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Assia Slimani-Rolls

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What is This?

Rethinking task-based language learning: what we can learn from the learners

Assia Slimani-Rolls *European Business School London*

To investigate the use, or otherwise, of conversational adjustments (CAs), in a normal instructional setting, the quality of speech generated during meaning negotiation, and learner perception of the task under study, a quantitative and a qualitative analysis was carried out of language produced in a dyadic set-up in a one-way information task, a two-way information task and a decision-making task. The study revealed that the quantitative analysis supported the results usually found in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies: that the use of CAs generated by the 10 dyads in the two-way communication task was indeed significantly higher than in the one-way task and the decision-making task. However, while the overall group's quantitative behaviour confirms the use of CAs, the qualitative analysis shows that the individuals' performance in their use differs widely within and across task types. Learner idiosyncrasy is therefore perhaps a far more important phenomenon than commonality, and learners' perception of the task may be much more relevant than its logical construction. Both aspects, learner idiosyncrasy and learner perception of tasks, suggest that predictability will be a perennial problem, not just a temporary technical one that some imaginative task designers will soon resolve. This calls into question the desirability of output predictability as an aim for task-based materials design. The report ends with further emphasis on the value of including learners in the development of understanding of classroom life.

I Introduction

Tasks have played a central role in SLA research and have brought SLA and language pedagogy together. From the 1980s up till now, particular

Address for correspondence: Assia Slimani-Rolls, European Business School London, Regents College, Inner Circle, Regents Park, London NW1 4NS; e-mail: ebsl@regents.ac.uk

task types have embodied the theoretical foundations proposed by some SLA researchers, on the basis of which they strongly recommend them to classroom practitioners. Tasks have themselves become an object of enquiry since through the manipulation of psycholinguistically motivated task features, researchers use tasks to attempt to influence interactional outcomes to test whether language acquisition happens according to their proposed theories. In language teaching, tasks are seen as important vehicles providing learners with the means to develop communicative competence by experiencing language as it is used outside the class. Tasks appear to be an ideal construct to link the fields of SLA and language pedagogy (Pica, 1997; Ellis, 2003).

Unfortunately, space precludes more than a very brief summary of the research background to the present study. Suffice it to say initially that there is a general consensus among researchers such as Long (1988, 1989); Varonis and Gass (1985); Doughty and Pica (1986); Pica (1987); Pica *et al*. (1993) that the use of two-way information tasks in group work and pair work (involving learners in sharing essential information initially distributed only partially to each member) provides favourable settings for learners to negotiate meaning, via the conversational adjustments (CAs) they make in interaction.

This consensus in favour of two-way tasks for language classrooms is challenged by other studies (Duff, 1986; Nakahama *et al*., 2001), suggesting that the two-way task cannot pretend any general supremacy over the one-way task. Varonis and Gass (1985) and Jauregi (1990, in Ondarra, 1997) found that it was, in fact, the one-way task that generated more meaning negotiation. Thus, if the aim of negotiation studies is to isolate the most effective task type to impact on language acquisition in the classroom, they have done little but suggest that a commonsense use of a balanced diet of one-way and two-way tasks is currently the safest way for teachers.

The results of studies on implicit and explicit feedback (see Doughty and Varela, 1998, and compare Samuda, 2001) are similarly mixed and suggest that currently a balanced diet of task characteristics hypothesized to be conducive to language acquisition would be a sensible approach to task choice. This is a rather disappointing outcome for a research line characterized as positivistic and computational in its attempts to manipulate task features to single out precisely those that are most effective in achieving L2 development. Moreover, these features interact in complex

ways and little is known about the nature of the interaction that arises in these meaning negotiation events. It is precisely the nature of interaction that the present paper will later examine in detail.

Although SLA researchers generally acknowledge the effects of social context on task performance (Pica, 1987), and the importance of learner factors (Plough and Gass, 1993), it is evident that learner characteristics and learner perception of tasks have not been fully taken into account. In the process of attempting to predict the outcomes of task-as-work-plan rather than task-as-process (Breen, 1987), SLA researchers have obviously overlooked the crucial relevance of the socio-psychological climate that animates learner behaviour during task implementation. This view is echoed by one of the 13 teachers and MA TESOL students who, asked about their views on the task-based research reported in Ellis (2003), responded that 'they (SLA researchers) ignore factors inside the learner and outside the classroom to concentrate in a rather narrow way on the tasks and measurable acquisition resulting from them … . Also the psychological side is missing; the learners' relationships with each other and with the teacher … and the attitude of the learner to learning itself' (Block, 2004: 21). These are indeed social and psychological factors that undoubtedly affect, positively or negatively, the development of interactive events in the classroom. As seen above, through the manipulation of tasks characteristics, SLA researchers appear to treat learners as passive recipients who will react predictably to stimuli.

It is clear that very little attention has been paid to learners' views on the use of CAs, the nature of the interaction and the quality of speech produced when they are involved in the two-way tasks so highly recommended to teachers. Aware of the SLA researchers' recommendations, as a Subject Leader and academic adviser to the French section where I teach, I always encouraged my colleagues to include two-way information exchange tasks in their own battery of tasks until I decided to examine, with a colleague, the actual difference these make to the nature of the interaction they produce. As a teacher researcher, I believe that there is a need to develop mutual understanding of the working of tasks, not only as predicted by academic researchers on the basis of simple frequency counts of interactional strategies but also as reacted to by learners themselves learning in a 'normal' instructional setting – not a setting where learners have 'volunteered their time or had been "lent" by their teacher' (Foster, 1998: 3–4). The present paper proposes then to contribute to

instructed SLA studies primarily by focusing on the learners' reactions to the process of meaning negotiation, or lack of it.

II The research study

To enhance the study with the hitherto absent qualitative dimension, and to allow for serious consideration of individual differences, the following research questions have been addressed:

1) What is, in a dyadic set-up, the quantitative occurrence of CAs in the two-way task as opposed to the one-way task and the decision-making task?
2) How and why do learners actually modify their interaction when involved in the meaning negotiation process?
3) How do learners explain their involvement, or lack of it, in the meaning negotiation process?

1 The subjects

They were 20 students from an international higher education establishment in London studying towards a Bachelor's degree in International Business Administration with French for Business Purposes as a foreign language. There were eight females and 12 males aged between 20 and 23 years from a variety of linguistic backgrounds: Austria, Italy, Germany, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden. They spoke at least two languages – their native language and English, the medium of instruction. They were placed in the intermediate-level group as assessed by a written test and an oral interview. At the point of data collection, they were in the second year of their four-year programme. Prior to the observational period they had already received 12 weeks of instruction in their respective language group, meeting twice a week for 2 hours. Their grouping patterns were therefore already well established.

2 The tasks

Three distinctly different task types, all part of routine teaching procedures, were administered to dyads with different native languages. As a teacher researcher, I was concerned about involving the learners in the

search for a better understanding of the working of tasks as we normally use them in the classroom. After all, learners are the prime target of this whole enterprise and the search for a better understanding should include them in the investigation. It was only after Zhang (2004) addressed a series of questions to her students and involved them in the search for a better understanding of the events which controlled her reading classes that all parties concerned started to see what was needed to make the teaching sessions better for all involved.

a Decision-making tasks: 'business plan':   Decision-making tasks are tasks in which participants work together towards choosing, among many alternatives, the goal that suits them best (Pica and Doughty, 1985; Doughty and Pica, 1986; Duff, 1986). In this study, the learners first read a text informing them about the various niches for opening a restaurant in Paris. The recorded task consisted then of asking each partner to discuss the type of restaurant that he or she would launch in Paris as well as the marketing strategies that he or she would use to ensure the success of this business plan. Both partners had to work to a convergent goal as they each held parts of the finance.

b One-way information exchange task: 'describing a celebrity':   One-way tasks are tasks not requiring information exchange and are therefore referred to as 'optional exchange' tasks. In this study, the dyads first saw a video about an influential entrepreneur followed by a discussion of his personal and professional qualities and the innovative strategies he used to build up numerous companies. For the recorded one-way task, each learner had to present to his or her partner the personality whose achievement impressed him or her most in the world of business, science, art, or politics. Each partner took turns in describing his or her chosen character. Clearly in this case, while the speakers provided information, their partners were not requested to supply any. They might very well accomplish their role of listening without much intervention if they chose not to check their understanding.

c Two-way information exchange task: 'French household expenditure':   Two-way information gap tasks are tasks whereby each person holds

information the other must acquire to be able to carry out the task successfully (following Long, 1980 in Doughty and Pica, 1986). In the present study, the learners first read a text on products made popular by the effective use of marketing strategies. Exercises then followed, which taught the learners to express increases and decreases of trends and products with a wide range of lexis. The recorded two-way task consisted of giving each partner an incomplete table providing statistics on the increases and decreases in French household spending during the years 1970, 1980, 1993, with predictions for 2000. Each side of the dyad had to complete his or her part of the table by asking their partner to provide the missing data and, also, propose possible explanations for these changes (Appendix A).

In summary, the study involves three distinct task types: (1) the decision-making task in which information flows between partners depending on their interests and personal preferences; (2) the one-way task in which the listener's contribution is entirely optional; and (3) the two-way task involving learners in a relationship of mutual request for and supply of information, converging to the same goal. As seen earlier, this task type responds, at least in description, to the characteristics of communicative tasks expected to lead ultimately to successful classroom SLA (Pica *et al*., 1993).

3 Data collection

The 20 students were studying in two groups. The 'normal' classroom environment was protected as far as possible and the teacher of each group acted as a researcher to gather the data. The tasks, part of classroom routine, were not used in any special way and therefore there was no reason for the students to discuss them outside the class with the other group. To familiarize the participants with the recording procedure, dyads were given the opportunity to record themselves, once a week for the two weeks preceding the research data collection. Each of the three weekly recording sessions for the actual data collection took place on the same day of the week for each group during the usual timetabled sessions.

In order to eradicate the practice-on-task effect, the order of task administration among the two groups was counterbalanced, as indicated below.

	Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**
Group 1	Two-way task	Decision-making task	One-way task
Group 2:	One-way task	Two-way task	Decision-making task

At the end of the three-week observational period, the respective teachers listened to the audio-recordings and identified places where the meaning was obscure but learners had not signalled any difficulty in understanding their interlocutor. For particularly problematic cases, subjects were then asked to listen to the tape, look at the transcript and explain why they had not signalled their lack of understanding despite the obvious lack of clarity.

4 Transcription and coding

All the tapes were transcribed (see Allwright, 1991: 222 for transcription conventions) and coded for meaning negotiation and modified interaction.

- *Meaning negotiation*: In order to measure the incidence of negotiation for meaning, the transcripts were coded according to Long (1980) for *comprehension checks* (expressions used by the speaker to establish that his or her preceding utterances have been understood by the addressee); *confirmation checks* (elicitations produced by the addressee to confirm that he or she understood or heard correctly the previous speaker's utterance) and *clarification requests* (elicitations requesting clarifications of the speaker's preceding utterances).
- *Modified interaction*: To measure modified interaction, the transcripts were coded according to four further categories: *semantic modifications* (through synonym, paraphrase, or example); *morphological modifications* (through addition, substitution, or deletion of inflectional morphemes and/or functors); *phonological modifications*; and *syntactic modifications* (through embedding and elaboration in clauses). Definitions are from Pica *et al*. (1989).

III Data analysis

A full quantitative analysis has been performed on the data, but only a very brief summary will be presented here, to make room for the more important qualitative analysis and general discussion.

1 Meaning negotiation

There were 73 instances overall of meaning negotiation, but only confirmation checks (28 = 38%) and clarification requests (45 = 62%) actually occurred. Across the task-types, as expected, the two-way context provided the most (41 = 56%), the one-way task least (11 = 15%), with the decision-making task between them (21 = 29%). But these figures are subject to strong individual differences. Fully 60% of the examples came from only 25% of the learners, with another 25% of the learners contributing none at all. This general disparity is also found in the two-way task taken separately, with just 19% of the learners (3) producing 56% (23) of the 41 occurrences, and 25% (4) of the learners producing none.

Hence, while the group's overall quantitative production of CAs suggests that task type is influential, examination of individual performance casts doubt on this suggestion, and suggests that any pedagogical importance given to simple average frequency of occurrence in the discourse is easily exaggerated.

Relevant here also is the finding illustrated below that in the two-way task type, multiple occurrences of CAs in the same episode may well be the result of communicative inefficiency rather than of any in-depth meaning negotiation, and thus distort the picture further.

Example 1

1. G: C'est autres bien durables.	(It's other non-perishable goods)
→ **2. C: hein? Autres?**	(Uh? other?) **[A clear clarification request (CR)]**
3. G: autres biens durables	(other non perishable goods) **[Straight repetition]**
4. C: biens du…rables	(peri…shable goods) [slowly repeating while writing]
5. G: uhuh	(uhuh)
→ **6. C: durables? Qu'est-ce que c'est?**	(non perishable? What is it?) **[Another clear CR about lexis]**
7. G: b - i - e - n - s d - u - r - a - b - l - e - s.	**[provision of spelling]**
→ **8. C: Mais qu'est-ce que c'est?**	(But what is it?) **[Again, another CR for the same item]**
9. G: C'est comme la télévision, l'ordinateur	(It is like a television, a computer) **[provision of examples]**
10. C: Je pense l'ordinateur n'est pas très ménager	(I don't think a computer is a house hold product) [C is not satisfied with the answer]
11. G: [silence]	[no reaction from G]

| 12. C: Ok, Ok, le numéro suivant? | (Ok, Ok. Next item?) [Frustrated, he gives up and goes back to completing the table which, as he claimed at interview, he sees as the prime target of the task]. |

By scoring three CRs, C might appear, to negotiation advocates, to be a negotiation-oriented individual. However, after three attempts, C still had not obtained a satisfactory response from G. How many more times could he try to force a response out of his partner, without jeopardizing, as he explained at interview, his relationship with her? This is one of the rare instances where a learner genuinely requested a piece of information but fear of antagonizing his peer stopped him from enquiring any further. He ignored his learning need and pretended that all was well.

Hence the qualitative analysis of the CAs generated by the two-way task uncovered at least three problems: (1) the range of individual differences; (2) the inflationary distortion that exclusive consideration of frequency of occurrence may bring; leading to the conclusion that (3) 'the more the merrier', in Aston's terms, may be quite wrong for some learners, if not all (see Aston, 1986, and also Allwright, 1980).

Previous negotiation studies have been quantitatively motivated, neither qualitatively analysing the use of CAs by individual learners, as reported above, nor analysing the learners' motives behind the use of CAs in the two-way task, which is discussed below.

2 Meaning modification

In the two-way task, apart from six cases of requests for lexis and spelling, most of the CRs (23 out of 29) and all the CCs (12 out of 12) occurred in situations where listeners simply confirmed that they understood, recalled or heard correctly the speakers' utterances. So 35 (85%) out of 41 (29 + 12) cases of so-called comprehension problems were cleared through straight reiterations reassuring listeners they had indeed got the right information, rather than pursuing deeper issues of meaning.

Example 2

O: Bien. La deuxième section, c'est l'habillement y compris les chaussures. (Right. The next section is about clothing including shoes).

J: l'habillement (clothing)? **[Clarification request]**

O: h - a - b - I - l - l - e- m - e - n - t [provision of unrequested spelling] y compris les chaussures.

J: C'est les vêtements (It's clothing)? ['vêtement' is a synonym for 'habillement']

O: Oui, les vêtements. (Yes, clothing.)

This anxiety about getting the missing information was particularly obvious in the two-way task as opposed to the one-way task or the decision-making task where listeners were observed to let large chunks of discourse pass without formulating any query. Conversely, modified interaction in the decision-making task (8 cases out of 21) and in the one-way task (4 cases out of 11) seems to be happening through interesting elaboration and reformulation. In this study, then, and contrary to the claims made by two-way task proponents, it is the decision-making task and the one-way task that prompted the learners most effectively to modify their output in a meaningful way. Their two-way task behaviour is very sensible of students. They are given a straight communication task so they adopt communication strategies, not learning ones.

Their behaviour also suggests that learners' perception of the task is crucial to their way of working on it. To my knowledge, previous studies have not looked at what actually motivates meaning negotiation in the completion of tasks, or at whether the use of CAs is truly related to a substantial lack of comprehension.

So far we have seen that, although it offers the task characteristics recommended by Pica *et al.* (1993), our two-way exchange task does not seem to stimulate learners to negotiate their meaning for the purpose of deeper comprehension. All the learners seem to be preoccupied with is obtaining missing content information. Platt and Brooks (1994) suggest that students within a specific classroom culture may give high priority to completing the task over their interlocutors' input incomprehensibility.

Similarly to some previous studies (Duff, 1986; Nakahama *et al.*, 2001), the analysis has, so far, revealed that the one-way task and the decision-making task offer more scope for meaningful negotiation and prompt learners to produce more complex input modification.

Thus little meaning negotiation happens in the two-way task and the little that happens seems motivated by the learners' eagerness to complete the task rather than clarify real cases of incomprehension. So to find out about their reticence in clarifying their peer's discourse, I asked learners, at interview, to explain why they had not asked for clarifications when it appeared on the tape and the transcripts that they had clearly not understood their interlocutor.

*3 How learners explain their involvement, or lack of it,
in the meaning negotiation process*

The following excerpt from the follow-up interviews shows that maximizing the quantitative use of CAs is, from the point of view of the learners, pointless and irrelevant to real-life classroom situations.

Example 3

Teacher (T): Here you said 'I understand' when O is obviously struggling for words. What helped you come to the conclusion that you agree on the type of clients. Why didn't you ask M to be more specific?

O: He's talking about young people, you know, young people, unmarried without children, they tend to eat out. <u>I added my own ideas</u> to understand what he was saying. I took a course in marketing that gave me the factors according to which I can measure people's spending habits. May be M (his partner) was trying to use those ideas. That's why I understood. I don't have to understand every word, <u>sometimes just a key word helps clarify everything. If I interrupt constantly, it gets difficult</u>. I'd rather let him finish as long as I have the main idea. Sometimes, I don't even listen to everything because I got the gist and I <u>get myself ready</u> for my turn to respond. <u>Also the rest of the class was about to finish</u>.

The comments made by O to explain the paucity of his restructuring moves confirm the views of the many researchers who consider social processes as crucial variables in language learning. One does not always need to understand everything that the interlocutor says. People catch on to conversation by using whatever clues are offered by their knowledge of social appropriateness (Hymes, 1972), the rules of speaking (Paulston, 1974) and their knowledge of the world in general. Guessing, a strategy used by O above, comes up as a major attribute of good language learners (Rubin, 1975) and a crucial technique to encourage learners to adopt for expanding their vocabulary (Twaddell, 1973: 61). In fact, joining a group and behaving as if they understand what is going on is the advice that Fillmore *et al*. (1979) give to learners. 'Faking' comprehension is also echoed in Hawkins (1985), Swain (1985) and Aston (1986). The strategy of 'pretend and hope', rather than 'check and clarify', as used by Foster's subjects (1998: 19) seems, in fact, closer to what actually happens in real-life situations.

In their attempts to promote the use of CAs in two-way tasks, interaction study researchers have overlooked the fact that, as suggested by Aston (1986), an abnormally frequent use of these strategies can jeopardize social interaction in general and social rapport in particular.

Legitimate cognitive, affective and social factors are used by the learners of this study to justify their lack of meaning negotiation:

> **Example 4**
>
> (T): Why didn't you say I don't understand you here?
> C: I don't think we actually tell each other 'no, I don't understand you'. I'm not sure why we don't. <u>May be it feels embarrassing to say 'what do you mean'</u>. I can't remember when I actually asked a person 'what do you mean by this'. We just help each other.
> [Then, he emphatically added:]
> In any case, that was not the aim of the task. <u>The aim was to complete the table</u>.

Learner C's reticence in using CAs illustrates Allwright's concern (1996a, b) that conflicts seem typically to be resolved in favour of saving the social rather than the pedagogic value systems. Rather than satisfy his learning curiosity, C ignored his interlocutor's discoursal obscurities to preserve his relationship with his partner. In Allwright's terms, he chose to 'get along' with his peer rather than 'get on' with his learning. Through this absence of meaning negotiation, learners display solidarity and mutual acceptance in their common learning enterprise. If such complex socio-affective dimension*s* are ignored, then the surface of the discourse cannot possibly reveal much about the interaction itself (Breen, 2001).

In this study, learners pretend to understand and accept their classmates' distorted discourse because, they claim, as for O, that it does not get in the way of communication, and because they, as asserted earlier by O, perceive it as their teacher's responsibility to react to incorrect language, not their own. The teacher will certainly correct a learner saying 'elle est fou' rather than 'elle est folle' but, in classroom life or anywhere else for that matter, this type of error does not impede communication and therefore no one, except a teacher or a language pedant, gives it a second thought. In other words, interactionist literature assumes a one-to-one relationship between the incidence of meaning negotiation and language development by focusing on the observable and countable features of the discourse without considering the possibility that learners do also have their own perception of tasks.

Furthermore, the above extracts clearly indicate that classroom interaction is not free from fear of face loss and does not necessarily provide, as claimed by Varonis and Gass (1985: 87), a 'non-threatening forum', where interactants can freely display their ignorance through constant requests for elucidation; unless they are, as implied by Aston (1986) and

Foster (1998), laboratory subjects. Davies (2000; quoted in Block 2003) found that the exchanges of her Japanese students of English were more motivated by saving each other's positive and negative face than by a concern for task completion.

A rationale for the scarcity of meaning negotiation comes from Varonis and Gass (1985) who found that the low level of meaning negotiation was due to the familiarity of the learners with the task and also with one another. However, familiarity is an inescapable fact of classroom life and it should be considered a blessing, not an affliction. Of course, as people get to know each other well they inevitably spend less energy on negotiating, because they already know each other's likely position. This is indeed the case of the present study of learners who were frequently observed to fill in for one another and to manage to understand rather obscure stretches of discourse because of their familiarity with the business context of the task and with their classmates. Gunn found that learners developed their own strategies to lead interviews successfully, and explains that 'perhaps part of communicative competence is in knowing how to keep the conversation going, which includes knowing when to feign understanding and when to change the subject' (2003: 249; see also below).

Having constantly to negotiate one's position is frustrating. Thus, creating artificial unfamiliarity in the classroom is not pedagogically attractive, except maybe occasionally. Allwright (2000: 8) explains that as learners become better 'at negotiating for truly useful opportunities' they spend more time on task 'performance' rather than task 'management'. This is evident in this study where we see learners simply providing their partners with the necessary pieces of information to complete the task rather than elaborately 'managing' a task whose objectives are perfectly clear.

Another plausible reason for the scarcity of meaning negotiation, and reinforcing the importance of the learners' perceptions of tasks, was put forward by J:

Example 5

T: Here you say 'very good, very good' despite the fact that S is struggling for words?

J: S didn't know the right word. I didn't stop her because … that would interrupt her train of thought. She tried to express a real difficult sentence and euh I just wanted to make her feel comfortable by telling her I understood,

> just making her feel comfortable, I guess. If we have a task to negotiate, I will not stop her for everything I don't understand or euh anything … wrong but I will ask for content questions rather euh rather than single words and I think that's what the task is about. For example, if I said I didn't understand this word and she explains it to me, I would lose the word after 2 minutes anyway because I'm concentrating on the story not on this word. It's much more euh important to get the content … and ask questions about what she's saying rather than how she's saying it. I think so but I don't know.

J shows that he clearly has his own views on what a task is about, and also he highlights, rather eloquently, two importantly problematic aspects of meaning negotiation. First, he echoes again Allwright's concern that, inevitably, learners react to social motives at the expense of their own pedagogical advancement, to preserve their social relationships. Secondly, he stresses the irrelevance of focusing on particular words or interactive episodes as negotiation studies do. Skehan (1998) explains that the type of conversational behaviour reported in negotiation studies is primarily local in character. It shows how particular language aspects are highlighted through quantitative use of interactional modifications but fails to indicate what happens to them in relation to longer-term language progress. Skehan argues that the consequent difficulty for a task-based syllabus, as advocated by Long and colleagues, is that it emphasizes 'communication', thus increasing reliance on communication strategies and lexically based language. Such conditions do not, in practice, provide systematic means for driving language development (see Skehan and Foster, 2001 for further discussion).

IV Summary and conclusions

Responding to the initial research questions, I have argued that the input produced in the two-way task does not support the idea that it actually drives language development forward. The inherent characteristics of two-way task design seem to focus learners' attention on getting the missing information without engaging in much meaning negotiation. Where meaning negotiation happens, the use of interactional modifications is apparently ineffective, lexically based and quantitatively easily inflated. Conversely, the one-way and decision-making tasks, regarded by negotiation studies as less productive, seem to offer more scope for language manipulation and more opportunities for genuine communication.

More importantly, including the learners in the investigation and investigating their explanations of their motives and attitudes towards the lack of use of meaning negotiation highlight their behaviour as being highly idiosyncratic and therefore unpredictable. Moreover, this learner input shows them to be active participants with their own views and perceptions of how to handle tasks. Their perceptions have revealed cognitive, personal variables and social pressures as determining features underlying their speech production. Talking to learners has therefore been very revealing, and has shown that they can be expected to make a strong contribution to developing understanding in future, their own and others.

This paper is a move towards a promising line of research suggested by Allwright (2003), who places great emphasis on bringing together everyone involved in the teaching/learning enterprise to develop mutually beneficial understandings of the phenomena controlling life in the classroom. This holistic approach, called Exploratory Practice (EP), is motivated by the following principles: put 'quality of life' first; work primarily to understand language classroom life; involve everybody; work to bring people together; work for mutual development; integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice; make the work a continuous enterprise (2003: 129-30). The aim is to encourage teachers, not only academic researchers, to participate with their learners, in their own familiar and therefore sustainable ways, in the search for a better understanding of what goes on in their classrooms.

In this study, my collaboration as a teacher-researcher with the learners has, through analysis of transcripts informed by learner interviews, revealed a host of affective, social and cognitive variables which helped me understand both why my students managed to make sense of obscure interactive episodes without requesting any clarifications; and subsequently why two-way exchange tasks will remain just part of a battery of tasks until further research suggests otherwise.

Gunn (2003) used the principles of EP to promote a better understanding of communicative competence and help her learners to develop it. She asked her learners, for their language lessons, to organize interviews with native speakers, transcribe them and then discuss, through student-teacher review, the interactive episodes where misunderstanding happened. Gunn explains that it was not always possible through oral work alone to find out whether or not learners understood their interlocutors'

speech. She cites herself mistaking for a clarification request a genuine question that the student addressed to the interviewee. Most of the communicative misunderstandings became accessible through Gunn's collaboration with the students, who pinpointed during the student-teacher review what they actually did not understand. Gunn found, as I have, that despite the lack of clarity in their interlocutors' discourse, they successfully maintained conversation without using clarification strategies. This lack of clarity seems to be uniquely important to 'academic' researchers of negotiation studies because they seem to analyse the surface structure of their subjects' discourse in complete isolation from its situational context.

Gunn showed that through teacher-researcher and learner co-operation, she managed to help her students become aware of the circumstances leading to incomprehension. Through the analysis of the student-teacher review, both parties realized that incomprehension and misunderstanding are in themselves quite complex, not linear, clear cut and straightforward. Above all, she realized that she should not expect her teaching to show immediately in her students' performance. For other insightful studies, see the 7(2) issue (May 2003) of *Language Teaching Research,* which is entirely devoted to Exploratory Practice.

More recently, Zhang (2004), as noted earlier, abandoned her traditional problem-solving ways of trying to sort out one by one the obstacles that spoilt her reading classes. Instead, following the EP principles, she adopted a holistic attitude and decided to concentrate on understanding life in the classroom, by including her students in the investigation. The series of questions she directed to them guided her into devising a classroom management system that successfully put the students in charge of working towards the development of their own reading skills in a way that was appealing and beneficial to all those involved.

One fundamental aim of Exploratory Practice is to attempt to develop a better understanding of a problematic teaching and learning situation prior to, or instead of, changing anything. Doughty and Pica (1986) and Pica (1987), however, assert that 'to be effective, group interaction must be carefully planned … to include requirement for a two-way or a multi-way exchange of information' (1987: 323). Crucially, it was not by planning ahead in isolation of the learners that the present author, Gunn and Zhang developed better understandings of their working environment. In fact, Zhang's careful pedagogic planning had to be abandoned because

it did not respond to the expectations of the learners, who had clear views of what reading classes should or should not include.

In effect, Breen (1987), who distinguishes between 'task-as-work-plan' and 'task-in-process', remains rather dubious about the effect of planning. He claims that, once in their hands, 'learners are capable of playing havoc with even the most carefully designed and much-used task' (1987: 23). Willis (1996) argues that organizing a task for the learners to approach it in some predictable ways, to encourage preplanned behaviour, is quasi-impossible because in the process of carrying it out, learners reinterpret the task in their own terms and, like the learners of this study, may perceive its classroom purpose differently from the teacher (Kumaradivelu, 1991; Gore, 1995).

I would like to finish this article by presenting a final excerpt from two students who illustrate perfectly well the views of the above researchers and also illustrate the point that predictability is, as all teachers know very well, often defeated by learners' characteristics and reactions during the implementation of tasks. The following one-way task would have been aborted in seconds but for the understanding and support that J gave to his interlocutor. Aware of her shyness, her confident partner J came to her rescue by asking her whether she was Cambodian and why she chose to describe such a personality. Given the opportunity to restart the task by speaking about her own origins, S continued the task, reassured at various intervals by J who signalled sympathy, interest and understanding through nodding positively and emitting comforting words such as 'très bien', 'c'est bien'. Hence their task was completed in 7.4 minutes rather than the seconds it would have taken had J not intervened so constructively.

Example 6

J: S, qui est cette personne très connue?	S, who is this well known person?
S: [rire] umh … (inaudible … nom de la personne). Tu connais? Le femme politique dans Cambodia?	[laugh] umh … (inaudible, name of the person) Do you know this political woman in Cambodia?
J: Une femme politique?	A political woman?
S: Oui, qui est euh est à la tête du mouvement euh. Démocratique.	Yes, she is euh the leader of the democratic movement.
J: une politicienne female?	A female politician?
S: Oui, oui. Elle est euh à la tête de la révolution dans Combodia. Elle euh mais oui, **c'est tout**.	Yes, yes. She is the leader of the Revolution in Cambodia. She euh and yes, **that's all.**
J: C'est tout? Mais tu es du Cambodge, non?	Is that all? But you are from Cambodia, no?

S:	Non, non (elle rit). Je suis moitié chinoise et moitié suisse.	No, no (laughs). I am half Chinese and half Suisse.
J:	Alors pourquoi une politicienne du Cambodge?	So why a political woman from Cambodia?
S:	Parcequ'elle euh à mon avis euh elle a beaucoup de courage …	Because, she euh to my mind she is very brave …

This study has shown learners clearly pretending to understand and accepting their classmates' distorted discourse because their personal characteristics, their perception of the task and their personal circumstances *vis-à-vis* themselves and their classmates, none of which can possibly be predicted by the teacher, can, as also shown by Slimani-Rolls (2003), heavily affect the implementation of teaching sessions. When analysing what, at times, prevented group work from functioning as expected, Slimani-Rolls found the influence of one single individual learner could suffice to exert an impact on the overall learning experience. She also found that the relationships students have with each other outside the class can influence heavily the group dynamic and 'prevent "expected" interactive events, perhaps events crucial to the teacher's plan, from happening at all' (2003: 230).

Learners have indicated that they were preoccupied with various other social, affective and cognitive considerations that inevitably influence classroom language learning. These matters do not necessarily appear on the surface of the discourse but they are, undoubtedly, bound to interfere, positively or negatively, with the participants' language progress. Breen (1985) put it well many years ago when he stated that it is quite optimistic to hope to explain the learning effects of discourse by solely examining its observable features. He spoke of the 'need of a metaphor for the classroom through which teachers and learners can be viewed as thinking social actors and not reduced to generators of input-output nor analysed as dualities of either conceptual or social beings' (1985: 14).

Other authors have warned against the sole reliance on observational data (Allwright, 1988), against SLA's relatively positivistic perspective (Van Lier, 1996), and called for wider means of enquiry (Pierce, 1995), 'more holistic, concrete and less idealised perspective' (Lantolf, 2001: 143) which take into account not only language competence but also, as did this study, the motives behind it, to develop a better understanding of the whole phenomenon. The intricacies of life in classrooms described in Allwright (1996a, b; 1997) and the high level of complexity of the

underlying learner-internal variables (Gass, 1997) do indeed expose the limitations of SLA methodological approaches and the shortcomings of looking at isolated interactive episodes, in isolation from those who produce them, for an understanding and explanation of such complex phenomena. What this paper has attempted to do is to try to understand classroom language learning, through research that also tries to develop participants' own understandings, in order to help bridge the gaps that may exist between teachers, learners and academic researchers.

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Appendix A: 2-way task: changes in French household expenditure

Partner (A)

You must complete your table with the missing information supplied by your partner. To complete the task, each participant should

a) provide his/her partner with the information s/he has on the changes that occurred between 1970 and 2003 in the expenditure of French household;

b) and s/he must explain, using personal knowledge, the reasons for the changes recorded throughout the years.

Distribution of expenditure	1970 (%)	1980 (%)	1993 (%)	2003 (*%)
1) Food, drinks and tobacco products	26,0	21,4	18,6	16,5
2) Clothing (including shoes)	9,6	7,3	6,0	5,1
3) Housing	15,3	17,5	21,1	19,0
4) Furniture, household appliances	10,2	9,5	7,5	8,7
5) —				
6) —				
7) —				
8) —				
Total consumption	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: *Predictions
Source: INSEE

Partner (B)

You must complete your table with the missing information supplied by your partner. To complete the task, each participant should

a) provide his/her partner with the information s/he has on the changes that occurred between 1970 and 2000 in the expenditure of French household;

b) and s/he must explain, using personal knowledge, the reasons for the changes recorded throughout the years.

Distribution of expenditure	1970 (%)	1980 (%)	1993 (%)	*2000 (%)
1) —				
2) —				
3) —				
4) —				
5) Health and medical care	7,1	7,7	10,3	16,4
6) Transport and communication	13,4	16,6	15,9	15,7
7) Leisure, entertainment and culture	6,9	7,3	7,5	8,6
8) Other non-perishable products	11,5	12,7	13,0	10,0
Total consumption	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: *Predictions
Source: INSEE