# 3 Teaching

In Chapter 2 an attempt was made to indicate how the principles and procedures of task-based teaching arose at a certain stage of the project. The purpose of this chapter is to state what further understanding of such teaching was gained in the course of subsequent experience. What is stated here does not therefore constitute a strict description of all the teaching done, but rather an interpretation of the pattern of teaching which came to predominate and was felt to be of particular value.

## Reasoning-gap activity

It is necessary first to clarify the sense of the term 'task' for the purpose of this discussion. Meaning-focused activity in the classroom can be divided broadly into three types.

**1** *Information-gap activity*, which involves a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another – generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language.[1] One example is pair work in which each member of the pair has a part of the total information (for example an incomplete picture) and attempts to convey it verbally to the other. Another example is completing a tabular representation with information available in a given piece of text. The activity often involves selection of relevant information as well, and learners may have to meet criteria of completeness and correctness in making the transfer.

**2** *Reasoning-gap activity*, which involves deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns. One example is working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables. Another is deciding what course of action is best (for example cheapest or quickest) for a given purpose and within given constraints. The activity necessarily involves comprehending and conveying information, as in information-gap activity, but the information

to be conveyed is not identical with that initially comprehended. There is a piece of reasoning which connects the two.

3 *Opinion-gap activity*, which involves identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation. One example is story completion; another is taking part in the discussion of a social issue. The activity may involve using factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion, but there is no objective procedure for demonstrating outcomes as right or wrong, and no reason to expect the same outcome from different individuals or on different occasions.

Teaching on the project started with a preference for opinion-gap activity (as being the most likely to ensure a preoccupation with meaning) but soon moved to information-gap and reasoning-gap activities. Between the latter two, a preference for reasoning-gap activity developed gradually, although information-gap activity continued to be used (for example instructions to draw) from time to time. In particular, information-gap activity was seen as a useful preliminary to reasoning-gap activity, either within a task sequence spanning several lessons or in a sequence of questions/exchanges within a single lesson. The first tasks on a new body of information (for example a map or a set of rules) were usually restricted to an interpretation of the information, as a preliminary to tasks which involved inference, deduction, or application to given cases.

Overall, it was reasoning-gap activity which proved to be the most satisfying in the classroom, and the discussion which follows is concerned with possible reasons why. The term 'task' will be used to refer generally to reasoning-gap activity and will also be used to refer to the activity in a lesson as a whole, including 'pre-task' work, unless indicated otherwise.

A pedagogic difficulty with opinion-gap activity is that it is open-ended in its outcomes, in comparison with the other two types which permit agreed decisions about right or wrong outcomes. The knowledge that there is a right answer, and a knowledge of the criterion by which its rightness is to be assessed, provide a sense of security to learners and support their efforts to arrive at answers. This sense of security is important when learners generally feel insecure about the language in which the activity is taking place. Further, objective criteria of rightness

and wrongness enable some learners to benefit from the outcomes of other learners' efforts: conclusions can be drawn about right or wrong outcomes from seeing what other outcomes are assessed as right and wrong; and such conclusions can lead to a perception of the right procedures for arriving at outcomes.

Inferencing of this kind is much more difficult in an open-ended activity where there are no decisions on the rightness of outcomes to be used in deducing procedures and, indeed, no logical connections to be established between the problem faced and the procedure adopted. The value of open-ended activity for linguistic development can perhaps be realized better with advanced level learners in a second language (and its value in personal development can no doubt be realized well in mother-tongue instruction) but in the early stages of second language learning, open-ended activity too often leads only to learners' verbal imitation of one another, or of the teacher, and thus ceases to be genuinely open-ended.

Information-gap activity generally takes the form of a one-step procedure – from content to linguistic formulation, or vice versa – for each piece of information to be transferred. It is true that this single step often involves trial and error, thus bringing in criteria of success or adequacy, and it may also involve decisions on the selection of information to be transferred, thus bringing in criteria of relevance. However, such processes involve little negotiation, if negotiation is understood as moving up and down a given line of thought or logic. In contrast, reasoning-gap activity does call for negotiation in this sense since there is in such activity (1) a gap in thought to be bridged, and (2) shared constraints (of practical reasoning, arithmetic, or rules applicable to the activity concerned) on how it is bridged.

Reasoning brings about a more sustained preoccupation with meaning than information transfer does on its own, since it involves deriving one piece of information from another ('working things out' in the mind), not just encoding or decoding given information.[2] More importantly, when a reasoning-gap activity proves difficult for learners, the teacher is able to guide their efforts step by step, making the reasoning explicit or breaking it down into smaller steps, or offering parallel instances to particular steps, as noted in the last chapter. The interaction resulting from this is a public, dialogic expression of the 'working out' which learners have found difficult to do on their own and

which, as a result of such expression, they are likely to be able to do more independently (and internally) in a subsequent task or step.[3] Dialogic reasoning is also a process in which the meaning-content of any given exchange is partly predictable and partly unpredictable – predictable because there is a shared perception of purpose and general direction, and unpredictable because the specific meaning-content of any exchange is determined by the outcome of the preceding exchange. The predictability acts as a support to learners' participation in the interaction, while the unpredictability ensures a continual preoccupation with meaning.

In contrast to the negotiation involved in reasoning-gap activity, interaction in the context of an information-gap activity is likely to be repetitious rather than developmental, thus lowering the level of unpredictability. Interaction in an opinion-gap activity, on the other hand, is likely to have too high a level of unpredictability, thus making it difficult for learners to cope.

There is a sense in which meaning is perceived as one's own when one has, or sees oneself as having, arrived at it oneself; and there is a sense of pleasure in attempting to articulate one's own meaning. There is, however, also a sense of diffidence – and a fear of exposure – in trying to express meaning which is one's own. In general, information-gap activity involves learners in stating meaning which is given to them, though perhaps in a form different from the one in which it is to be stated; it does not involve, or is not seen to involve, stating learners' own meaning. This is safer but less pleasurable than if the meaning were seen to be one's own.[4] Opinion-gap activity, on the other hand, involves stating meaning which is very much one's own – and of a kind (for example feeling or attitude) which is neither well-defined nor easy to articulate. This leads to a high level of uncertainty, diffidence, or anxiety, though it offers a correspondingly high level of pleasure from success. Reasoning-gap activity seems to offer a balance between these two contradictory tendencies; some meaning is derived from given meaning and what one has derived is, to that extent, one's own; it is, however, only derived from given meaning and is, moreover, objective in character, not a laying bare of one's 'inner thoughts'. There is, as a result, both a measure of satisfaction and a measure of security in attempting to state such meaning.[5]

There appears to be a similar sense in which the language one uses is looked on as one's own or 'borrowed' (i.e. available from

an outside source and made use of for a temporary purpose). When learners are dealing with meaning which is given (as in information-gap activity), they tend to look for language which is given as well – and, more importantly, to look on the language they use as being borrowed. If the meaning is not one's own, it seems to follow that the language is not one's own either. Opinion-gap activity, in contrast, calls for both meaning and language which is one's own, and for that reason can seem daunting. It is, in addition, easier to borrow language for objective meaning than it is for subjective meaning. Reasoning-gap offers opportunities for formulating meaning which is one's own in the sense outlined above – i.e. one has arrived at it oneself – with the possibility of borrowing language, when necessary, for effecting the formulation. More importantly, borrowed language tends to be regarded as one's own to the extent it is used to formulate one's own meaning.[5]

It is possible to think of language being used, in a reasoning-gap activity, either for presentation (i.e. for stating outcomes) or for operation (i.e. for arriving at outcomes; for doing the pieces of reasoning involved) and this has a bearing on the concept of borrowed language becoming one's own. The use of borrowed language is more conscious and deliberate in the context of presentation than it is in the context of operation. There is a more distinct shift of attention from meaning-content to linguistic formulation in the process of stating outcomes than there is in the process of doing the reasoning. The reasoning, of course, can – and frequently does – take place in the learner's mother tongue, but with recurrent teacher–class interaction which 'enacts' the process of reasoning publicly, as noted earlier, it is likely to involve the target language gradually and increasingly, drawing not only on reasoning processes but language from the public interaction. Since reasoning brings about a more sustained preoccupation with meaning than a starting of outcomes, the use of borrowed language in operation is less distinct as a process of borrowing and less deliberate than it is in presentation. Consequently, operation is a more powerful context than presentation for producing the effect of borrowed language becoming one's own. (There is no equation implied here between a learner looking on some piece of language as his or her own and the hypothesized phenomenon of subconscious acquisition, though it *is* suggested later in this chapter that the former increases the probability of the latter.)

It was noted above that there is a sense of pleasure in stating meaning which is felt to be one's own. However, there is a corresponding sense of frustration in not being able to put across one's meaning, which is a risk for both reasoning-gap activity and opinion-gap activity. The frustration occurs not only in the context of presentation but also in the context of operation, including interaction with the teacher, and it is stronger in proportion to the degree of one's involvement in the activity. Although these are contexts in which language tends to be borrowed, such borrowing is frequently inadequate to support sustained involvement in an activity, especially in the early stages of language learning. The fact that reasoning-gap activity involves logic, arithmetic, and diagrammatic forms is a clear advantage here: logic, arithmetic, and diagrams in tasks act as alternative 'languages' in which some of the thinking can be done. Indeed, it was found necessary to rely deliberately on such alternative 'languages' in designing feasible tasks for learners at very early stages, and valuable to use them at later stages to ease learners' difficulties in processing, deriving, or presenting information.

Both information-gap activity and reasoning-gap activity involve objective meaning-content, in contrast to opinion-gap activity, and both permit, as we have seen, objective criteria for judging outcomes to be right or wrong. This has an effect on what may be called the 'power-structure' of the class.[6] There are, in fact, three parties to the interaction, not two: the teacher, the learners, and the task itself with its own rules. The teacher and the learners are both bound by the rules of the task and the source of authority is, in a limited but real sense, the task not the teacher. Such equality before the rules of the task imposes a common frame of constraints which creates a form of teacher-learner rapport that is not available either when the activity is form-focused and outcomes are assessed in terms of right or wrong linguistic forms, with the authority inevitably lying with the teacher, or when it involves opinion and there is no recognized source of authority on what is right or wrong. Since reasoning-gap activity involves a wider range of shared constraints – those of inferencing and deduction – than information-gap activity, it has a correspondingly richer potential for such teacher-learner rapport.

Pedagogic advantages such as the above explain why the project came to give a clear preference to reasoning-gap activity, though information-gap activity was often used as a stepping-stone to it. The non-use of opinion-gap activity has been commented on as a

limitation of the project on the grounds that the affective aspect of learners' personalities was left unengaged.[7] It should be pointed out, first, that a reliance or reasoning-gap activity did not result in an exclusion of situations involving human feelings and motives. Not only were some tasks in the project's teaching based on dialogues and stories, with inferential comprehension as the basis for reasoning-gap work, but tasks frequently involved the application of rules and other constraints, for example those of distance, cost, and time, to particular individuals in particular situations. Nor does normal classroom discourse exclude reference to opinion (e.g. 'What do you think?' 'Do you agree?') or to personal choices, (e.g. 'Do you want to do this?' 'Would you now like a difficult question?'). Secondly, the classroom is in any case a social situation with its friendships, rivalries, self-images and attitudes, which teachers relate to as well as they can and take into consideration in their management procedures. It would, therefore, be wrong to imagine that task-based teaching involves treating learners as mere reasoning machines, and it was not the project's experience that reasoning-gap activity was 'dull' for learners.[8] Learners' involvement and interest were, in fact, the features most noticed by observers in project classrooms in comparison with normal classrooms. What *is* true is (1) that the meaning-content focused on in classroom activity was factual or rational, rather than emotional or attitudinal, and (2) that no procedures were deliberately employed in teaching for the purpose of creating or increasing learners' emotional involvement. This does not imply any denial of value to emotional involvement for language *learning*. What it implies is a recognition of the much greater suitability of rational activity for language *teaching*, in terms such as control and management by the teacher, approximation to the notions and expectations of formal education, levels of learner security and discourse predictability, and replicability – i.e. the fact that the rules and outcomes of reasoning-gap activity are likely to be similar in the hands of different teachers and learners.

It is also possible to raise wider educational questions about the desirability, for learners' personal development, of attention to rational and emotional domains or, within the rational domain, to convergent and divergent thought. I do not, however, think it is legitimate to expect instruction in a second language to mirror, in the meaning-content it employs, the balance of content in education as a whole. The aim of second language

teaching, as conceived of on the project, was to develop in learners a grammatical competence in the language, and the procedure thought to be most likely to achieve this was a preoccupation with certain forms of meaning-content. It is reasonable to ask, in view of the fact that second-language instruction was taking place as a part of formal education as a whole, whether the meaning-content employed was compatible with that of formal education, and there is clearly no incompatibility between convergent thought (which reasoning-gap activity relies on) and educational content. It is perhaps more reasonable, as suggested already, to expect courses in the mother tongue, in which the aim is not the development of grammatical competence as such, to consider the needs of learners' growth as individuals in the meaning-content they employ. A related question is whether it is fair to expect all learners to engage in reasoning activity and whether, in particular, learners with aptitudes in other directions, for example divergent thought or artistic activity, might not find themselves at a disadvantage?[9] Again, however, I do not think that task-based teaching makes, or needs to make, any higher demands on reasoning than are made in education in general. All learners in schools are expected to achieve some degree of numeracy and some understanding of science, and educated citizens are expected to understand something of the laws and regulations they are required to conform to.

On the question of aptitude, it needs to be remembered that no equation is implied in task-based teaching between the processes of conscious reasoning which classroom activity demands, and the processes of subconscious language acquisition which such activity brings about.[10] Reasoning activity is proposed as a methodology of language *teaching*, not as a hypothesis about the process of language *learning*. The expectation in task-based teaching is not that success in reasoning activity will in itself represent success in developing grammatical competence; the expectation is, rather, that success in reasoning activity will support sustained engagement in such activity and that sustained engagement is a condition favourable to the development of grammatical competence.[11]

### Pre-task and task

As indicated in Chapter 2, the general pattern of each lesson in task-based teaching is that it consists of two tasks of the same

kind, one of them to be attempted publicly as a teacher-guided, whole-class activity, and the other to be attempted by learners independently. The two tasks are similar in that they demand similar processes of reasoning, or consist of similar sequences of questions (each sequence graded within itself), and employ either the same or similar situations, sets of facts, or texts. Each task, however, requires an independent effort of the mind, i.e. it is not possible to transfer either the outcome or the procedures of one mechanically to the other. The pattern is roughly analogous to that of a lesson in mathematics, where a problem is worked out publicly and a similar problem is then set for learners to work out on their own.

The term 'pre-task' refers, as noted earlier, to the task to be attempted publicly while the term 'task' refers to what learners are to attempt on their own. This discussion is concerned with the advantages of organizing lessons on a pre-task and task pattern. The pre-task is a context in which any difficulties which learners may have in understanding the nature of the activity – seeing what information is given, what needs to be done, and what constraints apply – are revealed and the teacher is able to provide appropriate assistance, perhaps by paraphrasing or glossing expressions, by employing parallel situations or diagrams, or by reorganizing information. In this sense, the pre-task is preparation for the task, since learners are less likely, while engaged later in a similar activity on their own, to fail to see what is given and what needs to be done.

The pre-task is also a context in which learners' difficulties in carrying out the required reasoning are revealed and the teacher is able, in response, to engage in appropriate interaction, breaking down the effort needed into smaller steps and, in the process, making public the procedures to be employed. Since the difficulties of learners in any class are varied, in degree as well as in kind, the teacher's interaction with several learners at different points of the pre-task helps to ensure that the class as a whole receives a public demonstration of all or most of what is to be done. The work is not, however, done or seen as merely a demonstration: it is a task in its own right, with various parts of it being attempted publicly by different members of the class and with the outcomes of those attempts being examined and shown to be right or wrong. The learners who make such public attempts are generally the more extrovert or adventurous ones, who are willing to take risks in front of their peers, or the more

capable ones, who feel sufficiently confident of success. There are others in the class who are less extrovert or less confident and who therefore prefer to work things out by watching others' attempts while not being on trial themselves. Some of them feel sufficiently confident, after some watching and working out, to make a public attempt and the teacher is able, with some experience, to sense which learners are close to that stage and to invite or encourage them to join in. It is not, however, the aim of the pre-task to ensure a public attempt by every learner, and it is normally about half the class, or less, who participate overtly at this stage. The pre-task as a whole-class activity is thus an opportunity for some learners to learn by making an attempt, and equally an opportunity for others to learn without taking the risk of public failure. What motivates the learning by observation is not only the possibility that observation may lead to a level of confidence which later makes public participation possible but, more immediately, the knowledge that there is going to be a similar task to attempt individually in a short while, at which one can succeed on the strength of one's observation at this stage. The task therefore motivates attention to the pre-task, just as the pre-task facilitates the task by acting as a public demonstration.

The pre-task enables the teacher to assess how difficult or easy the task which is to follow is going to be for the class and, within limits, to adjust its difficulty-level accordingly. For instance a part of the task which calls for complex reasoning may be left out; alternatively, points of anticipated difficulty may be highlighted by the use of additional parallel questions, or explicit and detailed treatment of the reasoning processes involved. When, later, learners have attempted the task, their performance on it, as revealed in the course of the marking, acts as an indication of the level of difficulty at which the pre-task and task in the next lesson should be set and, in particular, what kinds of difficulty need to be highlighted in the next pre-task. The pre-task is therefore an occasion for making use of the evidence from learners' performance on the preceding task as well as for anticipating and easing learners' difficulty on the task to follow.

The language which the teacher employs in the classroom, both in presenting the information relevant to the task and in conducting the interaction, is (1) what the activity concerned calls for and (2) what the teacher considers likely to be comprehended by the class in the context of that activity. The teacher,

however, needs evidence during the course of the activity on whether or not the language is being comprehended adequately by the class; and the form of discourse which the pre-task produces (i.e. a pedagogic dialogue) makes such evidence continually available, enabling the teacher to adapt and adjust his or her language accordingly. In general, the nature of the pre-task; helps to ensure that the language needed for the activity is employed in the classroom at a level of complexity which is manageable for the class.

Finally, the pre-task and task pattern divides a lesson desirably into an initial period of whole-class activity, teacher-direction, and oral interaction, and a later period of sustained self-dependent effort by learners.

**Reasonable challenge**

Learners' immediate motivation in the task-based classroom derives from the intellectual pleasure of solving problems, in addition to such traditional sources as a desire to do well at school, to win the approval of the teacher, or to gain the admiration of one's peers. Although what is important for language learning is learners' engagement in a task rather than their success in it, some measure of success is essential for maintaining learners' desire to make the effort, as repeated failure can lead to a sense of frustration or a negative self-image. It is therefore important for the teacher to regulate the challenge offered by tasks and operate generally with some notion of what represents reasonable challenge for a given class. The concept of reasonable challenge implies that learners should not be able to meet the challenge too easily but *should* be able to meet it with some effort.[12] This is not just a matter of the teacher's assessment of the learners' ability; it is a matter of the learners' own perceptions, too. If a task looks very easy to learners, they expect no sense of achievement from success in it and are likely to be less than keen to attempt it. If, on the other hand, the task looks so difficult that they feel sure they will fail in it, they are likely to be reluctant to make an effort at all. A task should, ideally, look difficult but attainable to learners. The effort learners put into a given task may also be influenced by such additional factors as comparison or rivalry with their peers, and whether or not they feel that the teacher thinks them capable of success.

Learners in a class, of course, vary in their abilities as well as

their perceptions, and the teacher can only hope to adjust the level of challenge to suit the largest possible number. The fact that tasks are normally organized as a series of graded and parallel questions is of some help: different questions prove reasonably challenging to different learners and a parallel question proves reasonably challenging to some learners who have already watched a similar question being answered by other learners. The teacher is also able to assist in regulating the challenge by means of techniques such as negotiation and simplification, and to be guided by continual feedback from learners in the course of the pre-task. Nevertheless, the teacher needs a workable criterion for assessing the reasonableness of the challenge of tasks for a given class; and the learners' performance on the 'task' (the individual activity) in each lesson provides a useful basis. Teachers on the project used the working rule that the challenge of a task was reasonable if approximately half the learners in the class were successful on approximately half the task (as shown by a marking of their work). This, of course, leaves open the possibility that some learners consistently find the tasks too difficult while some others find them too easy, but a review of learners' performance over a stretch of time showed that this was true only of a small number (about 10 per cent of the class at each end). Many learners seemed to perform differently, relative to each other, on different task-types, such as those involving inferencing, or counting, or spatial or directional concepts, and some appeared to perform differently at different points on a task-sequence of increasing complexity.

The working rule for reasonable challenge was the outcome of experience and proved to be adequate as a means of monitoring learners' success on tasks in that there was, after the project's first year, no noticeable sagging of morale in any of the project classes. The monitoring also brought to light the fact that there is an optimal length to task sequences: when tasks of the same type were set in successive lessons in an order of increasing complexity, the success rate normally increased from day to day, probably as a result of an increase in familiarity with the task-type concerned. However, learners' success began to decline after a certain number of lessons (five or six for most task-types), although the gradation in the sequence of tasks had not become perceptibly steeper. In keeping with the interpretation that the initial increase in success was due to familiarity with the task-type, one can attribute the later decline to over-familiarity resulting in a form

of 'fatigue'. As a result of this observation, teaching on the project introduced a regular change of task-types after every few lessons, different ones thus being used cyclically. There was no indication of any 'fatigue' when a task-type was taken up again after one or more other task-sequences had intervened.

**Teacher's language**

In planning a task for any lesson, the teacher considered, among other things, whether it would be possible to set that task in language simple enough for the class to understand. This assessment could only be a rough one and typically involved decisions about what terms to use to refer to particular objects or concepts (for example 'fare' or 'cost'? 'continue' or 'take forward'?), which were central to the task. There were also decisions about how to word particular questions in order to control the complexity of the inferencing they required. Then, in the classroom, the teacher controlled the complexity of his or her language in more or less the same way as an adult does in speaking to a child – avoiding or paraphrasing what he or she felt might be too difficult, repeating statements, and speaking slowly when there seemed to be difficulties of understanding.[13] Such *ad hoc* simplification worked in the project classrooms for the same reasons that it does elsewhere: first, the purpose of language use was to get some meaning-content across, and there was an inherent connectedness and coherence to the meaning-content being put across at different points, making expectations possible; secondly, there was a criterion of adequacy for the comprehension being aimed at (i.e. enough to get on with the task); and thirdly, there was continual evidence available on whether or not enough comprehension was in fact being achieved from the learners' participation in the pedagogic dialogue. No attempt was made by the teacher to ensure that all the language which he or she used was understood by learners: it was assumed, indeed, that some or much of the language made only a peripheral impression and some of it went unregistered. Nor was it assumed that such comprehension as took place represented 'full' comprehension of the samples of language concerned. There is, in fact, no identifiable sense in which any sample of language can be said to have been comprehended 'fully' by anyone.[14] Comprehension can only be viewed as being adequate or inadequate for given purposes, and is typically paid attention to when it has been

inadequate. Further, the existence of purposes and criteria of adequacy not only help to make evidence of comprehension available, but act as an aid to the process of comprehension, by delimiting the range of possible meanings and making trial and error possible. (One of the weaknesses of the S-O-S teaching procedure which attempts to present pieces of language 'meaningfully' is that the teacher has to assume blindly that the degree of comprehension is proportionate to his effort in presentation – or seek, unreasonably, an assessment from learners with questions like 'Do you understand?')[15]

It is common to look on linguistic syllabuses as a means, among other things, of delimiting the language to be employed in the classroom at any given time – a means of protecting the learner from the bewilderment of facing too much language. But task-based activity has the effect of delimiting language too, and in a way which is more natural in the sense that the delimitation of language results from a delimitation of meaning-content in the form of tasks. The language that is employed in task-based activity is 'free' (i.e. constrained only by the needs of the activity and on-the-spot feasibility, not by any predetermined linguistic progression or preselection) but it is neither unlimited nor unmanageably complex, thanks to the nature of the activity itself.[16] In addition, the devices developed to facilitate a preoccupation with meaning, such as the organization of the activity into pre-task and task, and the use of task sequences and parallel questions, have the effect of bringing about a measure of recurrence, within and across lessons, of particular forms of language in response to need and without specific planning. This is, of course, the case with any recurrent real-life event, for example lectures on the same subject, or buying and selling. If the term 'repetition' can be restricted to refer to occurrences which are planned and deliberate, it is possible to say that task-based activity does not employ repetition but, by its nature, brings about a measure of recurrence. Recurrent language is meaning-focused, since it is brought about by the needs of meaning-content and, given the perception that the form of language is best learnt when the learner's attention is focused on meaning, repetition does not have the same value for learning as recurrence.

**Learners' language**

Learners' use of language in task-based activity was a matter of their coping as well as they could. They adopted various strategies such as using single words, resorting to gestures, quoting from the blackboard or the sheet which stated the task, waiting for the teacher to formulate alternative responses so that they could simply choose one of them, seeking a suggestion from a peer or, as a last resort, using the mother tongue. Tasks for learners in early stages were so formulated that they could convey the outcome of their individual work in non-linguistic forms such as numbers, letters of the alphabet, and diagrams. However, even with this kind of task, interaction at the pre-task stage called for verbal communication. Since responses were (and were seen to be) assessed only for their content, learners' concern in making those responses was to get meaning-content across as clearly as possible. The teacher helped by means of techniques such as offering alternative responses for the learner to choose from (which, incidentally, is not just a means of reducing learners' difficulty in verbalization but a means of clarifying the meaning-content of the problem and guiding thought as well), expanding inadequately formulated responses, and articulating a response ambivalently signalled by a learner then seeking the learner's confirmation of the interpretation made. The general understanding which prevailed in the classroom was that the learners had to meet the challenge of the task and, if they were unable to state an outcome or response adequately, they had a right to draw on the teacher's knowledge of the language. It was, that is to say, an instance of defeat if learners were unable to do the thinking, but not if they were unable to say what they wanted to say in the way some other learners or the teacher could.

Although tasks were presented and carried out in the target language, the use of the learner's mother tongue in the classroom was neither disallowed nor excluded. The teacher normally used it only for an occasional glossing of words or for some complex procedural instructions, for example: 'Leave the rest of the page blank in your notebooks and go on to the next page, for the next question'. Learners' use of the mother tongue in all project classes revealed a shared notion among them of what may be called 'public' and 'private' discourse. Learners refrained from speaking to the teacher in the mother

tongue (except as a last resort and with considerable reluctance) in whole-class activity when the teacher was in front of the class but felt much freer to do so at the individual task stage when the teacher was going round the class and the learner was therefore consulting the teacher 'privately' or, at the pre-task stage, when the learner happened to be at the blackboard and close to the teacher, which made it 'private' talk as well.

Reference was made above to learners quoting from what was written on the blackboard or from the statement of a task on paper, as a means of finding words in which to put their answers: discussion earlier referred to the same phenomenon as 'borrowing' language. It is perhaps useful here to distinguish, in considering learners' use of the target language, between 'production', 'borrowing', and 'reproduction' as follows. Production is self-initiated verbal formulation, resulting from a deployment of linguistic competence. It is automatic, that is it occurs while attention remains on the meaning-content the language expresses, and can be thought of as having been generated by an internal grammar to match some self-initiated meaning-content. Borrowing, in contrast, is taking over an available verbal formulation in order to express some self-initiated meaning-content, instead of generating the formulation from one's own competence – a matter of saying what one wants to say in someone else's words. It is not automatic but deliberate, i.e. there is a shift of attention from meaning-content to language itself and a conscious decision about what available formulation to select. The decision, however, is one's own, and the purpose is seen as one of expressing meaning-content, not borrowing as an end in itself. Reproduction is different from both production and borrowing in that its purpose is, wholly or partly, to take over an available sample of language and the decision to do so is not one's own but made in compliance with the requirement or expectation of the teacher. It is a deliberate act in which the attention is either entirely on language, or alternates between language and meaning-content. Both language and meaning-content are seen as 'borrowed' and, in the case of the latter, this is so even if the learner needs to change it in some way before matching it with borrowed language. These distinctions are set out in tabular form below.

| | Production | Borrowing | Reproduction |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Meaning-content** | Self-initiated | Self-initiated | Taken over |
| **Verbal formulation** | Self-initiated | Taken over | Taken over |
| **Decision to 'take over'** | (Not relevant) | Internal | External |
| **Linguistic competence** | Deployed | Not deployed | Not deployed |

Table 2 *Distinctions between production, borrowing, and reproduction*

From the perspective which informs task-based teaching, reproduction is of little value to language acquisition. In contrast, production is of value both in furthering acquisition and as evidence of it. Borrowing is necessary for maintaining task-based activity (and thereby a meaning-focused condition which is of value to acquisition) and is probably also of some direct value to acquisition. Both acquisition and production will be commented on further in the next chapter.

### Incidental correction

As mentioned above, teachers expanded and articulated learners' responses in the course of the pedagogic dialogues that took place in project classrooms. In doing so, they also replaced any grammatically incorrect forms in learners' expressions with correct ones. They restated learners' responses, that is to say, in the way that they, the teachers, would state them – more fully as well as more correctly. When different learners wrote things on the blackboard in the course of the pre-task, they felt free to ask the teacher or fellow-learners to spell particular words for them or to suggest ways of continuing or completing what they were writing; and when spelling errors were made, other learners pointed them out if they noticed them and, if not, the teachers drew attention to them, or set them right themselves. Learners were rarely able to point out errors of grammar but they were aware that there were likely to be deficiencies other than spelling in what they wrote on the blackboard and expected the teachers to set them right, just as they did in oral interaction. The teachers made the correction on the blackboard, or told the learner

who was writing what to change, but did not attempt to follow up an error with an explanation or other examples of the same kind. When the teachers marked learners' responses to the task (i.e. the outcome of individual work), they corrected the language in the same way as they did on the blackboard, though (1) the marking itself was done for content, as noted earlier, and (2) for want of time the language repair was much less complete and consistent than on the blackboard, and sometimes not possible at all. When the work was handed back to learners at the beginning of the next lesson, they looked to see what mark they had received and tried to work out why the responses marked wrong (for content) were wrong, often looking at some fellow-learner's responses and how they were marked. There is no evidence on what effect, if any, the linguistic correction of responses had, but there is some evidence that, when the next day's 'task' was of the same type (i.e. within the same task-sequence), some learners looked back, in the process of finding a way of stating some response, to the way they had stated a similar response the previous day and used it as a source to borrow from.

It seems useful to call such language repair 'incidental correction', and to distinguish it from 'systematic correction' which involves a larger interruption of ongoing activity to focus learners' attention on an error that has taken place by providing an explanation or a set of other such instances in the hope of preventing a recurrence of the error.[17] Systematic correction also involves making the errors noticed in one lesson the basis of some planned work in the classroom in a subsequent lesson, or anticipating particular types of error and taking some preventive action. It includes consistently correcting errors in learners' written work and marking the work itself, wholly or partly, for linguistic accuracy. Incidental correction, by contrast, is (1) confined to particular 'tokens' (i.e. the error itself is corrected, but there is no generalization to the type of error it represents), (2) only responsive (i.e. not leading to any preventive or pre-emptive action), (3) facilitative (i.e. regarded by learners as a part of getting on with the activity in hand, not as a separate objective and not as being more important than other aspects of the activity), and (4) transitory (i.e. drawing attention to itself only for a moment – not for as long as systematic correction does). There is evidently a great deal which is not yet understood about the role and value of correction; and incidental correction in project teaching was largely a matter of following unclear

pedagogic instincts, attempting not to miss opportunities for making available relevant samples of language to learners but, at the same time, taking care to exclude any sustained attention to language itself which would have resulted in a reduction in the focus on meaning.

## Notes

**1** See Johnson (1982: 163–75). I am using the term 'information-gap' in a more restricted sense than Johnson's. Since Johnson does not make the three-way distinction I am making, 'information-gap' would for him presumably include any or all of the three types.

**2** Where the purpose of teaching is to enable learners to conform to social conventions in language use rather than to develop an internal grammatical competence, the verbal encoding and decoding involved in information-gap activity is perhaps of some special value.

**3** Vigotsky's view of the development of reasoning in children seems to support the conjecture made here on the strength of classroom experience. See Vigotsky (1978: 56–7): 'An operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally. . . . An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one.' See also Frawley and Lantolf (1985: 20–21) who provide an interpretation of Vigotsky's perception of this phenomenon: 'All human beings as children are initially integrated into the strategic process of reasoning through social interaction, between the self and a more experienced member of a culture, either an adult or an older peer who is capable of strategic reasoning. . . . The transition from inter- to intrapsychological reasoning through mediation, as we said earlier, is a dialogic process, a process in which an adult undertakes to direct a child through a task, and where the child provides feedback to the adult, who then makes the necessary adjustments in the kind of direction offered to the child.' See also Donaldson (1978) for a view of the centrality of inferencing in first language development.

**4** The fact that learners generally do not regard mere repetition in the language classroom as serious activity and tend to

carry it out, when asked to, with a sense of resentment or condescension or frivolity, is perhaps due to the fact that no meaning seen as their own is being expressed. This may also explain why, when meaning-content is strictly specified for a piece of 'guided composition' as a means of keeping the writing within the limits of the language to be practised, learners seem perversely to deviate from the content specified, thus producing unpredicted errors of language. When, at the other end of the scale of control, 'free' composition is attempted by asking learners to state their own attitudes and feelings towards a topic, they tend to take stereotypic stances as masks, thus hiding their actual attitudes, probably from a sense of insecurity and a fear of exposure.

**5** There may be a case for moving generally from information-gap to reasoning-gap to opinion-gap activity as learners progress in their language acquisition, though genuine opinion-gap activity is likely to be feasible only at very advanced stages, and may have to be analysed further into more and less feasible areas of content.

**6** See Brumfit's (1984a: 56) description of what he regards as fluency activity: 'Students should not normally be aware of intervention by the teacher as teacher rather than as communicator during the performance of the activity. This has implications for the power relations in the class.'

**7** See, for instance, Brumfit (1984b).

**8** See Greenwood (1985: 271): 'One wonders whether life consists of anything other than maps and plans for these Bangalore learners.' Greenwood admits that he is speaking from limited knowledge of the project, but it is true enough that a large number of the tasks used have to do with maps and plans. What I find interesting is Greenwood's equation of the second language classroom with 'life'. One would presumably not ask, in examining a course in science, whether 'life' consists for the students concerned of anything other than material facts or, in examining; a course in history, of anything other than dates and names from the past: one recognizes that whatever else life should consist of for learners might well be available elsewhere in the curriculum. Within second language teaching, it is quite possible to ask, of structurally graded courses, whether life for learners should

not go beyond vocabulary and structural patterns; and, of courses which use the 'human' content of stories, poems, and personal anecdotes, whether life should not go beyond fiction and subjectivity.

**9** See Brumfit (1984b).

**10** The implications of studies of the 'good language learner' (e.g. Rubin 1975; Naiman *et al*. 1978) for the pedagogic perspective being presented here are not clear. If success in first language learning is independent of differences between individuals, and if second language learning involves essentially the same processes as first language learning (a hypothesis inherent in the thinking on the project), then differences in personalities or strategies can only be relevant as the conditions, in some sense, in which language learning takes place, not as the processes of language learning as such. The project was concerned with exploring just one condition of learning which it considered central, namely a preoccupation with meaning, and a contingent struggle with language. There may be other conditions which are important as well, though there is a prior question, in considering such other conditions, of what concept of 'knowing a language' one is operating with. Also, in a pedagogic enquiry, one is looking for conditions which can be created or influenced by procedures of teaching. If, for instance, some personality factors turned out to be relevant conditions, pedagogy would have to choose between attempting to alter some learners' personalities and leaving learners to learn the language as well as their personalities permit.

**11** There are, of course, problems arising from this view in deciding what constitutes evidence of success in developing grammatical competence, which is not indicated simply by success in doing tasks, but manifests itself nevertheless in a meaning-focused context.

**12** Vigotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development' seems to lend some support. See Vigotsky (1978: 86): 'The zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual development stage as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.'

**13** The procedures are generally those which have been studied under the label 'caretaker talk'. See Corder (1981) for a discussion and further references.

**14** 'Comprehensible input' (Krashen 1981, 1982; Krashen and Terrell 1983) is therefore an inadequate concept for language pedagogy. Comprehensibility is not an attribute of some sample of language in relation to some learner: a crucial third factor is a criterion of adequacy, i.e. the level of comprehension needed for a given purpose. The same sample of language can be comprehensible to the same learner at one level and for one purpose, and incomprehensible at another. Teaching is, therefore, primarily a matter of regulating the level of comprehension needed (by setting up goals and criteria of success and failure) and only secondarily a matter of doing things to the input – for example simplifying it – to assist the learner in achieving that level.

There is a similar difficulty with Krashen's concept of 'i + 1'. Given that input to the learner is not to be graded grammatically (a point on which the project's position is identical with Krashen's), there is little use which teaching can make of the i + 1 concept. What teaching *can* do is to ensure that the learner has a reason (and, as far as possible, a desire) to process input and that the purpose goes on increasing in complexity at such a pace that it remains, at any given point, difficult but attainable. This is the concept of reasonable challenge in tasks. See also Note 15 below.

**15** A concentration on making language easy for learners to understand also runs the risk of making understanding so easy that little effort is called for from the learner and, as a result, little learning takes place. As Vigotsky (1978: 89) points out, 'learning which is oriented toward developmental stages that have already been reached is ineffective . . . the only "good learning" is that which is an advance of development.' See also Palmer (1921: 91): 'There is an immense difference between difficult work and bewildering work; of difficulties there must necessarily be many, but of bewilderment there should be none.' Presenting language comprehensibly but without a purpose to the comprehension can remove difficulty and create bewilderment.

**16** There are English-medium schools in India in which all subjects are taught in English. There is, of course, no linguistic

syllabus for any subject other than English itself, and yet the language used in all classrooms gets limited and regulated as well as increasingly complex as learners move into higher classes. Teachers of history, science, etc., who are not trained as teachers of English, all simplify their language to the extent demanded by their classes for an understanding of what is being taught.

**17** Some correction of language takes place in all classrooms in English-medium schools, but the teachers of other subjects do not regard the activity as teaching English, only as paying what attention needs to be paid to English in order to get on with the teaching of the subject in question. Students' work is, of course, marked only for subject-content. The kinds of correction which other teachers make in such schools relates to the kinds of correction which teachers of English make, in the same schools, in roughly the way 'incidental correction' relates to 'systematic correction'.