

THE NEGOTIATIONS OF MEANING IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: REFLECTIONS OF A LANGUAGE TEACHER

BARBARA STEVENS
UNED. Madrid

ABSTRACT

It has been claimed that by checking and clarifying problematic utterances; i.e., by the *negotiation of meaning* in communication tasks, learners obtain comprehensible input which is seen as fundamental to second language acquisition (SLA). The findings of SLA modified interaction research suggest the classroom must thus be structured to provide a context whereby learners negotiate meaning. Task type is perceived as significant; 'jigsaw' tasks with a two-way exchange of information being held most likely to stimulate the most negotiation of meaning. The aim of these researchers appears to be to explain to teachers why these tasks can aid them in their work with language learners and to help teachers choose and use the tasks effectively. The purpose of this article is to show how SLA modified interaction research may be misinforming pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

The most fruitful interactions, according to Schachter (1993), come about when the concerns of second language teachers and second language researchers

coincide. One of these «happy coincidences» is the convergence of second language acquisition (SLA) research findings and proposals for communicative language teaching (CLT) practice (Lightbrown, 1985: 81). Skehan (1992, 1993) has similarly observed a convergence of SLA and CLT and remarks one might conclude that the situation is a very comfortable one, supported on the one hand by the research findings of SLA, and on the other by the range of practical techniques devised by the supporters of communicative language teaching (1993:17). In addition, if, as Johnson has suggested the communicative approach is atheoretical as regards learning theory (1996: 173) then this coincidence might well be perceived as very fortuitous: SLA theory could support and guide teaching practice.

Indeed, this has been the conception of the role of SLA modified interaction researchers. Their aim has been to provide a theoretical prop for the use of communication tasks in L2 instruction. The perspective which supports this rationale is that which holds that language is best learned and taught through interaction of learners, particularly in two-way *jigsaw* tasks where they negotiate towards mutual comprehension. In order to accomplish this mutual comprehension, learners «request their interlocutor's help in comprehending unclear or unfamiliar linguistic input and obtain interlocutor feedback» (Pica et al, 1993: 11). The findings of SLA modified interaction researchers suggest the classroom must be structured to provide a context whereby learners negotiate meaning.

The purpose of this article is to show how SLA modified interaction research may be misinforming pedagogy. The article will attempt to point to the limitations of such research by examining alternative research in the field and by considering the shortcomings of modified interaction research itself for practising teachers.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: MODIFIED INTERACTION

This approach can be outlined by referring to the work of Long (1981, 1983), and Varonis and Gass (1985) and Gass (1997, 1998) who along with Pica (1987, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996, 1997) and Pica and Doughty (1985, 1988) have established a tradition of input/output studies of interaction, associated with negotiation of tasks. This research has hypothesised that the most crucial feature of learner interaction is the amount of modified interaction that occurs in a task so that input becomes more comprehensible and production becomes more precise and focused. Modification is coded on the basis of requests for clarification, comprehension checks, and so on; these moves are added up and compared in various ways in an attempt to get at the quality of interaction.

The model consists of a trigger (T) which gives rise to incomplete understanding on the part of the listener; an indicator (I) which is the hearer's signal that understanding has not been complete; a repair response (R) which is the original speaker's attempt to clear up the trouble, and finally a reaction response (RR) which may signal the hearer's acceptance or remaining difficulty with the repair.

S1. And in the right side of the house I have a house a big house (T)

S2. Right side a big house? (I)

S1. My house have it's a big but er simple (R)

S2. Ok (RR) (*Data from Pica, 1998:24*).

In this case (I) is a confirmation check which consists of a response following the (T); it is characterised by repetition with rising intonation. These procedures for dealing with trouble in talk are considered to indicate a negotiation of meaning and that a higher frequency of them indicates more negotiation of meaning.

The next move in the argument is to consider the effect of the negotiation of meaning, which is to make input to the learners more comprehensible. As comprehensible input is an essential condition for acquisition, then «modified interaction provoked by the higher frequency of these procedures facilitates acquisition by providing more comprehensible input of this kind» (Long 1981: 430). The suggestion is that if interaction is more heavily modified, then input to the learner will be of a better quality. Long (1996) in an updated version of the interaction hypothesis, suggests how negative feedback operates in L2 acquisition. Negotiation of meaning elicits negative feedback; such feedback draws learners attention to mismatches between input and output:

...it is proposed that environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity, and these resources are brought together most usefully ...during negotiation for meaning. Negative feedback obtained in negotiation work ... may be facilitative of SL development (1996: 414).

In essence, then, interactional modifications or 'negotiations' can serve to focus learner attention on potentially troublesome parts of their discourse, providing them with information that can lead to IL modification. These modifications may, in turn, open the door to subsequent stabilisation or language change.

... Any sort of reformulation of an incorrect utterance (assuming that a learner recognises it as a reformulation) ... can serve to draw a learner's attention to the fact of 'incorrectness' and can thereby trigger learner-internal mechanisms (e.g., hypothesis testing). (GASS et al. 1998: 301).

On the basis of this argument, pedagogical proposals have been put forward in both terms of methodology and syllabus. Pica and Doughty (1985a) find no difference in the number of interactional adjustments in one way tasks performed in a teacher-fronted class and in small group work. They replicate this study (1985b) using a two-way information gap task, where they observe significant differences. They thus conclude that group work results in more modified interaction if the task is of the 2-way type. «communication activities which are two-way in design will foster a great deal of negotiated modification in the classroom» (1985a: 132) and similarly such tasks «stimulate negotiation for message meaning» for group members, thus giving them «opportunities to produce and receive modified input, and ultimately to make progress in their second language development» (1985b: 247).

Porter (1986) in a study whose principal focus is examining how learners talk to each other in dyads during problem solving tasks concludes that their input contained two interactional features vital to second language acquisition: interactional modifications and prompts. In addition, pedagogically, the findings are held to provide evidence for the value of small group work: learners can offer each other genuine communicative practice «negotiations for meaning that may aid second language acquisition» (220).

Long (1983, 1989) recommends that certain problem-solving tasks (closed or convergent tasks) are more apt to generate modified interaction than others (open or divergent). Doughty and Pica (1986) claim that tasks with a requirement for information exchange are crucial to the generation of conversational modification of classroom interaction. Duff (1986) observes in problem solving tasks the kind of interaction associated with the production of comprehensible input and thus the possibility for acquisition of new structures; she asserts that problem solving tasks are useful vehicles of instruction and language practice in second language classrooms.

Pica and Doughty (1988) claim to provide support for current practices in English as a second language instruction which encourage group work in the classroom; certain tasks and participation patterns are more conducive than others to modified conversational interaction in the classroom: what seems essential is the combination of group interaction and a task requiring the exchange of information among group participants. Long and Crookes (1993, 1992) see both procedural and process syllabuses as problematic: one of the

shortcomings of the Procedural Syllabus is cited as being «the need for incomprehensible input and communication breakdowns if learners are to perceive negative evidence as such in SLA» (33). They put forward a task-based approach to syllabus design in which it is claimed pedagogic tasks provide a vehicle for the presentation of appropriate target language samples to learners and for «the delivery of comprehension and production opportunities of negotiable difficulty» (1993:39).

The grading and sequencing of these pedagogic tasks depends on which of the various pedagogic options are chosen to guide their use. It is here they see the findings of a number of SLA researchers as being most helpful: they point to Doughty and Pica, (1986) for the quality and quantity of language use in whole class and small group formats and relationships between different pedagogic task-types (one way, two-way, etc.) and for negotiation work and interlanguage destabilisation to Varonis and Gass (1985) and Long (1989).

Pica, Kanagy and Faldoun (1993) maintain that there is a need for some type of communicative «task framework» that can be used to compare and categorise different communicative tasks with the aim of explaining to teachers why the tasks «can assist them in their work with language learners and to help them choose and use the tasks effectively» (10). The theoretical perspective which supports their framework is that which holds that language is best learned and taught through interaction of learners particularly when they negotiate towards mutual comprehension and in order to accomplish this, learners «request their interlocutor's help in comprehending unclear or unfamiliar linguistic input and obtain interlocutor feedback» (11). They thus insist that the classroom be structured to provide a context whereby learners negotiate meaning. Their typology is based on two general dimensions: Interactional Activities, that is who holds information, who communicates it, who requests it, who gives feedback, the direction of the information flow, two-way, one-way, and so on. The second dimension 'Communication Goal' refers to the task resolution, i.e., if the task is convergent, with only one possible solution, or divergent, with a range of possible answers.

According to Pica et al, the communicative task types present clear differences in their effectiveness as a means of providing learners with opportunities to work towards comprehension, feedback and interlanguage modification. The most effective task type for SLA seems to be the jigsaw and information gap tasks, as they generate more repair work, while the least effective in their model is the opinion exchange task (23).

Polio and Gass (1998) attempt to replicate an earlier study by Gass and Varonis (1994) with thirty dyads performing information gap tasks (either placing objects on a board, or picture storytelling i.e., describing a series of pictures)

because such a replication study «has important implications for theory and practice» (308). They conclude that «based on the fact that interaction gives learners an opportunity to modify their speech upon a signal of noncomprehension, it... also (has) a positive effect on native speakers' comprehension of NNSs» (308).

Long (1996: 454) suggests that what is of interest to both theorists and pedagogy is the «evidence of a facilitating effect on comprehension and acquisition of ... negotiation for meaning» (454). For theorists, he deems, this evidence suggests the variables that play a significant role in learning. For pedagogy it suggests the import of classroom activities which stimulate negotiation for meaning.

The upshot of such studies is that group work is seen as beneficial to the process of second language acquisition, especially if the speakers do not have the same L1 (Varonis and Gass, 1985). Moreover, if learners are engaged in tasks that require them to exchange information then such tasks are considered as more beneficial to SLA since more negotiation of meaning takes place (Pica et al, 1993).

Nevertheless, despite all the affirmations, as Long himself warns, «we are dealing with a claim, not with established wisdom» (1996:454). On examination, the research conclusions would appear to be predominantly inferential. Negotiation features have not been successfully linked to language acquisition processes. According to Ellis (1990) such a link has not been shown and probably could not be.

Pica et al. (1993) admit, «few studies have actually linked negotiation features found during task interaction with acquisition processes» (27). Gass et al (1998) similarly state: «Despite the large number of studies dealing with input and interaction in SLA, ... the precise role of interaction in actual development and internalization of L2 knowledge has continued to challenge researchers» (299).

Statements such as the following are the norm: the presence of negotiation and its accompanying input and interactional adjustments during a task implied the presence of learner comprehension, use of feedback and modification of interlanguage production (see Pica et al, 1993:27). Although interaction may provide a structure that allows input to become salient and noticed, «interaction should not be seen as a cause of acquisition; it can only set the scene for potential learning» (Gass, et al 1998: 305). Similarly,

negotiation is a means of drawing attention to linguistic form, making it salient and thereby creating a readiness for learning ...the claim is not that negotiation causes learning , nor that there is a theory of learning based on interaction. Rather, negotiation is a facilitator of learning (GASS, 1997:131).

Foster, in the same vein has cautioned «it is very hard to see how the influence of negotiation on language can ever be measured» (1998:3). Notwithstanding, not only is it suggested by these studies that the amount of modified interaction is important, (see Gass et al., 1998: 305) but that it is also the goal of SLA research to determine and explain to teachers the kind of classroom tasks most conducive to producing modified interaction. This has filtered into those publications particularly concerned with prescribing teaching practice: «there is already a wealth of research information which can be used to inform pedagogic selection of peer group communication tasks» (Courtney, 1996: 318).

SLA modified interaction research would appear to hold the view that the theorists do the thinking, while teachers do the behaving (Clarke, 1994:14). The job of the teacher appears to be «get on with it and take advice when given» (van Lier, 1994:337); Ellis, in addition (1998) is sympathetic towards the view which disapproves of SLA «researchers cast as decision-makers and teachers as technicians whose job it is to do what researchers tell them» but, nevertheless, concludes that «teachers should heed research» (11) and that SLA research «can inform language pedagogy» (10) despite his caution that such research has produced «highly variable results» which are «difficult to interpret» and do not provide a basis for «firm prescriptions about how to teach» (11).

CRITICISM OF THE HYPOTHESIS: ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH

The notion that learners negotiate their way to comprehensible input; that is, output indicates lack of comprehension and leads interlocutors to provide more finely-tuned input, has come under attack.

Indeed, Faerch and Kasper (1986:263) argue that while data describing the interactional structure of NS/NNS may uncover aspects of input which have a learning potential, such data tell us nothing about what is actually comprehended by second language learners in these interactions «the assumption that negotiated... input is used by the learner as learning intake remains an unsubstantiated claim» (262).

Ehrlich et al. (1989) also question the assumption in SLA literature that the quantity of meaning negotiations is an accurate predictor of the quantity of comprehensible input that results (399). They see the role of meaning negotiation within SLA as still an open question, challenging the «prevailing assumption» that the simple presence of meaning negotiations within an interaction guarantees comprehensible input. Their study in fact found that some speakers were skeletonizers who were « more willing to abandon negotiation of meaning, at least when the items being described were more deeply embedded than

salient» in the discourse; whereas other speakers were embroiderers and were «unwilling to abandon negotiations regardless of depth of embedding» (411). They conclude that the embroidering strategy can lead to confused problematic discourse and may, in fact, impede the production of comprehensible input; whereas the skeletonizing strategy of abandoning negotiation at deeply embedded points in the discourse: that is, not persistently engaging in negotiation of meaning, results in more comprehensible input (411). However, it is not yet apparent whether this model will permit generalisation across different discourse types (Ellis, 1994).

Yule, Powers and Macdonald (1992) in attempting to investigate the actual communicative outcomes of interaction manifested in certain information gap tasks, have pointed to three strategies of non-negotiation of meaning: firstly, «unacknowledged problem», where a problem may be brought up by one of the participants, but is not acknowledged by the other (261); secondly, «abandon responsibility», where negotiation may be simply abandoned (262); thirdly, «arbitrary solution», where they found «the arbitrary choice of some solution» (263) by one participant without checking with the other. They conclude that all three non-negotiating strategies fail to take into account the nature of the world of reference of the receiver of the information (263). They are thus concerned about making pedagogical assumptions on the value of these activities: «it is worth keeping in mind that the kind of learning we intend our students to experience via our materials may not turn out to be matched by the kind of learning that actually takes place» (274).

Yule and Powers (1994), following on from this previous work, consider that the creation of opportunities for interactional modification in classroom settings «may have been assumed ipso facto to be beneficial for progress in second language learning» (89).

In an attempt to examine the claims of the modified interaction studies, Foster (1998) recorded 21 intermediate level students over 4 tasks in the setting of a 'real classroom' i.e., during four scheduled lessons in which the students were asked by the teacher (acting as researcher) to do one task presented as part of the normal class routine, and which had been selected from the textbooks used on the course. Two of the tasks were done in dyads and two in small groups. Two of the tasks could be classified as required information exchange tasks (picture differences in dyads and map task in a small group) and two as optional information exchange tasks (grammar-based task in dyads and discussion in a small group). Foster then analysed the data using c-units (see Pica et al., 1989) defined as «independent utterances which provide referential or pragmatic meaning i.e., utterances which are meaningful though not necessarily complete» (Foster, 1998:8). Transcripts were coded for c-units as well as

for incidences of the negotiation of meaning: confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks. Negotiation of meaning was determined by ascertaining the number of such negotiation moves made by each dyad and group. The most negotiation moves were produced by a dyad carrying out an optional information exchange task and the least by another dyad doing the same task. The model of communicative tasks offered by Pica et al (1993) would not lead us to anticipate this outcome. Accordingly, Foster cautions that counter to much SLA theorising «negotiation of meaning is not a strategy that language learners are predisposed to employ when they encounter gaps in their understanding» (18). She goes on to argue that many students in her study were not inclined to initiate or pursue negotiation for meaning most of the students «made only a few attempts to negotiate for meaning and all made very few or no modified utterances (ibid). She speculates on the reasons for this:

To hold up the interaction every time there is a problem utterance, and painstakingly attempt to repair it is a sure way of making the task frustratingly slow. Similarly, indicating to others each time you fail to grasp their meaning is a sure way of making yourself look and feel incompetent. ... Students may have been predisposed to adopt the strategy of 'pretend and hope' rather than the strategy of 'check and clarify'. (18).

This strategy of pretending to understand and hoping a future utterance will reveal meaning has been posited by Wong Fillmore (1979:209) as possibly just as useful for SLA as modified interaction.

Not only can assessment be marshalled in terms of the above-mentioned quasi-experimental research, but also serious difficulties in the modified interaction studies themselves can be pointed to. Nunan, (1991a, 1991b) in citing this research makes little comment on its quality. However, he does add a significant caution: some of these studies «have been carried out in laboratory or simulated settings. It remains to be seen whether the results hold up in genuine language classrooms, that is classrooms constituted for the purpose of learning not research» (1991b: 51).

ENIGMAS IN THE MODIFIED INTERACTION RESEARCH: MOST OF WHAT WE STUDY IS TRULY COMPLEX (PESHKIN, 1993)

Long has attested (1990) that there are 'accepted findings' in SLA research; one of these accepted findings is that negative input on ungrammatical

items via repair sequences, especially through tasks which make certain L2 features salient, improves rate and ultimate SL attainment. (658). However, this assertion has been challenged. Widdowson (1998: 705) has suggested that terms such as *negative input* have become 'catchphrase currency'; they sound good, but their value is taken for granted. Block, in a similar vein, has counselled us to be wary of embracing claims to well-attested findings in SLA research:

If we dig under the surface a little, we very quickly find reason to have doubts about the solid foundation which Long wishes to attribute to SLA. ... Rather than accept the findings, perhaps a more fruitful exercise would be to...go back and re-examine the studies which support these findings. Such an exercise would no doubt lead us to the conclusion that... some of Long's accepted findings do not have a strong base to stand on. (1996: 70-73).

Sheen (1994) on the other hand, has pointed to the failure of the modified interaction studies like those of Doughty and Pica (1986) to account for all the human and environmental variables; in addition, that these studies infer that scholars have agreed on the fundamental nature of language learning. Indeed, we would also add, agreed on a right way of going about investigating the nature of language learning. Some reservations must be made with regard to these studies on which so many recommendations to teachers are made.

Firstly, the majority of studies of this type employ quantification of data. However, a much smaller number can be considered to have used a large sample size, or random selection; generalizability is a serious problem (Lazaraton, 1995: 465). However, they tend to make universal claims, presenting their findings and theoretical standpoint as «generalizable traits» (Clarke, 1994: 10) which teachers must accept as received truths. We would suggest, however, that Long's (1990) criticisms of second language classroom research as small scale, involving limited numbers of teachers, learners and classrooms and convenience samples «characteristics (which) make generalization of findings hazardous at best» (163) could similarly be levelled at the modification studies.

Pica and Doughty (1985b), themselves admit they have reservations about the results in view of the fact that only three classrooms participated in the study (245), yet claims are made in terms of general truths.

Duff (1986) concludes on the basis of 8 students (4 dyads) with 8 minutes of discussion time allocated for each of 2 tasks (one problem solving and one debate) that a «considerable amount of negotiation takes place within dyads especially when performing (interactionally) convergent tasks»(171) and in problem solving «owing to the relatively greater frequency of questions

asked, there is a constant source of clarification of meaning... This confirms the usefulness of problem solving in SLA». (170). These conclusions seem to be based on an assumption; they rest on the hypothetical status of their central tenet.

Doughty and Pica (1986) similarly claim that group work and pair work with a two-way exchange of information is particularly suited to giving students opportunities to modify interaction. Such modified interaction they maintain will «make input comprehensible to learners and (will) lead ultimately to successful classroom second language acquisition» (322). This premise has no more than «hypothetical status» (Sheen, 1994).

Porter (1986) herself admits that her study was clearly limited for purposes of generalisation by the homogeneous language background of the participants, quasi-laboratory context of the data collection and single task type (220). In addition, she admits the student sample was small (12 learners). The data was subjected to a quantitative analysis; the frequency of the negotiation of meaning features was calculated. In addition, some attempt was made at qualitative analysis to see if the language produced by learners in these discussions was appropriate for use in settings outside the language classroom (215). Porter selected three speech acts: expressing opinions, expressing disagreement and expressing agreement, concluding that learners' speech was more 'direct' (218) and unhedged. However, she did not investigate the consequences for the interaction of these patterns. Despite these limitations, the study is often cited as if its results were received truth.

As Clarke (1994: 22) has observed, research reports of this kind and the recommendations which accompany them are very often «extremely terse accounts which provide very little detail». We suggest analysis and conclusions should be offered in enough detail for teachers to decide for themselves if they want to follow their endorsements or not.

For instance, in the study by Pica and Doughty (1985a) only minimal extracts of transcripts are included, such as the following confirmation check *:

- S1. the homemaker woman
- S2. the homemaker? *

There are no transcripts available for teachers to carry out reanalysis.

In Doughty and Pica's study (1986), the last ten minutes of the recordings were used; no mention is made, however, of tape novelty and no transcripts or even extracts are available for perusal.

Modified interaction research has, in addition, been confined to certain discourse types (Ellis, 1994); many of the studies have examined data obtained in interview type situations (Varonis and Gass) and in information gap activities of

a particular type (see for instance garden planting task in Doughty and Pica, 1986).

Moreover, «controlled studies ... need to control more carefully» (van Lier, 1989: 178) where control does not only relate to issues such as sample size, but also to the operational definition and categorisation of the phenomena the study has decided to focus on. Ellis (1994) for instance, has affirmed that the categories employed in the modified interaction studies are «less watertight than researchers admit» (263). We can point to flaws in the categories, or as we term it coding, by turning to the work of Gass and Varonis (1985).

This study examined 14 conversational dyads of NNS, 4 dyads of NS/NS and 4 dyads of NS/NNS who had not previously met; their aim was to get to know each other. They were audiotaped and the first five minutes of each conversation was analysed. Correlation of the findings of the various modification studies depends on how effectively the data can be compared and how reliable the coding is. With regard to the dyads, this would mean that they were all involved in the same kind of conversational activity for the five-minute periods that were selected for analysis. Aston (1986) however, points out that conversational preliminaries, 'approaches', which preface focusing on some topic may have engaged different proportions of the five minutes according to the dyad type: learners may take longer to introduce themselves. Given that repair is more relevant at certain points of conversations, the phase of the conversation may be a pertinent variable in determining the frequency of non-understanding routines. Accordingly, it may be the case that the observed differences in frequency depended on «differences in the conversational activities carried out by the various dyads» (ibid, 132).

As far as the coding procedures are concerned, the researchers themselves admit that the categories are ambiguous; for instance from their own data they cite:

- A. I write a letter to my husband every Friday
- B. B. so you write 4 times *
- C. A. yeah

and acknowledge that «in many instances a particular exchange * is ambiguous with regard to whether it is truly an example of a conversational continuant or whether it is an indicator of non-understanding» In fact, in some instances, they assert, it may serve both functions (Varonis and Gass, 1985:82). Hence, whenever an utterance was ambiguous with respect to classification, they did not include it in their count of indicators (83). The operational definitions on which the study is based do not appear to be independent of the analyst's account of what is happening, so the coding could simply reflect the researcher's expectations.

The criteria which are adopted to assign clarification requests, comprehension checks and so on to their respective categories are «fuzzy» (Aston, 1986). Detailed analysis of what we mean by the terms negotiation of meaning and interactional modifications is needed. The following extract illustrates this argument:

NNS1 : My father now is retire
NNS 2 : retire ?
NNS1 : yes
NNS2 : oh yeah

Gass and Varonis (1985) view this extract as an exemplification of an exchange «in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete»(151). However, as Firth and Wagner (1997: 295) assert «it is at least debatable whether the interlocutor (NNS2) demonstrates any kind of complete ‘incomplete understanding’ or that the preceding turn is somehow ‘unaccepted’». They go on to affirm that Gass and Varonis «appear to be basing their judgement ... on an implicit assumption» (295). Gass (1998) in a response to their criticisms replies by stating her beliefs:

The word ‘retire’, because it is the echoed word is what I believe (and have believed all along) stimulated the lack of comprehension likely because of (a) pronunciation or (b) lack of familiarity with the meaning of the word ‘retire’. ... It is important to note that a request for confirmation does come about because there has been some question about what was heard...whether it is total lack of comprehension or only partial comprehension, the point is still the same as the one we made in the 1985 article: There is evidence here of incomplete understanding (87).

However, a little further into her article she admits, as in 1985, that one cannot always determine when a particular form or echo is functioning as a conversational continuant or, a request for confirmation with partial comprehension, or as an indicator of no comprehension (87). Firth and Wagner’s point would seem to be borne out. It would appear that the conclusions of Gass and Varonis (1985) and Gass (1998) are based on beliefs and assumptions, or at least on fuzzy operational definitions.

Although Foster’s (1998) research calls into question «the typicality of previous research into the incidence of negotiation of meaning and the justification therefore of constructing an SLA theory upon it» (19), in common with much research into second language interaction, her investigation was «small

and limited» (19). In addition, she herself admits that her statistics are inexact « across the data as a whole, the range of individual scores is so wide and the lack of participation by so many students is so striking as to make any statistics based on group totals very misleading» (18). This is not surprising given that her research is based on the same fuzzy operational definitions of negotiation moves as the SLA researchers (see Foster, 1998: 8). Pica herself has confessed to a

lack of consistency in the field in organising conversational data as T-Units ... Many of the features of interest to researchers are in high inference categories of operationalization, which challenges conditions for inter-rater reliability, and require consensus through multiple trials of coding discussion and revision (1997: 95).

It would seem then that the tables of statistics proffered by such research conceal the interpretative work done by coders who have to resolve ambiguities and to do so

use their common sense knowledge ... to make sense of replies, the coding task and later make sense of the tables ... the findings are not so much discoveries elicited by deployment of the format, but versions of sociological phenomena organised through the efforts of researchers to meet the constraints of the format (Benson and Hughes, 1991: 122).

We thus raise questions about the replicability and claims to generalizability of the studies and point to the tricky problem that when data are puzzling, they are eliminated, or explained away on the basis of belief. It would be fair to say, all this has major implications for the kind of inferences that can be drawn out of the data. Attempts to replicate these studies are also fraught with difficulty.

Brown (1991), following the earlier studies of Doughty and Pica (1986) and Varonis and Gass (1985) and «using mostly similar categories» (1), although, now, we are not quite sure what these are, counts the number of clarification requests, comprehension checks, repetitions and other similar features (8), in a quasi-experimental study (9) of three decision-making tasks in three small groups. He concludes that the number of clarification requests, comprehension checks, what he calls repair features, is «considerably lower than the 24 per cent noted by Pica and Doughty (1986) in two-way tasks and that this could indicate that decision-making tasks «are not providing as rich an opportunity for negotiation of meaning as one might wish». On the other hand, he finds higher levels of repetitions, prompts and rephrasings (9).

Brown argues that tight/loose, closed/open decision-making task-type does not seem to be a potential independent variable given that there was no significant difference in percentages of either repairs or repetitions across these task types. He does, however, find «dramatic differences» (9) along the interpretative/procedural dimension of task type, in that in interpretative decision-making tasks a far higher percentage of instructional input and hypothesising was found. He thus concludes that this difference represents a cognitive and linguistic challenge to the learner, which pushes the learner to express thoughts and interpretations. For him, it is thus not only the quantity of modification that goes on in task interaction which is important for SLA, but also the appropriate level of task challenge (10).

He affirms that these ideas require further study and admits that it is not possible to be sure of the non-relevance of certain variables (9): gender could be an important variable and group size could influence group interaction, or group size combined with gender (9). We suggest that first language might be another variable to be pondered: all Brown's students apparently had the same L1, so how far can his study be compared in terms of percentages with the studies of Pica and Doughty or Varonis and Gass whose learners (participating in dyads) had different L1 backgrounds?

This question also arises with regard to another replication study: Courtney (1996) attempts to make use of Pica et al's 1993 typology of task types as he believes that their notions of 'goal' and 'activity' capture «important aspects of peer group oral task design» (321). He operationalises the two features of 'interactional activity' and 'communication goal' by giving them greater specificity as: interactant relationship, interactant requirement, goal orientation and outcome options. His research framework incorporates five commonly used peer group oral tasks types at two different levels of complexity for each type. He obtains a large sample (240 taped performances) of dyads performing the tasks and analyses the output:

The output of these tasks has been initially quantified from transcript frequency counts for the well-defined cluster of participant strategies generally associated with the key notion of the negotiation of meaning - in particular, clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks and repair and repetition strategies. Features such as the number of utterances per speaker and the number of turns per task participant are also used as variables. ... The quantitative analysis of the results utilises multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedures, since the resulting number of variables is relatively large (323).

These procedures are used to ascertain if there are any patterns in terms of task type and level of complexity in relation to task output. Courtney finds that

the results «tend to support the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between task type and learner performance» (323). Core strategies associated with the negotiation of meaning appeared more frequently in type A and B tasks than in type C, D, or E. as the 1993 taxonomy would predict. He believes that tasks can tentatively be categorised in terms of output potential.

Yet, he himself admits that although the sample size is large, the domain is the same «they are all Hong Kong first year students on the same language programme» (323). As with the study by Brown, the question of first language as a variable to be controlled arises. This issue of controlling variables will be taken up below.

Willis (1999) has cautioned that Courtney does not define what he means by *task* and that for his research, he designs tasks some of which would be considered simulation activities and others replication tasks hence invalidating his research¹.

Courtney asserts that the participant strategies associated with the negotiation of meaning are «well-defined». However, it has been suggested by this paper that the definitions are in fact more than a little fuzzy. He also raises the question himself of the validity of the concept of the negotiation of meaning «does more evidence of the negotiation of meaning mean increased attempts by participants to work together to achieve comprehensible input ?» (321).

Courtney attempts a fuller description by adding a 'qualitative dimension' to his research in the use of introspective protocols after task (324):

establishing from the learner's point of view, what factors might be relevant to the adoption of particular strategies during task performance ... by interviewing task participants as soon as possible after their performances in relation to a transcript and recording of the actual performance.

and concludes that his results, despite having a «cultural and domain specific bias» (324) show that «learners have only identified the use of clarification requests, repetition, etc., with attempts to improve their grasp on the information supplied to them» (ibid). He asserts that some useful and non-trivial responses have been obtained, but unfortunately does not offer any to the reader for perusal. Furthermore, he raises misgivings about this approach himself as to whether learners

¹ SEE WILLIS (1990:80): Simulation Activities offer the learner a chance to display knowledge of language form; there is no specified outcome or goal to achieve. Replication Activities involve learners in conveying and exchanging meanings in order to achieve an outcome.

would be able to introspect more deeply —if we assume that the construction of a social context happens at a more subconscious level— and whether they would have the linguistic resources to relay the results of such introspection are clearly important questions which remain unanswered (ibid).

If we consider that learners create the activity context through their conduct in the interaction, displaying for each other (and for the analyst) which resources they consider relevant and how they will continue, then when they later report on what they were doing in a particular conversation they may «characterize the occasion or activity with a folk or vernacular name or description. This characterization may or may not reflect the underlying interactional dynamics to which they oriented at the time » (Nofsinger, 1997: 361). Similarly, Allwright points to the drawbacks of such a procedure as being «clearly subject to the possibility of yielding *post-hoc* rationalisations» (1997:220). It may well be a «rich» dimension, as Courtney claims, (324) but with no example data, the reader can only speculate.

Courtney declares that there may well be a statistically significant relationship between task-type and learner performance, but adds the concession *for his research sample* (323) raising the question of generalisability, which is a key issue for the rationalist approach of modified interaction research.

Although he mentions the fact that the groupings of learners were 'natural' (323) in addition, he remarks that «research controls were applied to the data» (323). It is not altogether clear from this observation if the tasks were set up for the express purposes of the investigation, or if they were naturally occurring classroom tasks. It would seem that his data collection is hypothesis driven; yet he makes no allusion to observer/experimental intrusion.

We might also add that opportunely all tasks are completed only by dyads, as most of the modified interaction studies in the past (see Gass, 1997:132) Courtney acknowledges that

peer group dyadic tasks offer the researcher the most accessible form of group task for research purposes.... Task performance controls necessary for research purposes can be more easily implemented than with larger groups and transcripts are simplified (319).

This attempt to control the multiplicity of variables by restricting research on group work to dyads weakens the claims of modified interaction research in terms of generalisability.

The predicament (of both Brown and Courtney) of controlling for large numbers of variables arises given the complexity of the social world of the classroom,

when trying to *prove* certain hypotheses, or establish relations between independent and dependent variables on a cause and effect basis: «there are always thousands of possible other influences that are not considered, or cannot be considered» (van Lier 1989: 176); the number of hypotheses is countless (Denzin, 1978). As Peshkin has similarly asserted «most of what we study is truly complex, relating to people events and situations characterized by more variables than anyone can manage to identify, see in relationship or operationalize» (1993: 27). No matter how assiduously researchers labour to include all the variables, as Clarke maintains, «the data they collect and the conclusions they draw are by necessity less complex than the reality that teachers confront» (1994:16).

CONCLUSION

Larsen-Freeman and Long state unequivocally that «the most obvious beneficiary of an increased understanding of SLA is the second language teaching profession» (1991: 3). However, this article has attempted to argue that the modified interaction 'theory' of SLA is not at a stage where it can directly inform teaching practice: we still have little and fragmentary knowledge of learner input in the classroom.

Teachers «struggle every day with the complexities and conundrums of the educative process» (Edge and Richards, 1998: 570). Modified interaction research suggests that classroom procedures are precisely specifiable and task outcomes predictable, but under restricted, quasi-experimental conditions. Teachers may find such theoretical assertions inadequate and irrelevant. The field could well benefit from listening to the voices and experiences of those who are involved with language learners as their profession.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALLWRIGHT, R. (1997): «Social and Pedagogic Pressures in the Language Classroom: The Role of Socialisation». In H. Coleman (Edit.), *Society and the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 209-228.
- ASTON, G. (1986): «Trouble Shooting in Interaction with Learners: The More the Merrier». *Applied Linguistics* 7/2: 128-143.
- BENSON, D.; HUGHES, J.A. (1991): «Method: Evidence and Inference - Evidence and Inference for Ethnomethodology» In G. Button (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology and The Human Sciences*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press: 109-136.

- BLOCK, D. (1996): «Not So Fast : Some Thoughts on Theory Culling, Relativism, Accepted Findings and the Heart and Soul of SLA». *Applied Linguistics* 17/1: 63-83.
- BROWN, R. (1991): «Group Work Task Difference and Second Language Acquisition» *Applied Linguistics* 12/1: 1-11.
- CLARKE, M. (1994): «The Dysfunctions of the Theory/Practice Discourse». *TESOL Quarterly* V.28/1: 9-26.
- COURTNEY, M. (1996): «Talking to Learn : Selecting and Using Peer Group Oral Tasks» *ELTJ* 50: 318-326.
- DENZIN, N.K. (1978): *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. New York : McGraw Hill.
- DOUGHTY, C.; PICA, T. (1986): «Information Gap Tasks: Do They Facilitate Second Language Acquisition». *TESOL Quarterly* 20/2: 305-325.
- DUFF, P. (1986): «Another Look at Interlanguage Talk: Taking Task to Task». In R.Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn*. Rowley, Mass : Newbury House.
- EDGE, J.; RICHARDS, K. (1998): «Why Best Practice is Not Good Enough» *TESOL Quarterly* 32/3 : 569 -576.
- EHRlich, S. et al (1989): «Discourse Structure and The Negotiation of Comprehensible Input». *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 11: 397-414.
- ELLIS, R. (1998): «Second Language Acquisition Research-What's in It for Teachers?» In *IATEFL Manchester Conference Selections* (Plenary) : 10-18.
- (1994): *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (1990): *Instructed Second Language Acquisition* Oxford : Blackwell.
- FAERCHT, C.; KASPER, G. (1986): «The Role of Comprehension in Second Language Learning» *Applied Linguistics* 7/3: 257-273.
- FIRTH, A.; WAGNER, J. (1998): «On Discourse Communication, and Some Fundamental Concepts in SLA Research». *The Modern Language Journal* 81/iii : 285 -300.
- FOSTER, P. (1998): «A Classroom Perspective on the Negotiation of Meaning» *Applied Linguistics* 19/1: 1-23.
- GASS, S. (1998): «Apples and Oranges: Or why Apples Are Not Orange and Don't Need to be» *The Modern Language Journal* 82/1: 83- 90.
- (1997): *Input, Interaction and the Second Language Learner* Mahwah, N.J. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- GASS, S. et al (1998): «The Role of Input and Interaction in Second Language Acquisition». *The Modern Language Journal* 82/3: 299-319.
- GASS, S.; VARONIS, E.M. (1985): «Task variation and Nonnative/Nonnative Negotiation of Meaning» In S.Gass and C. Madden (Eds.) *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- JOHNSON, K. (1996): *Language Teaching and Skill Learning* Oxford : Blackwell.
- LARSEN-FREEMAN, D.; LONG, M (1991): *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*. London: Longman.

- LAZARATON, A. (1995): «Qualitative Research in Applied Linguistics: A Research Report». *TESOL Quarterly* 29/3: 455-472.
- LIGHTBROWN, P. M. (1985): «Acquisition Research and Classroom Teaching» *Applied Linguistics* 6/2: 173-189.
- LONG, M. (1996): «The Role of the Linguistic Environment in Second Language Acquisition» In W.C.Ritchie and T.K.Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. London: Academic Press: 413- 456.
- (1990): «Second Language Classroom Research and Teacher Education» In C.Brumfit and R Mitchell (Eds.), *Research in the Language Classroom* ELT Document 133 MEP London: Macmillan.
- (1989): «Task Group and Task-Group Interactions» *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL* 8: 1-26.
- (1983): «Native Speaker/Nonnative Speaker Conversation and The Negotiation of Comprehensible Input» *Applied Linguistics* 4: 126-41.
- (1981): «Input, Interaction and Second Language Acquisition» In H.Winitz (Ed.), *Native Language and Foreign Language Acquisition. Annals of The New York Academy of Sciences* 379: 259-278..
- LONG, M.; CROOKES, G. (1993): «Units of Analysis in Syllabus Design: The Case for Task» In G.Crookes and S.Gass (Eds.), *Tasks In a Pedagogical Context*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- (1992): «Three approaches to Task-based Syllabus Design» *TESOL Quarterly* 26/1: 27-56.
- NOFSINGER, R.E. (1997): «Context and Conversational Processes» In J.L. OWEN (Ed.), *Context and Communication Behaviour*. Reno, Nevada : Context Press.
- NUNAN, D. (1991a): *Language Teaching Methodology* Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- (1991b): «Communicative Tasks and the Language Curriculum» *TESOL Quarterly* 25/2: 279-295.
- PESHKIN, A. (1993): «The Goodness of Qualitative Research» *Educational Researcher* 22/2 March: 24-30..
- PICA, T. (1998): «Second Language Learning through Interaction: Multiple Perspectives». In V. REGAN (Ed.), *Contemporary Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- (1997): «Second Language Acquisition Research Methods» In N.H.Hornberger and D. Corson (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*: 89 - 99.
- (1996): «Do Second Language Learners Need Negotiation?» *IRAL* 34/1: 1-21.
- (1994): «Research on Negotiation: What Does It Reveal about Second-Language Learning Conditions, Processes and Outcomes?» *Language Learning* 44/3: 493-527.
- (1992): «The Textual Outcomes of Native-Speaker-Non-Native Speaker Negotiation: What Do They Reveal about Second Language Learning?» In C. KRAMSCH et al (Eds.), *Text and Context*. Lexington: D.C.Heath.

- (1991): «Classroom Interaction, Negotiation and Comprehension: Redefining Relationships» *System* 19 /4: 437-452.
- (1987): «Second-Language Acquisition, Social Interaction, and the Classroom» *Applied Linguistics* 8/1: 3 — 20.
- PICA, T.; DOUGHTY, C. (1988): «Variations in Classroom Interaction as Function of Participation Pattern». In J.Fine (Ed) *Second Language Discourse: A Textbook of Current Research*. Norwood: Ablex: 41-55.
- (1985a): « The Role of Group Work in Classroom Second Language Acquisition». *SSLA* /7: 233-248..
- (1985b): «Input and Interaction in the Communicative Language Classroom : A Comparison of Teacher-Fronted and Group Activities» In S.Gass and C.G.Madden (Eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge, M.A: Newbury House: 115-132.
- PICA, T. et al. (1989): «Comprehensible Output as an Outcome of Linguistic Demands the Learner « *SSLA* 11: 63-90.
- PICA, T. et al (1993): «Choosing and Using Communication Tasks for Second Language Instruction» In G.Crookes and M.Gass (Eds.), *Tasks and Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- POLIO, C.; GASS, S. (1998): «The Role of Interaction in Native Speaker Comprehension of Nonnative Speaker Speech » *The Modern Language Journal* 82/3: 308-319.
- PORTER, P. (1986): «How Learners Talk to Each Other: Input and Interaction in Task-centred Discussions». In R.Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn*. Rowley; Mass: Newbury House.
- SCHACHTER, J. (1993): «Second Language Acquisition : Perceptions and Possibilities» *Second Language Research* 9/2: 173 -187.
- SHEEN, R. (1994): «A Critical Analysis of the Advocacy of the Task-Based Syllabus» *TESOL Quarterly* 28/1: 127-151.
- SKEHAN, P. (1992): «Second Language Acquisition Strategies and Task-Based Learning» *Thames Valley University Working Papers in ELT*. Vol. 1 Spring: 178-208.
- (1993): «A Framework for the Implementation of Task-Based Learning» *IA-TEFL Annual Conference Report* : 17-25.
- VAN LIER, L. (1989): «Classroom Research in Second Language Acquisition» *Annual. Review of Applied Linguistics* 10: 173-186.
- (1994): «Forks and Hope: Pursuing Understanding in Different Ways» *Applied Linguistics* 15/3: 328-346.
- VARONIS, E.; GASS, S. (1985): «Nonnative/Nonnative Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning» *Applied Linguistics* 6: 71-90.
- WIDDOWSON, H. (1998): «Context, Community and Authentic Language» *TESOL Quarterly* 32/4: 705-716.
- WILLIS, D. (1990): *The Lexical Syllabus* London : Harper Collins.

-
- WILLIS, J. (1999): «*What Is a Task ? Explorations in Aspects of Task Design*» Unpublished Paper, LSU Aston University, Birmingham , UK.
- WONG-Fillmore, L. (1979): «Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition» In Fillmore, W.Wang and D.Kempler (Eds.), *Individual Differences in Language Ability and Language Behaviour*. New York : Academic Press.
- YULE, G.; POWERS, M.; MACDONALD, D. (1992): «The Variable Effect of Some Task-Based Learning Procedures on L2 Communicative Effectiveness» *Language Learning* 42/2: 249-277.
- YULE, G.; POWERS, M (1994): «Investigating the Communicative Outcomes of Task-Based Interaction» *System* 22/1: 81-91.