

When Are They Going to Say “It” Right? Understanding Learner Talk During Pair-Work Activity

Frank B. Brooks
The Florida State University
Richard Donato
The University of Pittsburgh
J. Victor McGlone
Miami Country Day School

ABSTRACT *Adopting sociocultural theory as their conceptual framework, the authors set out to study selected features of student discourse of three pairs of third-semester (i.e., intermediate-level) learners of Spanish at the university level. Specifically, they wanted to investigate how these selected features, identified in an earlier research project (Brooks and Donato 1994), developed during opportunities to engage in five different but similar jigsaw tasks. Through discourse analysis, they traced these features and found that the students indeed developed and became better at performing the tasks. Their work suggests that if the purpose and function of learner language during problem-solving tasks are not clearly understood, learners may end up being denied strategic opportunities for language activity that can lead to their saying “it” right.*

Introduction

Foreign language learners sometimes say the strangest, most frustrating, and at times even unanticipated things when they are in small groups participating in a speaking activity. For example, we teachers have become annoyed and disconcerted when our students resort to speaking English during pair-work activity in which they have been specifically instructed to speak in the target language to accomplish a given task. They sometimes talk about the instructions for completing the task, discuss problems with vocabulary, or rehearse target language forms, asking each other how to say sentences or for the translations of certain

words. Sometimes they even announce to their group how difficult or vexing the task might be. When these behaviors occur, we generally assume that the students are off-task, and we quickly remind them to speak in the foreign language. Some teachers may even abandon the task altogether out of disappointment because the students seem uncooperative, appearing instead to sabotage the activity by “speaking in English.” We may even conclude that the students are simply unable to work in small groups or pairs.

As an example, one group of university-level learners we observed spoke in the following way during a two-way, information-gap activity,¹ even after they had been told specifically to perform the task in Spanish and even after they had already begun the activity:²

1 *Jane:* Uh, yo pienso que tú tienes um blancos donde yo tengo películas.
(*Uh, I think you have, um, white spaces where I have pictures.*)

Karen: Uh huh.

Jane: ¿entiendes?

Frank B. Brooks (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is Associate Professor of Multilingual/Multicultural Education at The Florida State University, Tallahassee.

Richard Donato (Ph.D., The University of Delaware) is Associate Professor of Foreign Language Education at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

J. Victor McGlone (Ph.D., The University of Florida) is Teacher of Spanish and English as a Second Language at Miami Country Day School, Miami, FL.

(Do you understand?)

Karen: Uh, sí

(Uh, yes)

5 Jane: y but that's not happening.

Oh, well.

Karen: Ha, ha! Oh, well.

Jane: So you have an "n" and I have a "z."

Karen: Sí.

(Yes.)

10 I think, um, you're supposed to draw in what I have, and I'm supposed to draw um, um. I don't know how to say this in Spanish.

Jane: Yeah, I know that what I'm saying some of mine are blank, and some I have pictures. I'm supposed to communicate the 15 pictures, and you would have blanks where the pictures are, and vice versa.

The two students in this interaction were involved in a jigsaw task of the type described by Brooks and Niendorf (1992; see also Brooks 1992; and Brooks and Donato 1994),³ and this was the first time they had ever participated in a problem-solving task of this kind. The researcher provided the students with verbal instructions on how to perform the task just before beginning the activity but, as we can see above, even after spending some time involved in the task, they were compelled once again to create for themselves their own understanding of what they were supposed to be doing during the activity. Then, once they seemed to understand what was supposed to be happening, they returned to speaking in Spanish, and eventually they managed to complete the task quite successfully. Switching to English to talk about what they were supposed to be doing might have caused some instructors to intervene in some way, perhaps by admonishing the students for their use of English or by reminding them to stay in the target language, which could possibly have led to the abandonment of the activity altogether.

The purpose of our article, therefore, is to discuss and shed light upon some of the functional or pragmatic aspects of learner lan-

guage during pair-work activities. We will look at a specific type of pair-work activity, the jigsaw task. Our research has shown that if the purpose and function of learner language during these tasks are not clearly understood, learners may end up being denied the opportunity to participate in certain activity types that have been shown to be beneficial in varying ways (e.g., Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993; Brooks and Donato 1994; Donato and Brooks 1994). These aspects of learner language are derived from a series of research projects conducted by the first two authors of this article (Brooks and Donato 1994; Donato and Brooks 1994) and later used in a high school classroom by the third author. Before discussing these aspects of learner language, however, we would like to explain our conceptual framework for discussing them.

Talking, Thinking, and Acting through Tasks: A Conceptual Framework

Over the past decade, interest in the use of information-gap tasks has increased as a way of promoting student interaction and as a research tool for understanding the interactional dynamics of how input is made comprehensible to the learner. Assumptions underlying research using information-gap activities have been based primarily on how learners exchange message meaning and repair communicative breakdowns through strategies that promote the negotiation of meaning (Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993). Pedagogical discussions, such as those found in Walz (1996), examine issues of teacher explanation of information-gap tasks to students, time allotment for task completion, and linguistic requirements for enabling learners to remain as much as possible in the target language while working together.

Although both discussions have raised our awareness about the importance of tasks that promote target language use in extended discourse in classrooms, we argue that critical psycholinguistic and semiotic processes have been neglected in the discussion (see also Platt and Brooks 1994). This failure to capture the full array of what learners are attempting

to achieve discursively, especially during a problem-solving, information-gap task, is due to what we feel is an impoverished understanding of communication as simple message transmission and reception (Appel and Lantolf 1994; Brooks and Donato 1994; Donato 1994; Frawley and Lantolf 1985) and a naive pedagogical judgment that task success is equivalent to "getting 'it' right" through the production of oral texts that are fluent and relatively flawless. This view is most recently expressed by Walz (1996) when, in an article in which he discusses the classroom dynamics (not communicative dynamics!) of information-gap tasks, he states that "...frequent switching to English and invented Spanish-sounding words...are unacceptable among classroom teachers" (482).

Our framework for making sense of language-learner language comes from Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and others (e.g., Leont'ev 1981; Luria 1979; Volosinov 1973; Wertsch 1985, 1991) and from work in second and foreign language learning from the same perspective (e.g., Appel and Lantolf 1994; Donato and Lantolf 1991; Donato 1994; Platt and Brooks 1994). This framework is referred to as socio-cultural theory. (For further discussion, see Hall 1996; Lantolf 1994; and Lantolf and Appel 1994.) Within this framework, the purpose of speaking is viewed not only for sending messages between people but also as a "thinking tool" as well. Much as a shovel is a technical tool humans employ to control, regulate, and reconstruct the natural environment, speaking is a cognitive tool that humans press into service to control themselves, others, and objects (e.g. language and tasks) in the everyday tasks that present us with a complication (Vygotsky 1986). Through language use, we communicate with others, mediate our own consciousness, and "...alter our mental activity" (Appel and Lantolf 1994, 437). In other words, we speak in order to act, to solve problems, to know what we are doing; we act not only for the opportunity to hear ourselves speak (Donato 1988) but also to change our ways of thinking (Wertsch 1991). From this viewpoint, in much the same way that speak-

ing assists us in the real world to perform complicated tasks, speaking in the foreign language class supports the language learner in achieving control of the new language and the classroom pair-work task itself. The act of achieving control of tasks and activities through speaking is referred to in Vygotskian theory as *verbal mediation*. Verbal mediation assists individuals in organizing, planning, and coordinating their actions as well as the actions of others (Vygotsky 1986; Wertsch 1985, 1991). One of the outcomes of verbal mediation is the development of mental functioning, i.e., thinking. For example, reflect for a moment on what you do when trying to remember a phone number, calculate and compare prices in the grocery store, plan for an important meeting where you will be required to make a presentation or request, or encounter a difficult passage in a book you are reading. In these cases, you may find yourself speaking out loud to yourself, subvocalizing numbers, and rehearsing what you are going to say. In other words, speaking has a dual function in human beings. It simultaneously constitutes the content of an interaction (an *interpersonal* communicative function) as well as constructs the very means by which an individual plans for and sustains involvement in a task (an *intrapersonal* communicative function). Rather than view speaking, acting, and thinking as three separate activities, it is best to conceive of them as constituting each other. That is, in much the same way as ingredients for a recipe are not the final product when they stand alone on the kitchen counter, speaking, doing work together, and thinking to construct activities enable the individual to move through tasks and problem-solving situations. By speaking about a problem or the procedures for completing a task, individuals gain control of their immediate environment as well as themselves, using the tool of language as a way to "talk through, think through, and act through" the problem situation.

As we have seen in our research, self-regulation in a second language can develop through frequent opportunities to participate

in collaborative problem-solving activity across time where students are permitted to use language as a cognitive tool. We should also point out, however, that in this study we did not set out to analyze the development of grammatical or syntactic structures, linguistic complexity, utterance length, and the like. Rather, our interest here is in the functional roles that speaking activity plays for enabling learners to maintain participation in pair-work activity. Thus, our concern is less with describing what learner discourse *is* than with what it *enables* its users to do and accomplish (Bain and Yu 1992).

The features of learner language that we wish to highlight from our data are (1) language learners talking about their own talk (metatalk), (2) talking about how to do the task (metacognition), and (3) students' use of English. We also explore (4) students whispering to themselves during the study in both languages, a phenomenon rarely, if ever, discussed in the professional or research literature in second language. In our research, we traced these features of learner language across five opportunities to perform similar or analogous speaking tasks. Before we discuss some of the findings, we would like to briefly describe the study we conducted.

What We Did⁴

In a previous study, Brooks and Donato (1994) identified the four aspects of language use listed above as they became manifested in a group of third-year high school Spanish learners. In the present study we wanted to know what would happen to these aspects of language use when students had multiple ($n=5$) opportunities to participate in similar kinds of problem-solving tasks over time (see Appendix). The students who volunteered to participate were all third-semester learners of Spanish at a major university in the southeastern U.S. They all had studied Spanish for two years in high school before entering the university, and no student participant reported close or continuous contact with Spanish-speaking individuals in their homes or personal relationships. In other words, these

students were typical of beginning language learners. Before their participation in the study, we informed them of the nature of the research project, that is, that they were going to participate in five similar speaking activities with the same partner. The students did not select their own partners; rather, a researcher randomly assigned the groups.

Collecting the Data. Procedures for data collection on the five tasks consisted of participants facing each other but separated by a wooden barrier.⁵ A stereo cassette recorder was placed nearby to ensure clear recording. The time between each taping session ranged from 24 to 72 hours, a relatively short period of time. For each session, the students were given one half of a jigsaw diagram. At the first session, one researcher explained in English that the subjects were to speak in Spanish to complete the jigsaw task. Following this first session, students arrived and started their tasks with no further questions or directions. For transcription of the audiotapes, we generally followed procedures described in Green and Wallat (1981) for systematic transcription. Five conversations were recorded for each of the three groups. For the purposes of this study of verbal mediation across time in a foreign language, however, we conducted a discourse analysis of only the first, third, and fifth sessions.

The two researchers who independently coded the data for talk about talk, talk about task, use of English, and whispering, reached consensus approximately 90 percent of the time. We resolved all disagreements together through data review and discussion. The frequency of each of the four features will be reported in raw scores for each interaction. Thus, through a simple count of these features we were able to observe their increase, decrease, or maintenance across the five tasks. We also coded utterances by language (Spanish or English). In this way, we could see in what language verbal mediation is performed and whether it develops in the direction of the target language. Finally, through the use of similar tasks, we were able to document how

learners grow into a task, self-regulate, and maintain themselves in the target language. In other words, since tasks are not generalizable but highly situated forms of communication (Coughlin and Duff 1994), each with its own demands and constraints, analogous or similar tasks provide a context for observing the development of interactional ability in one discourse domain routinely used in research and classroom language instruction, namely the information-gap task.

**“¡No recuerdo la palabra!
Talk About Talk**

When engaged in the five different-but-similar pair-work tasks we constructed, students were often heard commenting on their own speaking. This kind of talk is referred to as *metatalk*. Examples of this talk from our data include statements such as “¿Cómo se dice ‘through’?” (“How do you say ‘through’?”), “I have a good word for that,” “That’s a good word,” “Let me think of another way to say this,” “I don’t know how to say this in Spanish,” “I like that word,” and “We have to use that one,” among other examples. These statements served to assist the students’ own participation in the task. That is, by means of these statements, students were able to reflect upon their own activity and the language resources they had to perform it and thus gain control over their own communication. These kinds of statements are also commonly heard by people engaged in problem-solving activity. When we listen to them closely, however, we note that they contain little or no informational content about the task itself. That is, students were not talking about the information

in the pictures or describing the positions of objects. Although no informational content is expressed, the utterances do serve an important function in that they allow the speakers to talk, think, and act through their own speaking activity.

With regard to these statements, when looking at what particular groups of learners did across the five tasks, we noted that these statements decreased in frequency. Also noted was the tendency of the statements to shift from being said in English to being said in Spanish. As Table One shows, students Karen and Jane both employed talk about talk during the jigsaw tasks. Moreover, across the five tasks, both students increased their use of metatalk in Spanish. Jane, however, demonstrates a systematic decline in the use of metatalk. In Task One, for example, Jane assisted herself in doing the task six times; in Task Three the number dropped to three times; and finally we noted a complete absence of metatalk in the fifth and last task. This table also shows that Jane’s metatalk shifted completely from English to Spanish by Task Three, indicating the ability to control the task in the target language, or as some would say, “think in the language.”

With regard to Karen’s metatalk, although still commenting overtly on her own abilities in Spanish, Table One reveals development in her increased use of Spanish in Task Five. We feel that this particular group illustrates Moll’s (1992) assertion that collaboration provides a context for the development of conscious awareness and voluntary control of important aspects of one’s own speech and language and, in our case, the foreign language. What

TABLE 1
Talk About Talk
Group Two

| | Karen | | Jane | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | English | Spanish | English | Spanish |
| Task 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Task 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Task 5 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 |

we argue is important here in that this awareness and control of language are mediated with language itself, and at times accomplished in the student's first language. In this way, metatalk should not be understood as outside the requirements of the specific speaking task or as off-task behavior as some teachers might characterize it. Rather, this activity is strategic and very critical to the students' ability to sustain their own involvement and to verbally control themselves across the five collaborative problem-solving tasks.

What we would like to suggest is that when learners are involved in problem-solving speaking tasks, we should not view their metatalk as superfluous or as off-task behavior, even if it is in English. Rather, speaking about their own linguistic resources is a means for them to maintain involvement in the task, increase understanding of those resources (cf. Donato 1994; Swain 1995), and thus gain greater conscious awareness of what they know and do not know, or what Swain refers to as "noticing the gap" (1995) in their language abilities.

"Wait. This is making little sense."

Talk About Task

We observe these learners not only talking about the language they used to perform the task but also feeling compelled to speak about what they were supposed to do, or the procedures for completing the task. In so doing, these language learners externalized statements about procedures or emotional reactions to participating in the tasks. Examples of their talk about task-related procedures are statements such as "I don't know if I'm right," "Uh oh, this is really strange," "Es un poco dif-

cil" ("It's a little hard"), "*¿Tú quieres mi hablar mi hablo en español y tú oye oír*" ("You want me to speak and you listen?"), and "You can say número tres, and that way we know what we're talking about."

While there were statements about procedural aspects of doing the speaking tasks, they were relatively few, which is really not too surprising inasmuch as these students had multiple opportunities to participate in similar tasks across time. Some exemplary data are provided in Table Two. These numbers illustrate how talk about the task seemed to peak in task one and drop out of the discourse once collaborative orientation to the activity and task familiarity were established. Table Two also shows that most task-related talk (seven statements in this case) occurred during the first activity when they were least knowledgeable about what to do and how to do it. Moreover, we noted in Task One that out of 27 turns, the first seven turns were explicit references to the task itself. In addition, the nature of the comments centered on the subjects' affective reaction to the task (e.g., "Yes, it's frustrating," "Estoy...strange," and "Paper making little sense.") What is more, across the five tasks, we also noted that Karen and Jane's task-related talk diminished considerably. Task Three and Task Five each contained only one task-related comment. Task-related talk in Task Three ("*¿Es más difícil, cómo no*" ["It's more difficult, right?"]) and Task Five ("*Es un poco difícil*" ["It's a little hard"]) also provides a glimpse into these learners' feelings about the collaborative problem-solving task and points to their increased comfort with carrying out the jigsaw activity.

TABLE 2

Talk About Task

| | Karen | | Jane | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | English | Spanish | English | Spanish |
| Task 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Task 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Task 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

Similar to talk about talk, talk about task did not refer to the contents of the task but rather to the individual's emotional reaction to the activity of speaking during this task. Also, the nature and reduction of these comments provide evidence that as task familiarity increases, the learners appear to become more confident as well about doing the task. It is also important to note that judging these learners' performance exclusively on Task One would most likely result in an erroneous assessment of the learners' ability to collaborate in the target language. It is only by viewing learner performance across multiple opportunities to engage in similar tasks and by attending to task-related talk that we even begin to capture the development of the learners' communicative confidence and competence. A developmental perspective on language learning is, therefore, critical to understanding the potential benefits of collaboration on task performance.

"This is weird."

The Use of English

Perhaps the single most often-heard complaint about collaborative activity in the foreign language classroom is that learners do not maintain target language discourse. And this is probably the most irritating part, at least to teachers who really want to hear their students speaking the new language. After all, why are we involved in this work? We would argue, however, that there is a good psycholinguistic reason for the students to use English at particular times. Speaking, thinking, and acting through a task is assisted and mediated by language. The language of mediation available to these students is more often

than not English. At this point in the students' language development, metacognitive strategies in the L2 are probably still nonexistent for all practical purposes. There has been neither the time nor sufficient opportunities for it to develop (Donato 1994; Donato and Lantolf 1991). Consider for a moment the linguistic demands of completing a mathematical problem or thinking to yourself about how you will go about planning your lesson in a language you are just learning. Even individuals at high levels of proficiency report that for some cognitive operations, for example, balancing the checkbook, they resort to their first language to support and mediate the task. As the previous data indicate, the students of our study used English at times for talking about task and for talking about the talk. The use of the first language need not be viewed, therefore, as necessarily off-task behavior or unsuccessful learner interactions. Data for the use of English during collaboration suggest that the native language played an important supportive role during the interaction these students constructed. Of the four discourse features we investigated, the use of English represents the most dynamic developmental profile. Table Three summarizes the use of English at either the word, phrase, or sentence-level for three of our groups.

With the exception of Robert and Karen, who increased their use of English between Task Three and Task Five by one and seven utterances respectively, English noticeably fell out of the interaction across time. Totaling both subjects' use of English by groups, we see that Group One decreased from 39 to 9 English utterances from Task One to Task Five or a 76.9 percent reduction across tasks.

TABLE 3
Use of English

| | Group One | | Group Two | | Group Three | |
|--------|-----------|-------|-----------|-------|-------------|--------|
| | Robert | Diane | Jane | Karen | Kristin | Rachel |
| Task 1 | 18 | 21 | 50 | 78 | 54 | 46 |
| Task 3 | 2 | 16 | 3 | 6 | 20 | 19 |
| Task 5 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 13 | 4 | 5 |

Group Two decreased from 128 to 16 English utterances across the five tasks, representing a reduction of some 87.5 percent. Group Three shows a 91 percent reduction in English utterances, counting 100 utterances in Task One and 9 utterances in Task Five. Although the first language did not entirely disappear from the picture, its frequency of use diminished substantially. Furthermore, we feel that it would be inaccurate to claim that the use of English was detrimental to the development of the groups' ability to carry out the jigsaw task in Spanish. Quite the contrary, over time English was no longer entirely necessary to mediate participation in the task, with task completion being carried out a large part of the time in Spanish. Thus, rather than view the learners' use of English as "stepping out of the interaction," it actually enabled them to support and sustain their interaction.

***"Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis":
Whispering to the Self***

One final phenomenon we noted in the groups studied was that individuals whispered to themselves during their problem-solving activity. Interestingly, whispering to the self is often not reported in studies of this kind of interaction. One possible reason for this is that, of all the talk during collaborative activity, whispering is probably the most overtly non-communicative. In other words, it is difficult to argue that one is attempting to send a message when one whispers to the self in the presence of another. We would argue that whispering to the self during collaborative problem-solving activity illustrates Vygotsky's (1986) theory of private speech and represents the genesis or the beginning of development of verbal self-regulation (see also Berk 1992). As we pointed out earlier, speaking to the self, at times in almost inaudible whispers, is routinely observed in children and occurs in the everyday life of adults, especially at times when they encounter communicative duress (e.g., when preparing for an important meeting or an emotionally charged encounter or when confronted with a difficult text to read). This form of speaking activity is often

inhibited by adults since mature and highly proficient speakers of a language are expected to suppress such childlike verbal displays. When these utterances do appear, they are merely our hidden and silent verbal mediation coming to the surface, reminding us of the powerful tool that is language. Like children who have passed through a stage of intensive self-talk, therefore, we will show that our learners exhibited and passed through similar verbal behaviors in the form of whispering to the self.

While we are not able to detail a full discussion of Vygotsky's notions of the development and structure of private speech (but see Berk 1992, Donato and Lantolf 1992, and McCafferty 1994), its role in psychological development, its formation in social contexts, and its divergence from Piagetian accounts of egocentric speech, we wish to highlight three important points concerning private speech based on our discussion above. First, thinking is often verbal, and speaking can serve to plan, guide, and direct the physical and mental actions of the self in a task. In other words, speaking serves a self-regulatory function by enabling individuals to verbally assist in their own problem-solving activity. Second, according to Vygotsky, this type of speech has a unique status and needs to be differentiated from sociocommunicative aspects of speaking. Third, the use of private speech to mediate problem-solving activity can also be seen in children and adults as they verbalize their own plans for action. Imagine, for example, those times you heard your own private speech when creating a mental list of things to do, repeating a phone number several times to ensure remembering it, or talking with yourself about a paper you were writing or a class you were preparing to teach, or simply rehearsing an argument with a colleague or friend prior to an important meeting.

We would like to point out that second-language learners also engage in private speech in the form of whispering to themselves in order to plan and control their language and actions. Moreover, this verbal mediation is

often constructed in the native language, can develop in the direction of the target language, and is overtly manifested during collaborative problem-solving activity. Examples of self-talk include subvocalized target language words (“*cruzarón*,” “*segundo grupos de cuadros*”), counting out numbers (“*en el... uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco*”), affective reactions to the task (“*Oh goodness*,” “*Damn this is hard*”) or openings and closing of episodes (“*Let’s see here...*,” “*Okay...*,” “*Now what?*”). Whispers to the self during collaboration are, thus, a form of semiotic mediation that enables second-language learners to gain control of themselves, the new language, and the task. Our data reveal the use of whispering by the subjects as well as a striking reduction in its frequency across the five tasks. Tables Four and Five summarize the number of whispers across tasks found in two groups.

Whispers to the self in Group Two total 20 instances in Task One, 11 in Task Three, and nine in Task Five, or over a 50 percent reduction in the use of whispering between Task One and Task Five. Table Five represents a similar profile, with a decrease in whispering to the self of

close to 100 percent by Task Five. It is also important to note that in Group Two whispering became more inaudible over time in Karen’s speech. The seven English whispers in Task Five consisted of five audible and two inaudible utterances. What we conclude, however, is that learners do “talk themselves through” a language task. In other words, they use language (the L1 and the L2) both to mediate and sustain participation in the task. Second, they appear to invoke private speech less often as task familiarity increases. Finally, learners also mediate their thinking through private speech in both the first and the second language. The implication of these findings is that learners can gain self-regulation in tasks if provided multiple opportunities to collaborate in similar kinds of problem-solving tasks across time. Further, during collaboration, private speech should not be viewed as flawed communication but rather as attempts at self-regulation and cognitive engagement (Brooks and Donato 1994) with the task. Similar to talk about the task and talk about the talk, looking across tasks permits us to perceive how collaboration promotes regulation and to confirm, at least in

TABLE 4
Whispers to the Self
Group Two

| | Karen | | Jane | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | English | Spanish | English | Spanish |
| Task 1 | 17 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| Task 3 | 1 | 7 | 0 | 3 |
| Task 5 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

TABLE 5
Whispers to the Self
Group Three

| | Kristin | | Rachel | |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | English | Spanish | English | Spanish |
| Task 1 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 3 |
| Task 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 1 |
| Task 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

part, what Swain (1985) calls "the independent status of output in second language acquisition." This assertion maintains that output promotes language learning. By looking across tasks, we see clear developmental patterns emerge in the discourse of language learners.

One Teacher's Experience

The following discussion revolves around one high school teacher's experience when he first attempted systematically to incorporate the use of pair-work problem-solving tasks into his Spanish classes. The experiences of this teacher were kept in a journal that he maintained to record his impressions of this phase in his teaching career. We hope that the reader will note that his experience reflects what many teachers may witness when attempting to create more collaborative language learning activity with their students. At first he is skeptical about incorporating these tasks into his classroom. His initial trepidation is the result of his earlier, rather naive conclusion that the students in his classroom would probably sabotage the task altogether, not wanting to be cooperative, simply using the time to talk among themselves about other things. The teacher wrote:

A couple of years ago I was discussing socio-cultural theory in the foreign language classroom with some colleagues. We specifically spoke about pair-work activities [of the sort we discuss in this article]. At first, I was skeptical about using this type of activity in my high school Spanish classes because I was certain that once my students were put into groups of two and given a two-way information-gap activity, the topic of discussion would surely be diverted to weekend plans, fashion, tide forecasts, and the like. I didn't think that this type of activity would at all be productive in an introductory foreign language class at my high school.

It is only after he and his students worked with different but similar tasks over time that they became comfortable with them and their particular demands:

On the first day it took the entire 50 minutes to explain the activity and for the students to complete the task! That to me is simply too much time and I haven't got all day to do these. My procedures were as follows: First, I explained how the task worked (in English). I then asked the students to form groups of two and to face each other. I gave the students their task sheets and told them to begin, reminding them also not to look at each other's papers. I reiterated that they were to speak in Spanish while finding out the information that each one needed. The students were really confused at first. I then decided that I needed to model the activity with one of the students so they could see and hear how to do it. Once they knew exactly what to do they were able to complete the task by the end of the period.

The second day, much to my surprise, it took much less time to introduce the activity. The students began right away and completed the task in about 30 minutes. As I walked around the room I observed the students, and they were exchanging information in Spanish! The conversations on social events did not occur as I had previously anticipated. Instead, the students were actually communicating in Spanish and only concerned with the activity!

By the end of that week, the pair-work activity took only about 15 minutes to complete. The difficulty level of the fifth activity was similar to the first activity. However, the students understood what was expected of them and were able to complete the task in a relatively short period of time. Again, the students were focused and centered on the activity. I was quite surprised!

The above indicates that this particular teacher's experience was such that it indeed required several attempts at working with the new tasks before both he and his students were adjusted to the point that they could perform the information-gap tasks in significantly less time, thus indicating that all were growing into performing these tasks.

Because these were new, experimental ac-

tivities, the teacher later asked his students their opinions about the speaking activities. He found that, in fact, the students, much to his surprise, actually liked these activities and even asked for more to do in class:

After the five days and the five different information-gap activities I asked students what they thought about them. The students said that they enjoyed the activities immensely. They said they preferred these activities over the traditional teacher-centered ones that they were used to doing in class. In fact, the students said they wanted more to do! They also added that these activities were "fun" and not boring like many of the activities in the textbook we were using at the time (e.g., filling in the blank, drills, etc).

Conclusion

There are three significant points we are making here. First, interpersonal communication is often prescribed as the goal of collaborative tasks in the language classroom. Learners are told to get together and "share information" in their small groups (e.g., Nunan 1989; Omaggio 1993; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun 1993). The *intrapersonal* regulatory benefits of collaborative tasks have not been acknowledged or even addressed in our professional literature. In this study, we have observed how learners attempted to gain control of their own speaking during social interaction. Thus, from a sociocultural perspective, collaboration in the target language plays a much broader role than merely allowing individuals to exchange or negotiate message content. Collaborative activity enables reflection upon and control of important aspects of language and task demands (Donato 1994; Swain and Lapkin 1996).

Second, a Vygotskian or sociocultural perspective maintains that individual development, including orality and literacy, is a by-product of socially mediated forms of interaction within cultural institutions, like schools and classrooms. The implication of this perspective is that, in classrooms, learners need not only an input-rich environment

(VanPatten 1996) but a collaboration-rich environment as well (Platt and Brooks 1994). Input, output, and interaction are major factors in language development across time. This environment would be characterized by frequent opportunities to work on analogous or similar tasks in small groups or in whole-class configurations (see Hall 1996 for further discussion). Moreover, it may also mislead teachers in their assessments of a learner's developmental capacity for language learning. For example, our data have shown that when learners are attempting to regulate their participation in collaborative tasks, their efforts may be, at least initially, carried out in the native language. As we have seen, however, the overt statements of self-regulation in English and in the target language tended to disappear or "go underground" over time. Thus, systematic opportunities for collaboration *with* the target language may eventually enable individuals to perform cognitively demanding tasks *in* the target language.

Finally, we hope this study leads to a greater understanding of when learners will finally be able to say "it" right. In our opinion, an expanded vision of learner-to-learner discourse should not be limited only to observations of how linguistically accurate messages are sent and received (or understood). It should include, as we have tried to show, an account of how forms of collaboration and social interaction unite the development of second-language orality with an individual's cognitive functioning. Only when we systematically allow learners to collaborate in the target language *over time* will we be able to succeed in helping them to talk, think, and act through encounters and interactions using their new tool, the foreign language.

NOTES

¹ An information-gap activity is one in which one or each of the group members needs information from the other in order to fill in a chart, complete a picture, or answer questions.

² These transcript lines were taken from the study by Donato and Brooks (1994). See also Brooks and Platt (1994).

³ In Brooks and Niendorf, the authors suggest that allowing students to perform similar kinds of information-gap activities a number of times would be beneficial in various ways. The present study, then, set out to investigate in what ways this might be true.

⁴ We wish to thank Gloria Law and Rafael Iglesias for their assistance during data collection. These two graduate students at FSU also transcribed the audiotapes as part of a course project in a graduate seminar on sociocultural perspectives in SLA. We also wish to thank Dr. Steven Symmes, formerly of the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at FSU, for his assistance in locating student volunteers for this study. Additionally, we wish to thank Dr. Donna Hoffmeister, University of Pittsburgh, for her editorial assistance on an earlier draft of this article.

⁵ We chose to have an opaque barrier between the student volunteers to minimize the use of gestures and maximize the need to speak with one another in order to complete the tasks.


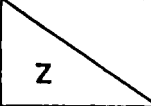

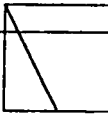
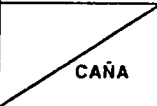
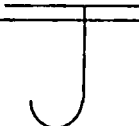

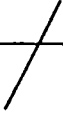

REFERENCES

- Appel, Gabriela, and James P. Lantolf. 1994. "Speaking as Mediation: A Study of L1 and L2 Text Recall Tasks." *Modern Language Journal* 78: 437-452.
- Bain, Bruce, and Agnes Yu. 1992. "Vygotsky and Luria Revisited: Raising Children Bilingually According to Grammont's Principle in the Alsace, Alberta, and Hong Kong." Paper, University of Moscow, December.
- Berk, Laura E. 1992. "Children's Private Speech: An Overview of Theory and the Status of Research," 17-53 in Rafael M. Diaz and Laura E. Berk, eds., *Private Speech*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Brooks, Frank B. 1992. "Can We Talk?" *Foreign Language Annals* 25: 59-71.
- Brooks, Frank B., and Richard Donato. 1994. "Vygotskian Approaches to Understanding Foreign Language Learner Discourse During Communicative Tasks." *Hispania* 77: 262-274.
- Brooks, Frank B., and Kari A. Niendorf. 1993. "Promoting Communicative Competence Through Task-Based Speech Activity," 43-67 in Robert M. Terry, ed., *Dimension: Language '92-'93*. Valdosta, GA: Southern Conference on Language Teaching.
- Coughlin, Peter, and Patricia A. Duff. 1994. "Same Task, Different Activities: Analysis of a SLA Task from an Activity Theory Perspective," 173-193 in James P. Lantolf and Gabriela Appel, eds., *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Donato, Richard. 1988. *Beyond Group: A Psycholinguistic Rationale for Collective Activity in Second Language Learning*. Dissertation, University of Delaware.
- _____. 1994. "Collective Scaffolding in Second Language Learning," 33-56 in James P. Lantolf and Gabriela Appel, eds., *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Donato, Richard, and Frank B. Brooks. 1994. "Looking Across Collaborative Tasks: Capturing L2 Discourse Development." Annual Meeting, American Association for Applied Linguistics, Baltimore, MD. March.
- Donato, Richard, and James P. Lantolf. 1992. "Communication and Social Interaction: Conduit or Cognitive Activity?" Paper, Biennial Meeting for the Society for Research in Child Development, March, Seattle, WA.
- Frawley, William, and James P. Lantolf. 1985. "Second Language Discourse: A Vygotskian Perspective." *Applied Linguistics* 6: 143-159.
- Green, Judith, and Cynthia Wallat. 1981. "Mapping Instructional Conversations—A Sociolinguistic Ethnography," 161-205 in Judith L. Green and Cynthia Wallat, eds., *Ethnography and Language in Educational Settings*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Hall, Joan Kelly. 1996. "In Response to Firth and Wagner: A Consideration of SLA as a Theory of Practice." Paper, Meeting of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, Jyväskylä, Finland, August.
- Lantolf, James P. 1994. Guest Editor of Special Issue on Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning. *Modern Language Journal* 78.
- Lantolf, James P., and Gabriela Appel, eds. 1994. *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Leont'ev, A. N. 1981. "The Problem of Activity in Psychology," 37-71 in James V. Wertsch, ed., *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe
- Luria, A. R. 1979. *The Making of Mind: A Personal*


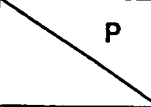


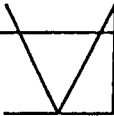

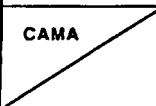

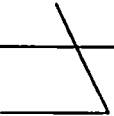

- Account of Soviet Psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McCafferty, Steven G. 1994. "Adult Second Language Learners' Use of Private Speech: A Review of Studies." *Modern Language Journal* 78: 421-436.
- Moll, Luis C. 1992. "Introduction," 1-27 in Luis C. Moll, ed., *Vygotsky and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, David. 1989. *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Omaggio Hadley, Alice. 1993. *Teaching Language in Context*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Pica, Teresa, Ruth Kanagy, and Joseph Falodun. 1993. "Choosing and Using Communication Tasks for Second Language Instruction and Research," 9-34 in Graham Crookes and Susan M. Gass, eds., *Tasks and Language Learning: Integrating Theory and Practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Platt, Elizabeth, and Frank B. Brooks. 1994. "The 'Acquisition-Rich Environment' Revisited." *Modern Language Journal* 78: 497-511.
- Swain, Merrill. 1995. "Collaborative Dialogue: Its Contribution to Second Language Learning." Plenary Paper, Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Long Beach, CA. March.
- _____. 1985. "Communicative Competence: Some Roles of Comprehensible Input and Comprehensible Output," in Susan M. Gass and Carolyn G. Madden, eds., *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Swain, Merrill, and Sharon Lapkin. 1996. "An Anatomy of Interaction and Second Language Learning: Two Adolescent French Immersion Students Working Together." Paper, Meeting of the Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, Jyväskylä, Finland. August.
- VanPatten, Bill. 1996. *Input Processing and Grammar Instruction*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Volosinov, V. N. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, Lev S. 1986. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- _____. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Walz, Joel. 1996. "The Classroom Dynamics of Information-Gap Activities." *Foreign Language Annals* 29: 481-494.
- Wertsch, James V. 1985. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1991. *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

APPENDIX

FORM 1 A

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| | \$103.95 |  | |
|  Z | |  |  |
| | C A | |  CAÑA |
|  J |  |  | |
| | | |  |

FORM 1 B

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| | |  | |
|  P | |  | |
| | OP |  |  |
|  | | |  CAMA |
| |  | | |
| \$410.15 | |  |  |

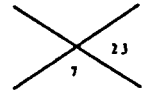

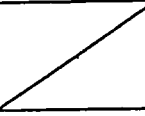


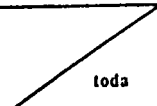
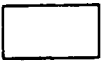
FORM 2 A

| | | | |
|--|----|----------|--|
| | | | |
| | AS | | |
| | | | |
| | B | LOOO | |
| | | \$195.00 | |
| | | | |

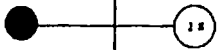
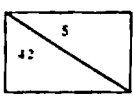
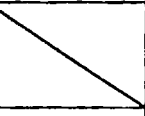



FORM 2 B

| | | | |
|----------|-----|------|--|
| \$212.73 | | | |
| | C A | | |
| | | | |
| | T | TOOO | |
| | | | |
| | | | |





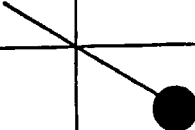
FORM 3 A

| | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| | |  | |
| AS | | |  |
| | |  | |
| |  | | |
| | |  | \$15.75 |
|  toda | |  | |



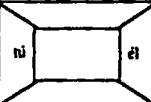
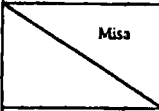


FORM 3 B

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---------|
|  | |  | |
| C A | \$259.97 | | |
| | |  | |
| |  | | |
| | |  | \$15.75 |
| moda | |  | |







FORM 4 A

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| |  | | |
| | | | |
| |  | |  |
|  | | \$167.00 | |
| | | | Pe o |
| | |  | |




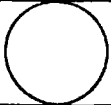
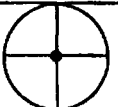
FORM 4 B

| | | | |
|---|---|----------|---|
|  | | | |
| | | \$548.00 | |
| |  | |  |
|  | | | |
| |  | | π |
|  | | | |

FORM 5 A

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Miguel | \$550.75 | | La |
| |  | |  |
| | B |  | |
| | LL | | |
| |  | | |
|  | | |  |

FORM 5 B

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Lo |
| | | |  |
|  | |  | |
| | E OS | | L |
| |  | | |
| 19 | | \$250.75 |  |