Interaction and Negotiation in the Language Classroom: Their Role in Learner Development

1. Introduction: three views on the contribution of classroom interaction to language development.

We cannot claim to know nearly enough about what it is about language classrooms that enables classroom language learners to develop, more or less well, their command of a second or foreign language. And yet our collective experience as professionals does lead us to believe that success, or failure, in classroom language learning typically has something, if not absolutely everything, to do with the nature of the interaction that takes place during lessons. It makes good sense, therefore, for us to want to try to understand the contribution of classroom interaction to language development. This has indeed been the focus, under a number of different headings, for a considerable amount of work over the last few decades (for example: Allwright, 1976, 1984a, 1984b; Breen and Candlin, 1980; Long, 1981; Seliger, 1977, 1983; Swain, 1985). From this work there have emerged several importantly different suggestions, however, about the way in which classroom interaction might contribute to language development, and about the way the notion of 'negotiation' relates to the notion of interaction. Some of these are best seen as 'methodological proposals', or advocacy positions, where the perspective is presented more or less baldly as a methodological prescription. Others are more descriptive in intent, 'conceptual proposals' that seek to describe what is the normal state of affairs, rather than what should be (see Allwright, 1982). Still others move, sometimes uneasily and even unhelpfully, between 'description' and 'advocacy'.

In this paper I will set out three of the major positions[1] and attempt to make out a convincing argument for just one of them as being the one most likely to aid us in our search for understanding - a search for understanding which I would also wish to argue is our surest route to sensible responses to immediate practical, as well as to long-term conceptual, problems. The first position is associated with mainstream thinking about communicative language teaching, and as such it advocates the active promotion of interaction as a productive teaching technique. The second is the 'weak' form of my own 'interaction hypothesis' (Allwright, 1984a), which intends only to describe what is seen as an inevitable role for classroom interaction, whether or

not it is 'advocated' as a teaching technique. The third position I will consider is the 'strong' form of my 1984 interaction hypothesis - the claim that interaction (in the form of syllabus negotiation, *inter alia*) can and should be advocated because it is synonymous with the learning process itself. This is the position (a conceptual proposal used to motivate and support a methodological one) that is historically most closely related to the notion of the process syllabus.

I will argue that the first position, though probably the standard view in the profession, is largely irrelevant to the important practical and conceptual issues this volume seeks to illuminate. The third position, by contrast, is directly and centrally relevant but is at the same time too bold for its own good. It makes too strong a claim to be considered entirely convincing as a methodological proposal properly derived from a conceptual one, since it moves, I will argue, too awkwardly from 'description' to 'advocacy' (see also Allwright, 1984c). That will leave me with the 'weak' form of my own interaction hypothesis, which I hope I will be able to show offers us the most promising way forward in our attempt to understand what it is in language classrooms that enables language development to occur. I will then argue that it is therefore this 'weak' notion of the role of interaction that will eventually help us address productively the practical problems we face in the language classroom. Finally I will set out the implications of my position for the concept of negotiation in the context of a process syllabus, arguing that classroom interaction involving negotiated work has potentially its greatest importance for its contribution to *learner*, rather than to *language*, development.

2. The role of classroom interaction in communicative language teaching

Probably the most common view of the role of classroom interaction in the profession currently is the somewhat narrowly 'methodological' one that proposes that classroom interaction contributes to language development simply by providing target language practice opportunities. Through carefully designed classroom interaction activities, involving various forms of more or less 'realistic' practice, learners can become skilled at actually doing the things they have been taught about (turning 'knowledge that' into 'knowledge how'). This view, taking account as it does only of classroom interaction in the target language, is essentially the position of advocates of the standard model of communicative language teaching over the last two decades.

Littlewood's highly influential 1981 volume on communicative language teaching will be taken here to represent this mainstream viewpoint. In 1981 Littlewood advocated a progression from

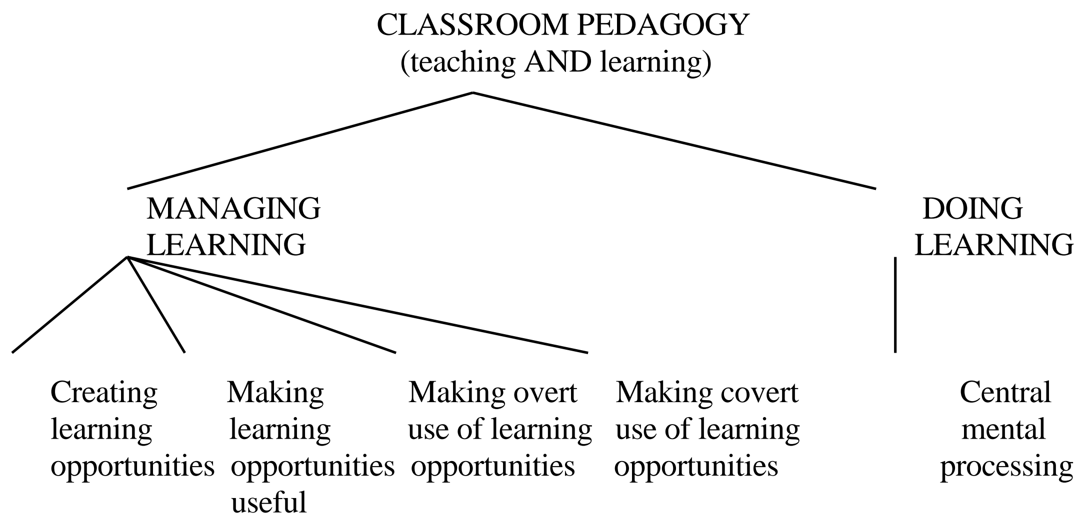
'pre-communicative' to 'communicative' activities involving various forms of interactive language practice. His underlying view of the psychology of language learning was that systematic language practice is crucial, as it was in the otherwise discredited behaviourist model of learning. But he also believed that practice should progressively emphasize relevance over repetition. That is to say, that practice activities should progressively come closer and closer and closer to imitating 'real-life' language use (a feature also found, it might be noted, if in a less developed form, in the work of such 'behaviourist' writers as Lado (1964)). The general notion of 'negotiation' (loosely defined as 'discussion to reach agreement') will be involved, therefore, only if 'negotiation' is itself seen as a type of 'real-life' language use that is relevant to the learning purposes of the learners. This is most likely to be the case in the context of a course of 'business English', say, or 'English for diplomats', where 'negotiation' can be expected to be identified as a relevant target language skill for the learners to develop in the classroom, through simulated negotiations.

I hope it is already clear that such a concept of 'negotiation' - as a target language skill to be practised through simulations in classroom interaction - is a purely 'methodological proposal' that is conceptually a very long way away from the notion of 'negotiated work' that is the central concern of this present volume. It is for this reason that I propose to reject the standard form of communicative language teaching as interesting for our present purposes, in spite of its manifest interest in the promotion of classroom interaction, and to move on to the other two views on the contribution of classroom interaction to language development.

3. The 'weak' form of the interaction hypothesis

An alternative, wider-ranging, and fundamentally conceptual proposal is that what is interesting about interaction is that it is in fact a thoroughly pervasive phenomenon in language classrooms (in fact in all classrooms), and certainly not interesting only for its target language practice potential. This view suggests that interaction is indeed the principle mechanism through which classroom learning (in any subject area) is managed. This view (my own 'interaction hypothesis', as set out first in Allwright, 1984a) distinguishes conceptually, and crucially, between 'managing learning' and actually 'doing learning', and posits that interaction is best seen as the key process whereby learning is managed, through the creation and exploitation of learning opportunities.

This conceptual analysis of classroom teaching and learning is represented below in diagrammatic form:



The diagram's bottom line represents five more or less conceptually distinct stages in classroom learning. First, there is the creation of learning opportunities, for example the work done by a teacher to introduce to learners a new form in the language. This is necessarily an overt stage. Then there is the process of making such learning opportunities more individually useful to the learners. Learners may contribute significantly to this themselves by asking the questions that the teacher's presentation raises in their minds. Alternatively they may deal with this stage purely covertly, within the privacy of their own minds, through, for example, the potentially extremely important mechanism of selective attention. It is probably not at all difficult to imagine this second stage being performed entirely covertly by an attentive learner who simply finds something of personal interest in the current input and 'makes a mental note' of it, thus satisfactorily 'personalising' it for further processing and perhaps even for long-term learning. These two stages, which might not be at all distinct chronologically, however distinct they are conceptually, together constitute the 'management of learning' - now redefined as the creation and individualisation of learning opportunities. These first two stages, taken together, constitute a 'task management' phase. The third and final overt stage is by contrast the 'task performance' phase, when the learners actually do whatever learning activity has been agreed upon (complete the exercise, read the paragraph, or whatever). The next (covert) stage involves the learners themselves, again in the privacy of their own minds, finding ways of processing whatever the

learning opportunity offers them by way of potentially usable input. Part of the folklore of language teaching is that learners may well do the overt work without anything happening inside their heads -they may be simply 'going through the motions'. Even if they are mentally processing the input, however, this is not necessarily the final stage, because such processing may well stop at comprehension. The final stage of actual learning is represented here by 'central mental processing', which will need to include some way for processed input to be stored appropriately in long-term memory.

Especially important for our purposes here are the first two stages - the initial creation and individualisation of learning opportunities - and their relationship to the third stage of overt learning task performance. It is the first two stages, when both are overt, that can easily be seen as involving interactive work it would be reasonable to identify in terms of the concept of 'negotiation'. Elsewhere I have argued (1988) that the seeds of learner individualisation and autonomy work can be found, if anyone wishes to look, in the least autonomous of classrooms, whenever learners make errors. I suggest, for example, that learners' spoken errors in class typically constitute an unintended initiating move in the creation of learning opportunities. This is because they offer opportunities for correcting moves, which themselves should contain material appropriate to the learning needs of the individual learner who made the error, and potentially to those of other learners in the same class. What is true of learners' unintended errors seems even more true of learners' questions. When learners ask questions they would appear to be deliberately setting out to create a learning opportunity of personal significance to them (and perhaps to nobody else in the room), and what follows may supply material appropriate to their needs, and potentially to those of others, regardless of the intentions of the learner who asked the original question. We may even argue, probably uncontroversially, that most teachers would see it as normally their duty, in a whole-class setting, to try to respond to any individual error or question in a way that is also appropriate to other people in the class. Such 'seeds of learner individualisation and autonomy work' can also be interpreted, I wish to suggest, as forms of interactive negotiation in which personally appropriate learning opportunities are managed (created and made individually useful). This analysis, I would claim, is descriptively true, and is therefore not something that has to be advocated - it is necessarily the case, whatever anyone may advocate. Of course it is possible to derive a methodological proposal from it (see Allwright 1984b), as a suggestion about how this normal (even inevitable)

state of affairs can be productively exploited for pedagogic purposes. The real importance of the analysis, however, lies in its power to help us understand the complexity of the relationship between language teaching and language learning, and in particular of the special role interaction might play in that relationship.

4. The 'strong' form of the interaction hypothesis

The third view I shall deal with in this paper starts from the same suggestion that interaction is best seen as the process whereby classroom language learning is managed, but makes the further claim that in the language classroom the process of negotiation that is involved in interaction is itself to be identified with the process of language learning. In a sense then, in this view, interaction *is* language learning. (For an early working out of this proposition see Allwright, 1976.) It is not merely the process whereby learned linguistic knowledge is practised, but rather the process whereby linguistic knowledge, and also linguistic ability, are themselves developed.

In this view of interaction the starting point is the notion of 'communication' (see Breen and Candlin, 1980). 'Communication' is analysed as involving three fundamental processes - interpretation, expression, and negotiation - and/or their various combinations. 'Communication', in this view, does not necessarily involve overt person-to-person interaction, since the conditions would be satisfied whenever a reader reads a text silently (an example of communication involving interpretation - 'interaction with the text' - without expression or negotiation). But overt two-way person-to-person communication would, in this view, necessarily involve all three potential components of communication, where the term 'negotiation' would mean at least the negotiation of meaning.

This definition of communication is related to language learning by positing that 'interpretation, expression, and negotiation' are not only the mechanisms whereby people deploy their current linguistic resources (to use Prabhu's helpful terminology, 1987), but also the mechanisms whereby they simultaneously develop them. This is held to be true of native speakers deploying their native-speaker resources, and also true of people involved in foreign or second language learning.

From such a starting point we can perhaps easily see that classroom interaction, an example of overt two-way person-to-person communication which we have already established in the previous section as an inevitable element of any classroom-based pedagogy, can now also be

analysed as involving interpretation, expression, and negotiation. It also follows that classroom interaction, in the target language, can now be seen as not just offering language practice (as it would from our first viewpoint), nor just learning opportunities (the second viewpoint), but as actually constituting the language development process in itself. This view does not, however, hold that all forms of classroom interaction are equally productive for language development purposes. For such purposes interaction must be seriously meaningful, about matters of serious concern to the participants, and therefore conducive to a serious attempt to communicate, not merely to simulate communication. This largely rules out the sorts of controlled or pseudo-communicative interactive activities likely to monopolize time in a class run on 'mainstream' communicative lines as outlined in Section 2 above. If we are looking for 'matters of serious concern', however, what could be more serious and of greater immediate concern than the curriculum and the learning process? Why not therefore focus our energies on communicating, in classroom interaction, about the curriculum and the learning process? Following this line of reasoning takes us from 'negotiation' as a component process of all instances of human communication (via the concept of the 'negotiation of meaning') to 'negotiation' as we saw it in connection with the discussion above of 'mainstream' communicative language teaching - a process of discussion to reach agreement. Except that now we are not talking about practising negotiating for the 'real' world. The classroom is now our real world, a real world of learning in which, by explicitly negotiating the curriculum and the learning process we will simultaneously develop our linguistic resources.

The problem with the above reasoning, I believe, is that it moves too easily from the notion of 'negotiation', in the psycholinguistic sense, as an *inevitable* feature of all person-to-person communication, to 'negotiation', in the 'diplomatic' sense, as a *desirable* feature of communication in the language classroom. I believe that this move between two distinct senses of the term 'negotiation' is logically unjustified, that the inevitability of the first type of negotiation cannot be used to justify advocacy of the desirability of the other (see Allwright, 1984c). If we are interested in the potential value of 'negotiated work' in the language classroom, therefore, we need to look for alternative sources of support for the idea. The 'strong' form of the interaction hypothesis is not able to help us.

5. Implications for negotiation in the context of a process syllabus: the importance of distinguishing between language development and learner development

In the terms of the conceptual analysis provided above and in the section on the 'weak' form of the interaction hypothesis, we can perhaps now see that a language learning opportunity cannot be expected to be 'better' than some other language learning opportunity simply because it involves a process of overt (diplomatic-style) negotiation. However, a learning opportunity might reasonably be expected to become 'better' than it would otherwise be, to the extent that it is the outcome of a successful process of negotiation that makes it potentially more individually useful to the learners.

One intriguing corollary of this suggestion is the likelihood that, as learners become more proficient at negotiating for truly useful learning opportunities, then the time spent of negotiating will itself diminish, leaving more time for what we might call task 'performance', rather than task 'management'. This would be a problem if negotiating was itself seen as crucial to meaningful language learning, but no problem at all if we assess the value of negotiating more conservatively - in terms of its contribution to 'task management'.

A further implication for negotiation in the context of a process syllabus is that curriculum negotiation will not need to be conducted exclusively in the target language. There may be a loss of target language practice time if negotiations are conducted in a language the learners are more comfortable with, but there could be a corresponding improvement in productivity for the negotiation process itself.

Another implication follows from the observation that curriculum negotiation does not now have to be considered as crucial to language learning itself. It can now be permissible for the curriculum negotiating process to have as an outcome patterns of working that do not themselves involve continuous negotiation of the 'diplomatic' sort. This is potentially an extremely challenging implication, of course, because it makes possible a situation in which learners, with their teacher, negotiate to not pursue a pattern of work overall that even includes any further curriculum negotiation. In principle at least, a class could negotiate successfully to put themselves entirely in the hands of their teacher, and leave him or her to make all subsequent decisions. Taken to its logical conclusion, then, people initially engaged in a process syllabus could negotiate it out of existence.

The implication of the above line of argument is surely that, as already noted, we need more arguments for a positive role for negotiated work in the language classroom, arguments that we can expect learners to find convincing, so that they will be encouraged to maintain an element of negotiated work, rather than attempt to negotiate it out of existence. Providing such arguments I take to be principally the task of the other contributions to this volume. Here I would wish simply to draw attention to one major argument: from the field of language learner autonomy. This is the claim that there is enormous potential value (for the individual and eventually for society at large) in people successfully learning how to manage their own learning, so that they will be able to carry on learning successfully long after the taught course is over (see Trim, 1988). If we look again at the title of this chapter, with its reference to '*learner* development', rather than merely to '*language* development', we can see that all the foregoing discussion has been unnecessarily narrow in its exclusive concern with the development of language. Although it could no doubt be argued persuasively that language development should not be sacrificed for the sake of learner development, this argument could itself be powerfully criticised as a short-term view that fails to take into account the multiplying potential of successful learner development. From a long-term perspective, classroom interaction that involves the negotiation of the curriculum, and thereby enables learners to develop their skills as managers of learning, becomes central and crucial rather than peripheral and optional.

6. Summary and conclusion

I have argued here that we need to better understand the role of interaction in learner development before we make the major step of moving from conceptual proposals to methodological ones. I have also argued that a conceptual analysis based on the hypothesis that interaction is best seen as the mechanism for learning management (rather than as constituting learning itself) offers us the best chance of improving our understanding of the role of interaction in learner development. This is because such a conception frees us to think more flexibly about what we mean by 'negotiated work' in the language classroom, and what we want to achieve by it. It also prompts us to think more flexibly about 'learner development' as a concept, and to go beyond 'linguistic' development to encompass in our thinking the whole notion of learning how to learn, learning how to manage learning.

Putting these two ideas together, we can now begin to think about how negotiated work, whether or not conducted in the target language, could contribute to helping learners learn how to

manage their own learning - to create learning opportunities for themselves and each other, and to make sure that the learning opportunities they create fit their own individual needs.

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