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Group Work, Interlanguage Talk, and Second Language Acquisition

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The use of group work in classroom second language learning has long been supported by sound pedagogical arguments. Recently, however, a psycholinguistic rationale for group work has emerged from second language acquisition research on conversation between non-native speakers, or interlanguage talk. Provided careful attention is paid to the structure of tasks students work on together, the negotiation work possible in group activity makes it an attractive alternative to the teacher-led, "lockstep" mode and a viable classroom substitute for individual conversations with native speakers.

For some years now, methodologists have recommended small-group work (including pair work) in the second language classroom. In doing so, they have used arguments which, for the most part, are *pedagogical*. While those arguments are compelling enough, group work has recently taken on increased *psycholinguistic* significance due to new research findings on two related topics: 1) the role of comprehensible input in second language acquisition (SLA) and 2) the negotiation work possible in conversation between non-native speakers, or *interlanguage talk*. Thus, in addition to strong pedagogical arguments, there now exists a psycholinguistic rationale for group work in second language learning.

PEDAGOGICAL ARGUMENTS FOR GROUP WORK

There are at least five pedagogical arguments for the use of group work in second language (SL) learning. They concern the potential of group work for increasing the quantity of language practice opportunities, for improving the quality of student talk, for individualizing instruction, for creating a positive affective climate in the

classroom, and for increasing student motivation. We begin with a brief review of those arguments.

Argument 1. Group work increases language practice opportunities.

In all probability, one of the main reasons for low achievement by many classroom SL learners is simply that they do not have enough time to practice the new language. This is especially serious in large EFL classes in which students need to develop aural-oral skills, but it is also relevant to the ESL context.

From observational studies of classrooms (e.g., Hoetker and Ahlbrand 1969 and Fanselow 1977), we know that the predominant mode of instruction is what might be termed the *lockstep*, in which one person (the teacher) sets the same instructional pace and content for everyone, by lecturing, explaining a grammar point, leading drill work, or asking questions of the whole class. The same studies show that when lessons are organized in this manner, a typical teacher of any subject talks for at least half, and often for as much as two thirds, of any class period (Flanders 1970). In a 50-minute lesson, that would leave 25 minutes for the students. However, since 5 minutes is usually spent on administrative matters (getting pupils in and out of the room, calling the roll, collecting and distributing homework assignments, and so on) and (say) 5 minutes on reading and writing, the total time available to students is actually more like 15 minutes. In an EFL class of 30 students in a public secondary school classroom, this averages out to 30 seconds per student per lesson—or just *one hour per student per year.* An adult ESL student taking an intensive course in the United States does not fare much better. In a class of 15 students meeting three hours a day, each student will have a total of only about one and a half hours of individual practice during a six-week program. Contrary to what some private language school advertisements would have us believe, this is simply not enough.

Group work cannot solve this problem entirely, but it can certainly help. To illustrate with the public school setting, suppose that just *half* the time available for individual student talk is devoted to work in groups of three instead of to lockstep practice, in which one student talks while 29 listen (or not, as the case may be). This will change the total *individual* practice time available to each student from one hour to about five and a half hours. While still too little, this is an increase of over 500 percent.

Argument 2. Group work improves the quality of student talk.

The lockstep limits not only the *quantity* of talk students can engage in, but also its *quality.* This is because teacher-fronted

lessons favor a highly conventionalized variety of conversation, one rarely found outside courtrooms, wedding ceremonies, and classrooms. In such settings, one speaker asks a series of *known-information*, or *display*, questions, such as *Do you work in the accused's office at 27 Sloan Street?*, *Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?*, and *Do you come to class at nine o'clock?*—questions to which there is usually only one correct answer, already known to both parties. The second speaker responds (*I do*) and then, in the classroom, typically has the correctness of the response confirmed (*Yes, Right*, or *Good*). Only rarely does genuine communication take place. (For further depressing details, see, for example, Hoetker and Ahlbrand 1969, Long 1975, Fanselow 1977, Mehan 1979, and Long and Sato 1983.)

An unfortunate but hardly surprising side effect of this sort of pseudo-communication is that students' attention tends to wander. Consequently, teachers maintain a brisk pace to their questions and try to ensure prompt and brief answers in return. This is usually quite feasible, since what the students say requires little thought (the same question often being asked several times) and little language (mostly single phrases or short "sentences"). Teachers quickly "correct" any errors, and students appreciate just as quickly that what they say is less important than how they say it.

Such work *may* be useful for developing grammatical accuracy (although this has never been shown). It is unlikely, however, to promote the kind of conversational skills students need *outside* the classroom, where accuracy is often important but where communicative ability is always at a premium.

Group work can help a great deal here. First, unlike the lockstep, with its single, distant initiator of talk (the teacher) and its group interlocutor (the students), face-to-face communication in a small group is a natural setting for conversation. Second, two or three students working together for five minutes at a stretch are not limited to producing hurried, isolated "sentences." Rather, they can engage in cohesive and coherent sequences of utterances, thereby developing discourse competence, not just (at best) a sentence grammar. Third, as shown by Long, Adams, McLean, and Castaños (1976), students can take on roles and adopt positions which in lockstep work are usually the teacher's exclusive preserve and can thus practice a range of language functions associated with those roles and positions. While solving a problem concerning the siting of a new school in an imaginary town, for example, they can suggest, infer, qualify, hypothesize, generalize, or disagree. In terms of another dimension of conversational management, they can develop such skills—also normally practiced only by the teacher—as

topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarizing, and clarifying. (Some of these last skills also turn out to have considerable psycholinguistic importance.) Finally, given appropriate materials to work with and problems to solve, students can engage in the kind of information exchange characteristic of communication outside classrooms—with all the creative language use and spontaneity this entails—where the focus is on meaning as well as form. In other words, they can in all these ways develop at least some of the variety of skills which make up communicative competence in a second language.

Argument 3. Group work helps individualize instruction.

However efficient it may be for some purposes—for example, the presentation of new information needed by all students in a class—the lockstep rides roughshod over many individual differences inevitably present in a group of students. This is especially true of the vast majority of school children, who are typically placed in classes solely on the basis of chronological and mental age. It can also occur in quite small classes of adults, however. Volunteer adult learners are usually grouped on the basis of their aggregate scores on a proficiency test. Yet, as any experienced teacher will attest, aggregate scores often conceal differences among students in specific linguistic abilities. Some students, for example, will have much better comprehension than production skills, and vice versa. Some may speak haltingly but accurately, while others, though fluent, make lots of errors.

In addition to this kind of variability in specific SL abilities, other kinds of individual differences ignored by lockstep teaching include students' age, cognitive/developmental stage, sex, attitude, motivation, aptitude, personality, interests, cognitive style, cultural background, native language, prior language learning experience, and target language needs. In an ideal world, these differences would all be reflected, among other ways, in the pacing of instruction, in its linguistic and cultural content, in the level of intellectual challenge it poses, in the manner of its presentation (e.g., inductive or deductive), and in the kinds of classroom roles students are assigned.

Group work obviously cannot handle all these differences, for some of which we still lack easily administered, reliable measures. Once again, however, it can help. Small groups of students can work on different sets of materials suited to their needs. Moreover, they can do so simultaneously, thereby avoiding the risk of boring other students who do not have the same problem, perhaps because they speak a different first language, or who do have the same problem

but need less time to solve it. Group work, then, is a first step toward individualization of instruction, which everyone agrees is a good idea but which few teachers or textbooks seem to do much about.

Argument 4. Group work promotes a positive affective climate.

Many students, especially the shy or linguistically insecure, experience considerable stress when called upon in the public arena of the lockstep classroom. This stress is increased by the knowledge that they must respond accurately and above all quickly. Research (see, for example, Rowe 1974 and White and Lightbown 1983) has shown that if students pause longer than about one second before beginning to respond or while making a response, or (worse) appear not to know the answer, or make an error, teachers will tend to interrupt, repeat, or rephrase the question, ask a different one, "correct," and/or switch to another student. Not all teachers do these things, of course, but most teachers do so more than they realize or would want to admit.

In contrast to the public atmosphere of lockstep instruction, a small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting and, usually, a more supportive environment in which to try out embryonic SL skills. After extensive research in British primary and secondary school classrooms, Barnes (1973:19) wrote of the small-group setting:

> An intimate group allows us to be relatively inexplicit and incoherent, to change direction in the middle of a sentence, to be uncertain and self-contradictory. What we say may not amount to much, but our confidence in our friends allows us to take the first groping steps towards sorting out our thoughts and feelings by putting them into words. I shall call this sort of talk "exploratory."

In his studies of children's talk in small groups, Barnes found a high incidence of pauses, hesitations, stumbling over new words, false starts, changes of direction, and expressions of doubt (*I think, probably*, and so on). This was the speech of children "talking to learn" (Barnes 1973:20)—talking, in other words, in a way and for a purpose quite different from those which commonly characterize interaction in a full-class session. There, the "audience effect" of the large class, the perception of the listening teacher as judge, and the need to produce a short, polished product all serve to inhibit this kind of language.

Barnes (1973:19) draws attention to another factor:

> It is not only size and lack of intimacy that discourage exploratory talk: if

> relationships have been formalized until they approach ritual, this, too, will make it hard for anyone to think aloud. Some classrooms can become like this, especially when the teacher controls very thoroughly everything that is said.

In other words, freedom from the requirement for accuracy at all costs and entry into the richer and more accommodating set of relationships provided by small-group interaction promote a positive affective climate. This in turn allows for the development of the kind of personalized, creative talk for which most aural-oral classes are trying to prepare learners.

Argument 5. Group work motivates learners.

Several advantages have already been claimed for group work. It allows for a greater quantity and richer variety of language practice, practice that is better adapted to individual needs and conducted in a more positive affective climate. Students are individually involved in lessons more often and at a more personal level. For all these reasons and because of the *variety* group work inevitably introduces into a lesson, it seems reasonable to believe that group work motivates the classroom learner.

Empirical evidence supporting this belief has been provided by several studies reported recently in Littlejohn (1983). It has been found, for example, that small-group, independent study can lead to increased motivation to study Spanish among beginning students (Littlejohn 1982); learners responding to a questionnaire reported that they felt less inhibited and freer to speak and make mistakes in the small group than in the teacher-led class. Similarly, in a study of children's attitudes to the study of French in an urban British comprehensive school (Fitz-Gibbon and Reay 1982), three quarters of the pupils ranked their liking for French as a school subject significantly higher after completing a program in which 14-year-old non-native speakers tutored 11-year-old non-natives in the language.

GROUP WORK: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC RATIONALE

In addition to pedagogical arguments for the use of group work as at least a complement to lockstep instruction, there now exists independent *psycholinguistic* evidence for group work in SL teaching. This evidence has emerged from recent work on the role of comprehensible input in SLA and on the nature of non-native/non-native conversation. It is to this work that we now turn.

Comprehensible Input in Second Language Acquisition

A good deal of research has now been conducted on the special features of speech addressed to SL learners by native speakers (NSs) of the language or by non-native speakers (NNSs) who are more proficient than the learners are. Briefly, it seems that this linguistic *input* to the learner, like the speech that caretakers address to young children learning their mother tongue, is modified in a variety of ways to (among other reasons) make it comprehensible. This modified speech, or *foreigner talk*, is a reduced or "simplified" form of the full, adult NS variety and is typically characterized by shorter, syntactically less complex utterances, higher-frequency vocabulary items, and the avoidance of idiomatic expressions. It also tends to be delivered at a slower rate than normal adult speech and to be articulated somewhat more clearly. (For a review of the research findings on foreigner talk, see Hatch 1983, Chapter 9; for a review of similar findings on teacher talk in SL classrooms, see Gaies 1983a and Chaudron in press.)

It has further been shown that NSs, especially those (like ESL teachers) with considerable experience in talking to foreigners, are adept at modifying not just the language itself, but also the shape of the *conversations* with NNSs in which the modified speech occurs. They help their non-native conversational partners both to participate and comprehend in a variety of ways. For example, they manage to make topics salient by moving them to the front of an utterance, saying something like *San Diego, did you like it?*, rather than *Did you like San Diego?* They use more questions than they would with other NSs and employ a number of devices for clarifying both what they are saying and what the NNS is saying. The devices include clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and repetitions and rephrasings of their own and the NNSs' utterances. (For a review of the research on conversational adjustments to NNSs, see Long 1983a.)

It is important to note that when making these linguistic and conversational adjustments, speakers are concentrating on *communicating* with the NNS; that is, their focus is on what they are saying, not on how they are saying it. As with parents and elder siblings talking to young children, the adjustments come naturally from trying to communicate. While their use seems to grow more sophisticated with practice, they require no special training.

A recent study by Hawkins (in press) has shown that it is dangerous to assume that the adjustments always lead to comprehension by NNSs, even when they *appear* to have understood, as judged by the appropriateness of their responses. On the other hand,

at least two studies (Chaudron 1983 and Long in press) have demonstrated clear improvements in comprehension among groups of NNSs as a result of specific and global speech modifications, respectively. Other research has demonstrated that the modifications themselves are more likely to occur when the native speaker and the non-native speaker each start out a conversation with information the other needs in order for the pair to complete some task successfully. Tasks of this kind, called *two-way* tasks (as distinct from *one-way* tasks, in which only one speaker has information to communicate), result in significantly more conversational modifications by the NS (Long 1980, 1981, 1983b). This is probably because the need for the NS to obtain unknown information from the NNS makes it important for the NS to monitor the NNS's level of comprehension and thus to adjust until the NNS's understanding is sufficient for performance of his or her part of the task.

There is also a substantial amount of evidence consistent with the idea that the more language that learners hear *and understand* or the more *comprehensible input* they receive, the faster and better they learn. (For a review of this evidence, see Krashen 1980, 1982 and Long 1981, 1983b.) Krashen has proposed an explanation for this, which he calls the Input Hypothesis, claiming that learners improve in a SL by *understanding* language which contains some target language forms (phonological, lexical, morphological, or syntactic) which are a little ahead of their current knowledge and which they could not understand in isolation. Ignorance of the new forms is compensated for by hearing them used in a situation and embedded in other language that they *do* understand:

> A necessary condition to move from stage i to stage i + 1 is that the acquirer understand input that contains i + 1, where "understand" means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not the form of the utterance (Krashen 1980:170).

Whether or not simply hearing and understanding the new items are both necessary *and sufficient* for a learner to *use* them successfully later is still unclear. Krashen claims that speaking is unnecessary, that it is useful only as a means of obtaining comprehensible input. However, at least one researcher (Swain in press) has argued that learners must also be given an opportunity to *produce* the new forms—a position Swain calls the "comprehensible *output* [italics added] hypothesis." What many researchers do agree upon is that learners must be put in a position of being able to *negotiate* the new input, thereby ensuring that the language in which it is heard is modified to exactly the level of comprehensibility they can manage.

As noted earlier, the research shows that this kind of negotiation is perfectly possible, given two-way tasks, in NS/NNS dyads. The

problem for classroom teachers, of course, is that it is impossible for them to provide enough of such individualized NS/NNS opportunities for all their students. It therefore becomes essential to know whether two (or more) *non*-native speakers working together during group work can perform the same kind of negotiation for meaning. This question has been one of the main motivations for several recent studies of NNS/NNS conversation, often referred to in the literature as interlanguage talk. The focus in these studies of NNSs working together in small groups is no longer just the quantity of language practice students are able to engage in, but the *quality* of the talk they produce in terms of the *negotiation process*.

Studies of Interlanguage Talk

An early study of interlanguage talk was carried out by Long, Adams, McLean, and Castaños (1976) in intermediate-level, adult ESL classes in Mexico. The researchers compared speech samples from two teacher-led class discussions to speech from two small-group discussions (two learners per group) doing the same task. To examine the quantity and quality of speech in both contexts, the researchers first coded moves according to a special category system designed for the study. *Quality of speech* was defined by the variety of moves, and *quantity of speech* was defined by the number of moves. The amount and variety of student talk were found to be significantly greater in the small groups than in the teacher-led discussions. In other words, students not only talked more, but also used a wider range of speech acts in the small-group context.

In a larger study, Porter (1983) examined the language produced by adult learners in task-centered discussions done in pairs. The learners were all NSs of Spanish. The 18 subjects (12 NNSs and 6 NSs) represented three proficiency levels: intermediate, advanced, and native speaker. Each subject participated in separate discussions with a subject from each of the three levels. Porter was thus able to compare interlanguage talk with talk in NS/NNS conversations, as well as to look for differences across learner proficiency levels. Among many other findings, the following are relevant to the present discussion:

1. With regard to quantity of speech, Porter's results supported those of Long, Adams, McLean, and Castaños (1976): Learners produced more talk with other learners than with NS partners. In addition, learners produced more talk with advanced-level than with intermediate-level partners, in part because the conversations with advanced learners lasted longer.
2. To examine quality of speech, Porter measured the number of

grammatical and lexical errors and false starts and found that learner speech showed no significant differences across contexts. This finding contradicts the popular notion that learners are more careful and accurate when speaking with NSs than when speaking with other learners.

3. Other analyses focused on the interactional features of the discussions; no significant differences were found in the amount of repair by NSs and learners. *Repair* was a composite variable, consisting of confirmation checks, clarification requests, comprehension checks, and three communication strategies (verification of meaning, definition request, and indication of lexical uncertainty). Porter emphasized the importance of this finding, suggesting that it shows that learners are capable of negotiating repair in a manner similar to NSs and that learners at the two proficiency levels in her study were equally competent to do such repair work. A related and not surprising finding was that learners made more repairs of this kind with intermediate than with advanced learners.
4. Closer examination of communication strategies, a subset of repair features, revealed very low frequencies of "appeals for assistance" (Tarone 1981), redefined for the Porter study to include verification of meaning, definition request, and indication of lexical uncertainty. In addition, learners made the appeals in similar numbers whether talking to NSs or to other learners (28 occurrences in four and a quarter hours with NSs versus 21 occurrences in four and a half hours with other learners.) Porter suggested that her data contradict the notion that other NNSs are not good conversational partners because they cannot provide accurate input when it is solicited. In fact, however, learners rarely ask for help, no matter who their interlocutors may be. It would appear that the social constraints that operate to keep foreigner-talk repair to a minimum (McCurdy 1980) operate similarly in NNS/NNS discussions.
5. Further evidence of these social constraints is the low frequency of other-correction by *both* learners and NSs. Learners corrected 1.5 percent and NSs corrected 8 percent of their interlocutors' grammatical and lexical errors. Also of interest is the finding that learners *mis*corrected only .3 percent of the errors their partners made, suggesting that miscorrections are not a serious threat in unmonitored group work.
6. The findings on repair were paralleled by those on another interactive feature, labeled prompts, that is, words, phrases, or sentences added in the middle of the other speaker's utterance to continue or complete that utterance. Learners and NSs provided similar numbers of prompts. One significant difference, however,

was that learners prompted other learners five times more than they prompted NSs; thus, learners got more practice using this conversational resource with other learners than they did with NSs.

Overall, Porter concluded that although learners cannot provide each other with the accurate grammatical and sociolinguistic input that NSs can, learners can offer each other genuine communicative practice, including the negotiation for meaning that is believed to aid SLA. Confirmation of Porter's findings has since been provided in a small-scale replication study by Wagner (1983).

Two additional studies of interlanguage talk (Varonis and Gass 1983, Gass and Varonis in press) should be mentioned. In the first study, the researchers compared interlanguage talk in 11 non-native conversational dyads with conversation in 4 NS/NNS dyads and 4 NS/NS dyads. Like the learners in Porter's (1983) study, the NNSs were students from two levels of an intensive English program; unlike Porter's subjects, these learners were from two native language backgrounds (Japanese and Spanish). Varonis and Gass tabulated the frequency of what they term nonunderstanding routines, which indicate a lack of comprehension and lead to negotiation for meaning through repair sequences.

The main finding in the Varonis and Gass study was a greater frequency of negotiation sequences in non-native dyads than in dyads involving NSs. The most negotiation occurred when the NNSs were of different language backgrounds and different proficiency levels; the next highest frequency was in pairs sharing a language or proficiency level; and the lowest frequency was in pairs with the same language background and proficiency level. On the basis of these findings, Varonis and Gass argue for the value of non-native conversations as a nonthreatening context in which learners can practice language skills and make input comprehensible through negotiation.

Building on this study, Gass and Varonis (in press) next examined negotiation by NNSs in two additional communication contexts: what Long (1981) calls one-way and two-way tasks. In the one-way task, one member of a dyad or triad described a picture which the other member(s) drew. In the two-way task, each member heard different information about a robbery, and the dyad/triad was to determine the identity of the robber. The participants, who were grouped into three dyads and one triad, were nine intermediate students from four different language backgrounds in an intensive ESL program.

Gass and Varonis looked for differences in the frequency of negotiation sequences across the two task types; they found that there

were more indicators of nonunderstanding in the one-way task, but the difference was not statistically significant. They suggest that there may have been more need for negotiation on the one-way task because of the lack of shared background information. A second concern in the study was the role of the participant initiating the negotiation. The finding was not surprising: The student drawing the picture in the one-way task used far more indicators of nonunderstanding than the describer did. A third finding related to the one-way task was a decrease in the number of nonunderstanding indicators on the second trial: Familiarity with the task seemed to decrease the need for negotiation, even though the roles were switched, with the students doing the describing and those doing the drawing changing places.

As in their earlier study, Gass and Varonis argue that negotiation in non-native exchanges is a useful activity in that it allows the learners to manipulate input. When input is negotiated, they maintain, conversation can then proceed with a minimum of confusion; additionally, the input will be more meaningful to the learners because of their involvement in the negotiation process.

The importance of learners' being able to adjust input by providing feedback on its comprehensibility was also stressed by Gaies (1983b). Gaies examined learner feedback to teachers on referential communication tasks. The participants were ESL students of various ages and proficiency levels and their teachers, grouped into 12 different dyads and triads. The students were encouraged to ask for clarification or re-explanation wherever necessary to complete the task of identifying and sequencing six different designs described by the teacher. On the basis of the audiotaped data, Gaies developed an inventory of learner verbal feedback consisting of 4 basic categories (responding, soliciting, reacting, and structuring) and 19 subcategories. Of interest here are Gaies' findings that 1) learners used a variety of kinds of feedback, with reacting moves being the most frequent and structuring moves the least frequent, and 2) learners varied considerably in the amount of feedback they provided.

In another study of non-native talk in small-group work, this time in a classroom setting, Pica and Doughty (in press) compared teacher-fronted discussions and small-group discussions on (one-way) decision-making tasks. Their data were taken from three classroom discussions and three small-group discussions (four students per group) involving low-intermediate-level ESL students. Their findings on grammaticality and amount of speech are similar to those of Porter (1983). Pica and Doughty found that student production, as measured by the percentage of grammatical T-units

(Hunt 1970) per total number of T-units, was equally grammatical in the two contexts. In other words, students did not pay closer attention to their speech in the teacher's presence. In terms of the amount of speech, Pica and Doughty found that the individual students talked more in their groups than in their teacher-fronted discussions, confirming previous findings of a clear advantage for group work in this area.

Pica and Doughty also examined various interactional features in the discussions. They found a very low frequency of comprehension and confirmation checks and clarification requests in both contexts and pointed out that such interactional negotiation is not necessarily useful input for the entire class, as it is usually directed by and at individual students. In the teacher-led context, it serves only as a form of exposure for other class members, who may or may not be listening, whereas such negotiated input directed at a learner in a small group is far more likely to be useful for that learner. Finally, an examination of other-corrections and completions showed those features to be more typical of group work than of teacher-led discussions, thus supporting the arguments for learners' conversational competence made by Porter and by Varonis and Gass.

In a follow-up study, Doughty and Pica (1984) compared language use in teacher-fronted lessons, group work (four students per group), and pair work on a two-way task. The participants, who had the same level of proficiency as those in Pica and Doughty (in press), had to give and obtain information about how flowers were to be planted in a garden. Each started with an individual felt board displaying a different portion of a master plot. At the end of the activity, all participants were supposed to have constructed the same picture, which they compared against the master version then shown to them for the first time. The researchers compared their findings with those from their earlier study, in which a one-way task had been used.

Doughty and Pica found that the two-way task generated significantly more negotiation work than the one-way task in the small-group setting but found no effect for task type in the teacher-led lessons. *Negotiation* was defined as the percentage of "conversational adjustments"; these adjustments included clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks, self- and other-repetitions (both exact and semantic), over the total number of T-units and fragments. Clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks, in particular, increased in frequency (from a total of 6 percent to 24 percent of all T-units and fragments in the small groups) with the switch to a two-way task in the second study.

When task type was held constant, Doughty and Pica found that significantly more negotiation work (again measured by the ratio of conversational adjustments to total T-units and fragments) occurred in the small group (66 percent) and in pair work (68 percent) than in the lockstep format (45 percent), but that the difference in amounts between the small group and pair work was not statistically significant. More total talk was generated in teacher-fronted lessons than in small groups on both types of task, and more total talk on two-way than on one-way tasks in both teacher-fronted and small-group discussions. However, the 33 percent increase in the amount of talk in the small groups for the two-way task was six times greater than the 5 percent increase provided by the two-way task in teacher-led lessons. Teacher-fronted lessons on a two-way task generated the most language use, and small-group discussion on a one-way task produced the least. As Doughty and Pica noted, however, the high total output in the teacher-fronted, one-way discussions was largely achieved by close to 50 percent of the talk being produced by the teachers, whereas teachers could not and did not dominate in this way on the garden-planting (two-way) task. Thus, students talked more on the two-way task, whether working with their teachers or in the four-person groups.

Doughty and Pica also noted that negotiation work as a percentage of total talk was lower in teacher-fronted lessons on both one-way and two-way tasks. This finding, they suggested, may indicate that students are reluctant to indicate a lack of understanding in front of their teacher and an entire class of students and for that reason do not negotiate as much comprehensible input in whole-class settings. This suggestion was supported by the researchers' informal assessment of students' actual comprehension, as judged by their lower success rate on the garden-planting task in the teacher-led than in the small-group discussions. Doughty and Pica concluded by emphasizing the importance not of group work per se, but of the nature of the task which the teacher provides for work done in small groups.

Finally, two nonquantitative studies have contributed insights into interlanguage talk. Bruton and Samuda (1980) studied errors and error treatment in small-group discussions based on various problem-solving tasks. Their learners were adults from a variety of language backgrounds, studying in an intensive course. The main findings were that 1) learners were capable of correcting each other successfully, even though their teachers had not instructed them to do so, and 2) learners were able to employ a variety of different error-treatment strategies, among which were the offering of straight alternatives (i.e., explicit corrections) and the use of repair questions.

In general, the learners' treatments were much like those of their teachers, except that the most frequent errors treated by the learners were lexical items, not syntax or pronunciation. Bruton and Samuda also noted that in ten hours of observation, only once was a correct item changed to an incorrect one by a peer; furthermore, students did not pick up many errors from each other, a finding also reported by Porter (1983). Bruton and Samuda make the point that while learners seemed able to deal with apparent, immediate breakdowns in communication, several other, more subtle types of breakdown occurred which the students did not (and probably could not) treat. They suggest that learners be given an explanation of the various kinds of communication breakdowns that can occur, that they be taught strategies for coping with them, and that they be given explicit error-monitoring tasks during group work.

Somewhat related to this work on error treatment is the analysis by Morrison and Low (1983) of monitoring in non-native discussions. Morrison and Low point out that their subjects, in addition to monitoring their own speech, self-correcting for lexis, syntax, discourse, and truth value without feedback from others and in a highly communicative context, also monitored the output of their interlocutors. This interactive view of monitoring, of making the struggle to communicate "a kind of team effort" (243), includes the kind of negotiation that Varonis and Gass are describing. The transcripts presented by Morrison and Low, however, show a wide divergence in the extent to which groups pay attention to and provide feedback on their members' speech. While some groups seemed to be involved in the topic and helped each other out at every lapse, other groups appeared totally absorbed in their own thoughts and inattentive to the speaker's struggles to communicate.

Summary of Research Findings

The research findings reviewed above appear to support the following claims:

Quantity of practice. Students receive significantly more individual language practice opportunities in group work than in lockstep lessons (Long, Adams, McLean, and Castaños 1976, Doughty and Pica 1984, Pica and Doughty in press). They also receive significantly more practice opportunities in NNS/NNS than in NS/NNS dyads (Porter 1983), more when the other NNS has greater rather than equal proficiency in the SL (Porter 1983), and more in two-way than in one-way tasks (Doughty and Pica 1984).

Variety of practice. The range of language functions (rhetorical, pedagogic, and interpersonal) practiced by individual students is

wider in group work than in lockstep teaching (Long, Adams, McLean, and Castaños 1976).

Accuracy of student production. Students perform at the same level of grammatical accuracy in their SL output in unsupervised group work as in "public" lockstep work conducted by the teacher (Pica and Doughty in press). Similarly, the level of accuracy is the same whether the interlocutor in a dyad is a native or a non-native speaker (Porter 1983).

Correction. The frequency of other-correction and completions by students is higher in group work than in lockstep teaching (Pica and Doughty in press) and is not significantly different with NS and NNS interlocutors in small-group work, being very low in both contexts (Porter 1983). There seems to be considerable individual variability in the amount of attention students pay to their own and others' speech (Gaies 1983b, Morrison and Low 1983), however, and some indication that training students to correct each other can help remedy this (Bruton and Samuda 1980). During group work, learners seem more apt to repair lexical errors, whereas teachers pay an equal amount of attention to errors of syntax and pronunciation (Bruton and Samuda 1980). Learners almost never *mis*correct during unsupervised group work (Bruton and Samuda 1980, Porter 1983).

Negotiation. Students engage in more negotiation for meaning in the small group than in teacher-fronted, whole-class settings (Doughty and Pica 1984). NNS/NNS dyads engage in as much or more negotiation work than NS/NNS dyads (Porter 1983, Varonis and Gass 1983). In small groups, learners negotiate more with other learners who are at a different level of SL proficiency (Porter 1983, Varonis and Gass 1983) and more with learners from different first language backgrounds (Varonis and Gass 1983).

Task. Previous work on NS/NNS conversation has found two-way tasks to produce significantly more negotiation work than one-way tasks (Long 1980, 1981). The findings for interlanguage talk have been less clear, with one study (Gass and Varonis in press) not finding this pattern and another (Pica and Doughty in press) *appearing* not to do so, but actually not employing a genuine two-way task. The latest study of this issue (Doughty and Pica 1984), which *did* use a two-way task, that is, one *requiring* information exchange by both or all parties, supports the original claim for the importance of task type, with the two-way task significantly increasing the amount of talk, the amount of negotiation work, and—to judge impressionistically—the level of input comprehended by students, as measured by their task achievement. Finally, it seems that familiarity with a task decreases the amount of negotiation work it produces (Gass and Varonis in press).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The research findings on interlanguage talk generally support the claims commonly made for group work. Increases in the amount and variety of language practice available through group work are clearly two of its most attractive features, and these have obvious appeal to teachers of almost any methodological persuasion.

The fact that the level of accuracy maintained in unsupervised groups has been found to be as high as that in teacher-monitored, lockstep work should help to allay fears that lower quality is the price to be paid for higher quantity of practice. The same is true of the findings that monitoring and correction occur spontaneously (although variably) in group work and that it seems possible to improve both through student training in correction techniques, if that is thought desirable. The apparently spontaneous occurrence of other-correction probably diminishes the importance sometimes attached to designation of one student in each group as leader, with special responsibility for monitoring accuracy. However, group leaders may still be needed for other reasons, such as ensuring that a task is carried out in the manner the teacher or materials writer intended. (See Long 1977 for further details concerning the logistics of organizing group work in the classroom.)

For many teachers, of course, concern about errors occurring and/or going uncorrected has diminished in recent years, since second language acquisition research has shown errors to be an inevitable, even "healthy," part of language development. In fact, some teachers have been persuaded by theories of second language acquisition, such as Krashen's (1982) Monitor Theory, and/or by new teaching methods, such as the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983), to focus exclusively on communicative language use from the very earliest stages of instruction. Many others, while not abandoning attention to form altogether, are eager to ensure that their lessons contain sizable portions of communication work, even though this will inevitably involve errors.

For such teachers, the most interesting findings of the research on interlanguage talk do not concern quantity and variety of language practice or accuracy and correction, but rather, the negotiation work in NNS/NNS conversation. The findings of each of five studies which have looked at the issue of whether learners can accomplish as much or more of this kind of practice working together as with a NS are very encouraging.

The related finding that students of mixed SL proficiencies tend to obtain more practice in negotiation than same-proficiency dyads suggests that when students with the same needs are working in small groups on the *same* materials or tasks, teachers of mixed-ability

classes would do well to opt for heterogeneous (over homogeneous) ability grouping, unless additional considerations dictate otherwise. The fact that groups of mixed native language backgrounds tend to achieve greater amounts of negotiation also suggests grouping of students of mixed language backgrounds together where possible. For many teachers of multilingual classes, this would in any case be preferable, since it is one means of avoiding the development of "classroom dialects" intelligible only to speakers of a common first language—a phenomenon also avoidable through students having access to speakers of other target language varieties in lockstep work or outside the classroom.

The finding concerning mixed first language groups does *not* mean, of course, that group work will be unsuccessful in monolingual classrooms, which is the norm in many EFL situations. To reiterate, the research shows clearly that the kind of negotiation work of interest here is also very successfully obtained in groups of students of the *same* first language background. Things simply seem slightly better with mixed language groups.

Finally, the findings of research to date on interlanguage talk offer mixed evidence for the claimed advantages of two-way over one-way tasks in NS-NNS conversation. However, recent work on this issue seems to indicate that the claims are probably justified in the NNS-NNS context, too. Further, it appears to be the *combination* of small-group work (including pair work) with two-way tasks that is especially beneficial to learners in terms of the amount of talk produced, the amount of negotiation work produced, and the amount of *comprehensible* input obtained.

In this light, teachers might think it desirable to include as many two-way tasks as possible among the activities students carry out in small groups. It is obviously useful to have students work on one-way tasks, such as telling a story which the listener does not know or describing a picture which the listener attempts to draw on the basis of the description alone. However, because one participant starts with all the information in such tasks, the other group members have nothing to "bargain" with; this limits the ability of the latter to negotiate the way the conversation develops. (Some one-way tasks in fact become monologues rather than conversations.)

In conclusion, it should be remembered that group work is not a panacea. Teacher-fronted work is obviously useful for certain kinds of classroom activities, and poorly conceived or organized group work can be as ineffective as badly run lockstep lessons. Furthermore, additional information is still needed on such issues as the optimum size, composition, and internal organization of groups; about the structuring and management of tasks to be done in groups;

and about the relationship between group work and teacher-led instruction.

Despite these caveats, the authors are encouraged by the initial findings of what we hope will develop into a coherent and cumulative line of classroom-oriented research: studies of interlanguage talk. Together with theoretical advances concerning the role of input in second language acquisition, the studies we have reviewed have already contributed a psycholinguistic rationale to the existing pedagogical arguments for group work in the SL classroom. ■

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