to facilitate completing the
task.

S1  177 —oye oye oye! (said excitedly)
S2  178 no no
S1  179 no no no look!
    180 —veo veo veo! (said excitedly)
    181 un número uh de
    182 uno dos tres cuatro cinco seis
    siete ocho nueve diez
    183 like that
S2  184 what?
S1  185 de izquierda de a derecha, ¿si?
    186 ¿yo comprende?
S2  187 ¿izquierda la derecha? (=what do
    you mean by that?)
S1  188 okay
S2  189 hold on
S2  202 no understando
S1  203 ¿no comprende?
    204 —si!
S2  205 no comprende
    206 (incomprehensible)
S1  207 el abajo y um y izquierda (Here,
    el abajo means arriba)
S2  208 (no response)
S1  209 ¿si?
S2  210 huh?
Like metatalk, discourse that orients participants to how the problem-solving task can be accomplished is a metacognitive strategy. In the beginning of the example above, we see how S1 suddenly understands the task for herself in a moment of excitement, which is reflected in the volume and tone of her voice. She then is able to guide S2 to a joint focus on the procedures for task completion. In Rommetveit’s (1979) terms, S1 and S2 achieve intersubjectivity since they both come to define task procedures in the same way. What is important about this interaction is that much of the initial interactive work between S1 and S2 is focused on knowing how to do the task rather than on displaying what they know about the contents of the pictures they are describing. In other words, they initially speak in order to act rather than act in order to speak (Donato 1988). More specifically, they talk in order to set up problem-solving (i.e., establishing procedures for doing task) rather than problem-solving as an opportunity to practice speaking. Although compliance with the task was a requirement of the experimental session, engagement in the task does not come about until after several attempts to establish the students’ own procedures for achieving their task-related goals. This will later prove critical to understanding the nature of classroom tasks and the role of speaking in carrying them out.

Looking more closely at Example C, early in the interaction S1 orients herself to a procedure for completion of the task. This procedure involves numbering the boxes on her diagram from left to right and from top to bottom, from one to twenty-four. She exclaims enthusiastically in lines 177 -Oye, oye, oye! and 180 -veo, veo, veo! These two lines, said in Spanish and replete with affective force, indicate that she has arrived at an understanding for herself of how to solve the task. Her actions now take on a new significance. She orients her partner to a similar understanding, which takes a number of additional turns. S2, however, is not a passive partner but rather is an active co-constructor of the orientation. He regulates the interaction to a large extent by signaling his non-comprehension, as seen in lines 184, 187, 202, and 205. That he eventually comes to the same orientation as S1 is revealed finally at the conclusion of Example C when he explicitly states in line 258 I understand what you are talking about. Later, S1’s strategic orientation to the task is appropriated by S2 when he too begins referencing specific boxes in the diagram with a number that they both had agreed upon, as seen in line 309: uh número diez y siete. Thus, S2 demonstrates that he has indeed established intersubjectivity with S1 by using her numbering strategy six more times during the remainder of the task.
Another example of orientational talk appears below.

Example D

S2 051 wait I got one okay
  052 dos arriba de cuatro cien
S1 053 dos arriba
  054 oui si [said in a whisper: corrects self]
S2 055 es un [semaisirkula]
S1 056 (incomprehensible)
  057 um
  058 derecho de ese [semaisirkla] cerca [rising intonation="got that?"]
S2 059 uh huh
S1 060 es un [line] um c’est un um
  061 umbrella
  062 um c’est un [line] avec con uh el [jay] [referring to shape of handle of umbrella]
S2 063 hold it hold it
  064 semicircula [indicates that he needs to return to a previously established reference point, the semicircle]
S1 065 avec
S2 066 um ¿ uno a derecha?
S1 067 no um the semicircle that you just gave me, alright?
S2 068 uh huh
S1 069 it’s an umbrella
S2 070 no
  071 okay
  072 no derecho no arriba

In this example, S1 and S2 are trying to locate the figure of the umbrella in the diagram. Because S1 does not know the word in Spanish for umbrella, he uses the English word (line 061). S2, however, is not sure of its exact placement in the diagram and begins to reorient S1 (line 067 and again in lines 071 and 072). This reorientation to the location of the umbrella actually continues for many more turns. What in fact has happened is that S2 realizes that S1 is confused and thus takes personal control of the task for the time being by reorienting him to the diagram until they eventually resolve the dilemma.

III. Speaking as Goal Formation

Speaking as goal formation, although closely related to the principles of speaking as object regulation and orientation to task, represents another distinctive aspect of semiotic mediation. When individuals are faced with a task they sometimes need to speak in order to externalize the goal or end-result of their activity. Even though teachers (and researchers) often provide task goals, as is illustrated in Example E below, there are moments where confusion still exists for the learners that needs to be resolved.

Example E (R=Researcher):

R 001 LIKE WE DID LAST WEEK, YOU’VE GOT THE PIECES AND PARTS OF ONE DRAWING, OKAY? SO, YOU HAVE ONE HALF AND YOU HAVE THE OTHER HALF WHAT YOU NEED TO DO IN SPANISH, JUST KEEP IT IN SPANISH AS MUCH AS YOU CAN, PREFERABLY IN SPANISH, OKAY, TRY TO FIND OUT WHAT THE OTHER ONE HAS SO THAT YOU CAN COMPLETE OR FILL IN WHAT YOU’RE MISSING, OKAY? YOU GET THAT INFORMATION FROM THE OTHER ONE, OKAY? SO JUST KEEP IT IN SPANISH.

S1 002 can we start now?
R 003 YES
  (researcher leaves the room and closes the door)
S1 004 okay uh
  005 (incomprehensible whisper)
  006 you go ahead Jamar
S2 007 Din-wait yo tengo dinero en abajo izquierda
  008 wait wait
  009 am I supposed to tell you and you write stuff on your paper?
S1 010 yeah, that’s what he said to do we make a picture
S2 012 okay
  013 um tengo dinero en bajo izquierda
S1 014 es uno uh número
S2 015 cuatro diez dot uno cinco
S1 016 repita
S2 017 cuatro diez uno cinco
S1 018 si
S2 019 did you write down what I said?
S1 020 sí

We can see in this interaction that the researcher explained the procedures for task completion to these students. In fact, the students were oriented to the task goals the day before the taping was conducted to acquaint them with the recording room and the two-way information-gap activity. The students even had the opportunity to perform briefly a similar kind of task in English to become familiarized with what they were expected to accomplish during the taping sessions. All of the other seven student dyads displayed familiarization with the goals of the task except for this particular group of students. Because the researcher provided the task goals to the students, little if any goal formation talk is evident in the total sample.

Nevertheless, in the case of this one dyad, S2 needed to reformulate the task goals (line 009) in order to establish for himself the "mental image of the object" (Lomov 1982, cited in Ahmed 1988: 223). Moreover, S2 asked S1 if he indeed wrote down the number that he had provided (line 019), thus reassuring himself that they both were following the researcher’s instructions. It must be remembered that all events and activities are organized according to goals and that meaning and purpose hold a central place in the definition of activities or events (Rogoff 1990). More importantly, it is only when the purposes of the participants in events or activities are understood that their actions make sense. Their actions occur in the service of accomplishing something that is understandable. In order for it to be understandable, it is sometimes necessary to externalize through speech, or semiotically mediate, those goals so that they become clear and are comprehensible, which often times results in initial goals becoming altered (Ahmed 1988). However, despite the externally imposed goal of “describe the picture by communicating with each other,” the learners in Example E still needed to state for themselves the end result of this experience in order to make sense of their actions.

What occurs here is that S2 felt compelled to interrupt his own talk (line 009) and to reacquaint for himself what the purpose of the activity was (line 110). In so doing, he took control of the activity to reorient himself to the task goal. Once again, S1 and S2 achieve intersubjectivity or a sharing of purpose and focus for the task. Once this intersubjectivity has been established (line 012) through the externalization of their own goals, S2 and S1 are able once again to construct the activity in Spanish (line 013).

Conclusion

From the analysis of this study we offer the following points concerning the contribution of Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory to research in foreign language learner discourse. First, the preceding examples indicate that when learners interact verbally during a task, they do more than simply encode and decode messages about the topic at hand. The discourse of the interactions highlighted from this study shows that learners indeed attempt to control the problem-solving task actively by constructing it verbally and orienting themselves to the language and task demands as they understand them. The importance of this insight is that what might appear on the surface as non-relevant task talk is in fact mediating the participants’ control over the language and procedures of the task, each other, and ultimately the self. This control is what Vygotsky (1986) refers to as regulation and is one of the major features of human cognitive development within his theory. The discourse seen in the above examples demonstrates therefore the impossibility of discussing L2 performance apart from cognition (e.g., planning, monitoring, etc.) as is often done in second language acquisition research (e.g., Pica et al 1991). Further, this cognition is semiotically constructed and can be observed directly during verbal interactions.

Second, these data have implications for thinking about and constructing tasks given
to foreign language learners in classes or during experiments. In the case of classroom small-group activities, most instructors would probably agree that students could fall along a continuum from non-compliance to engagement with the task, as shown in figure 2.

![Figure 2](non-compliance<---compliance<---engagement)

More specifically, simply coercing students to comply with a task does not necessarily guarantee that they will become engaged with it or, to put it in other terms, construct it and connect to it and to each other as meaningful activity. For meaningful interaction to occur requires that learners be given the opportunity to structure tasks and to establish goals as they feel necessary in order to move from mere compliance to engagement, as is seen in the examples above (see also Donato 1994). We observed that when allowed to structure the procedures of the activity and discuss the language of the task and its goals, even in English, these learners were able to orient themselves jointly, thus allowing them to regulate themselves during the problem-solving activity. Therefore, those who have recently introduced the notion of task-based foreign language learning need to consider that tasks can not be externally defined or classified on the basis of specific external task features (e.g., Long and Crookes 1992; Nunan 1989; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993) despite our best efforts to do so. Rather, tasks are in fact internally constructed through the moment-to-moment verbal interactions of the learners during actual task performance. As Coughlan and Duff argue, "a linguistic event never duplicates a past one, and can never be truly replicated in the future. For these reasons, we must be careful when we assume that 'task' is indeed a constant in our measurements: while the task or blueprint may be the same, the activity it generates will be unique." Ceding greater control of the task to the learners themselves and allowing them multiple opportunities to engage in analogous problem-solving tasks can result in moving beyond mere compliance to greater levels of engagement and self-directed learning (Brooks and Niendorf 1993; Donato 1988; Donato and Brooks 1994; Donato and Lantolf 1990).

Meaningful task-based instruction is derived in large part, therefore, from the extent to which learners are permitted to infuse activities with their own goals and procedures. As Thomson (1992) points out, tasks should be more concerned with the ways that learners interact with the language than the outcome of the language use. Tasks therefore draw their authenticity and meaningfulness from learners who believe that what they are doing is real, is under their own control, and is worth pursuing.

Third, if learners are allowed to participate in successive, analogous problem-solving tasks that they can jointly construct, learners can continue to become learning environments for one another (Brooks and Niendorf 1993). The learners can, thus, carry over task-relevant information from one context to another as a scaffold to support the performance of new task components (Rogoff 1990; Rogoff and Gardner 1984). In making new information compatible with the learners' current knowledge and skills, learners can guide and orient one another to successively more complex problems. Thus, students can continuously draw upon previous knowledge about prior tasks, bringing about continued cognitive growth and adroitness at solving new communication dilemmas.

Finally, Vygotskyan approaches to foreign language learner discourse shed light upon important small-group processes that up until now have gone unnoticed or worse, ignored. Language learning activity must
be viewed as cognitive activity and not merely the rehearsal and eventual acquisition of linguistic forms, as is prevalent in such classroom activities as "conversation cards" (Kinginger, 1989), communication simulations (Brooks 1989, 1990), and role-play activities (Ahmed 1988 and Donato 1988). These activities, and by extension all classroom activities, can only become effective if learners are allowed to take control over them for themselves and have opportunities to grow into them. For Vygotsky, communication focuses less on the transfer of information and more on how, through speaking, individuals maintain their individuality and create a shared social world during communicative activity. As the present analysis has shown, it is not only the contents of the lesson or the communicative task that is paramount, but engagement with and control of communicative interactions that will ultimately benefit the foreign language learner, both in the classroom and in the real world.4

NOTES

1The purpose of the Brooks 1992 study was to investigate the interaction patterns of third-year high school foreign language learners of Spanish as they participated in an information-gap task to see if they exhibited similar interaction patterns as reported by studies with adult ESL learners conducted by Pica and Doughty (1985), Schwartz (1980), and Varonis and Gass (1986) among others. The present study, then, is a re-analysis of Brooks' data from a Vygotskian perspective.

2As supervisors of student teachers, we have heard teachers on many occasions express frustration when hearing their students speaking in English during speaking tasks. In many cases, the teachers went to the different student groups to remind them to speak Spanish or French. One teacher also revealed that she rarely if ever used these kinds of group problem-solving tasks because the students, she felt, spoke too much in English. It is also interesting to note that the researcher even told the learners in the present study to speak only in Spanish as best as they could, though English was used on a number of occasions during data collection.

3Within Activity Theory (Wertsch 1981) the "object" of each activity, or goal, can take two forms. First, it may be the present, concrete object to which particular actions are aimed. Second, the object may be represented as an idealized image. In both cases, the object represents the desired outcome (goal) of a particular set of actions and, at the same time, determines the type of actions selected to achieve this goal.

4An early version of this article was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, Cancún, Mexico, August, 1992. The authors thank David Paulson, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Douglas Hartman, University of Pittsburgh, and Robert Robison, Columbus (Ohio) City Schools, for their comments and suggestions.

WORKS CITED


________. 1989. "Patterns of Instruction and Student Participation in Small-Group, Learner-to-Learner Speaking Opportunities in a Spanish Conversation Course at the College Level: A Social Interaction Perspective." Diss. The Ohio State U.


Donato, Richard. 1984. "Collective Scaffolding in Sec-


