# 4 Learning

This chapter attempts to state how task-based teaching of the kind already discussed was perceived on the project to lead to language learning, and why any systematicity in teaching in terms of language structure was thought to be of little value to the process of learning. Some of the project's ideas on these issues were outlined in Chapter 2; what follows is an elaboration of those ideas, indicating ways in which they developed further during the course of the project. Second language acquisition is an area in which a great deal of research has taken place in recent years but the project's ideas, though similar in many ways to those arising from this research, for the most part developed independently, and in the context of an exploration of language teaching rather than directly of language learning.[1] Any retrospective attempt to relate, in any detail, these two sets of ideas would distort the intended focus of this account. The purpose of what follows therefore is confined to indicating what concepts of language learning lay behind the teaching procedures developed on the project, and how those concepts clarified and articulated themselves in the process of developing and discussing the procedures.

## Linguistic competence

As noted earlier, although learners' preoccupation with tasks was perceived on the project to bring about the development of linguistic competence, their ability to do tasks successfully was not taken to be identical or co-extensive with linguistic competence as such. Success in doing tasks involves more than linguistic competence in one sense, and less in another. It involves more in that the processes of understanding, thinking, and stating outcomes which are necessary in accomplishing a task are supported by various non-linguistic resources such as those of practical reasoning and numeracy. They are also supported by the way tasks are structured, with a limitation of possible interpretations and outcomes, or with parallel instances. On the other hand, success in doing a task involves less than linguistic competence in that,

strictly speaking, language needs to be comprehended only for a certain purpose (hence, to a certain degree) and an outcome needs to be formulated in language only to the extent necessary for putting its meaning-content across. Now, linguistic competence involves not just being able to communicate meaning but, in that process, conforming to linguistic (i.e. grammatical and lexical) norms as well.[2] Although learners in a task-based classroom can get their meaning across by means of ungrammatical expressions, task-based teaching is meant to enable them to achieve, in due course, grammatical conformity in their use of language. Grammatical conformity in language use is thought to arise from the operation of some internal system of abstract rules or principles, and it is the development of that system that task-based activity is intended to promote. While, that is to say, learners are engaged in an effort to understand and express meaning, a process of internal system-development is hypothesized to go on at a subconscious level of their minds. This process of system-building is thought to be activated or furthered by immediate needs to understand and express meaning but, once activated, capable of going beyond what is strictly called for by those immediate needs, achieving grammatical conformity in addition to communication.[3] Learners engaged in task-based activity are, at any given time, meeting the demands made on their understanding and expression by bringing into play such internal systems as they have developed so far (which, being in formative stages, may lead to miscomprehension or ungrammatical expression) but, in doing so, they are also developing those systems a little further. It is in this sense that meaning-focused activity constitutes a condition for language acquisition without success in such activity being identical with language acquisition.

## Acquisition and deployment

Meaning-focused activity involves learners in making sense of various pieces of language in the course of understanding the information provided, interpreting the teacher's questions or instructions, working out a solution, or mentally following an exchange between the teacher and a fellow-learner. Each piece of language embodies some meaning-content as well as some elements of language structure: indeed, it embodies meaning-content partly as a result of being linguistically structured. In

their efforts to cope with a task, learners thus receive a form of 'intensive exposure' to entities which represent a matching of meaning and structure. Task-based teaching operates with the concept that, while the conscious mind is working out some of the meaning-content, a subconscious part of the mind perceives, abstracts, or acquires (or re-creates, as a cognitive structure) some of the linguistic structuring embodied in those entities, as a step in the development of an internal system of rules.[4] The intensive exposure caused by an effort to work out meaning-content is thus a condition which is favourable to the subconscious abstraction – or cognitive formation – of language structure.

This way of looking at the process of acquisition does not imply that acquisition of any element of language structure is necessarily an instant, one-step procedure. It may take several instances of intensive exposure to different samples of language before any abstraction is made, or cognitive structure formed, and particular instances may or may not lead to any such result. The cognitive structures formed may at first be faint, or incomplete, or inaccurate, becoming better defined with further exposure, or with the formation of some other structures which have a bearing on them. Also, different learners in a class may, in the course of the same classroom activity, be preoccupied with different pieces of language, thus abstracting different structures, or with the same piece of language with different results (i.e. making the abstraction with different degrees of firmness, completeness, or accuracy). Language learning perceived in this way cannot be specifically predicted or controlled by language teaching. Teaching can only hope to increase the probability of such learning.

Meaning-focused activity is of value not only to the initial formation of the internal system but to its further development or elaboration too. The effort to make sense of a piece of language occasions not only a possible 'yield' (i.e. the subconscious abstraction of a structure) but also a corresponding 'investment': the effort draws on such abstract linguistic structures as have been formed already, whether it be firmly or faintly, accurately or inaccurately. Available abstract structures are thus deployed on new (or recurring) samples of language, helping to interpret those samples but, in the process, themselves getting firmed up, modified, extended, or integrated with one another. Recurrent effort at comprehension thus leads to recurrent deployment and to the gradual growth of an internal linguistic competence. Furthermore, deployment occurs not only in the process of comprehension but in the

process of production as well; and deployment in production has value for the development of the internal system in that, like comprehension, it results in a firming up of the abstract structures concerned. It is, however, likely that abstract structures need to be formed more firmly for deployment in production than they need to be for comprehension, a hypothesis that will be expanded upon later in this chapter.

**System-development**

Although acquisition and deployment have been outlined above as different concepts, they are not seen as separate processes in the development of the internal system. Every effort to comprehend or convey meaning involves a deployment of abstract structures that have already been formed, and every instance of deployment constitutes a step in the further development of those structures. The structures deployed may be firmed up or modified, or new structures may be formed as an extension of existing ones. Also, deployment of one piece of language may facilitate abstraction from another. The abstract structures available at any time are likely to be functioning as a related system (as has been argued in the study of interlanguage) rather than discretely; and this means that a modification or extension of one part of the system can have consequences for other parts.[5] Given such a process of system-development, what is abstracted from any piece of language is not just what is occasioned by a working out of its meaning, but what is relevant to some part or other of the developing system itself. This process of system-development is likely to go on until all relevant parts have been abstracted in the course of recurrent deployment.[6] A fully-formed internal system is thus likely to achieve, when deployed thereafter, conformity to the norms of language structure, regardless of the strict needs of meaning-exchange in particular instances.

Deployment is a notion which also applies to the operation of linguistic competence in normal language use. A characteristic of normal language use is that while the user's conscious mind is occupied with the meaning-content that is being exchanged, an internal linguistic competence is operating simultaneously at a less conscious level, both to facilitate this exchange by bringing about a matching of meaning and language structure and to ensure conformity to grammatical norms. Perceptions of this

two-level operation in language use have led in the past to notions such as automaticity and 'associative habit' as a means of characterizing the operation of linguistic competence, and to teaching techniques such as 'practice' in various forms ('form-focused' and 'meaningful' activity as characterized in Chapter 2) which address themselves directly to that linguistic level. The perception of a more integral link between the two operations led, on the project, to the notion of deployment and to meaning-focused activity, a form of pedagogy which addresses itself directly to a conscious preoccupation with meaning-content in order to achieve a deployable linguistic competence.

## Rule-focused activity

It must be remembered that the reference above to an internal system of rules is not to any particular descriptive or generative grammar produced by linguists. The study of grammar by linguists is an attempt to *discover* various aspects of the internal system, while language pedagogy is an attempt to *develop* that system in learners. As was noted in Chapter 2, linguists' study of grammar has made it abundantly clear that the internal system developed by successful learners is far more complex than any grammar yet constructed by a linguist, and it is therefore unreasonable to suppose that any language learner can acquire a deployable internal system by consciously understanding and assimilating the rules in a linguist's grammar, not to mention those in a 'pedagogic' grammar which represent a simplification of the linguist's grammar and consequently can only be still further removed from the internally developed system. Moreover, although linguists' grammars aim to provide some understanding of the internal system, they cannot, and do not, claim any isomorphism with it in terms of specific correspondence between units, operations, or organization. Linguists construct conceptual models (acting as intellectuals, rather than as language-users), the outputs of which match as closely as possible the output of the internal system shared by language-users. However, output similarity does not justify an assumption of isomorphism, even when output is taken to include 'intuitions' about well-formedness or ambiguity. At best, these intuitions represent expressions of the internal system, not introspections on its form. Furthermore, teaching a descriptive grammar can only be done in some order suggested by its organization, implying the

even less plausible assumption of a correspondence between such organizational logic: and the developmental sequence of the internal system. Most importantly, teaching a descriptive grammar is likely – as has been pointed out at various times in the history of language pedagogy – to promote in learners an explicit knowledge of that grammar, rather than a deployable internal system.

**Planned progression**

For similar reasons, the use of a descriptive grammar 'behind the classroom' as a means of regulating teaching through planned progression, preselection, and form-focused activity is also unlikely to be helpful in promoting an internal system. The purpose of using a descriptive grammar in this way (as noted in Chapter 2) is to ensure that learners infer the rules of language structure, one by one, directly from pre-arranged samples made available to them. It is thought that when learners infer rules in this way, they internalize them better than if the rules were taught explicitly. However, the assumption is still that the descriptive grammar used to arrange samples represents the internal system to be constructed by learners. A unit of grammar used as the basis of a set of samples is taken to be a unit of the internal system, and the sequence in which different units are brought into the teaching is taken to be the sequence of internal grammar-construction. Planned linguistic progression in teaching thus involves both an assumption of isomorphism between the descriptive grammar used and the internal system, and an assumption of correspondence between the grammatical progression used in teaching and the developmental sequence of the internal system. In particular, it assumes that the development of the internal system is a discrete item, additive process – an assumption which goes counter to the highly plausible perception in interlanguage studies that the process is a holistic one, consisting of a sequence of transitional systems.[7]

**Pre-selection**

Pre-selection of particular units of a descriptive grammar for particular lessons arises from planned progression and results in form-focused activity. It aims, on the one hand, to ensure that learners receive, at each stage of the teaching, samples repre-

senting the unit of grammar relevant to that stage in the planned progression, and is therefore based on the same assumption of isomorphism, developmental sequence, and additive process. Preselection also aims, on the other hand, to ensure that the preselected unit of grammar is learnt well by learners in the course of the lesson concerned, by making provision for a good deal of repetition or practice with samples of language representing that unit. The concept of learning which lies behind such repetition and practice, however, conflicts with that which underlies task-based teaching. Practice relies on a focus on form – or focus on nothing in particular, as in the mechanical handling of a given piece of language – and on what may be regarded as the 'quantum' of exposure. In contrast, task-based teaching relies on a focus on meaning and what was referred to above as the 'intensity' of exposure. The two approaches conflict in that planned repetition and practice (unlike unplanned 'recurrence', see pages 58–9) can be employed in the classroom only at the expense of a sustained focus on meaning, and vice versa.[8]

### Meaningful practice

What was referred to in Chapter 2 as 'meaningful practice' may appear to be a desirable combination of focus on both form and meaning. Such work generally involves getting learners to handle a set of samples representing a grammatical unit while ensuring that the handling of each sample involves some attention to its meaning. Both the samples of language and the meaning are made available (in more or less direct ways) and learners' attention alternates repeatedly between the two, it being a constraint of the activity that each be paid attention to. Such activity differs qualitatively from what we have called 'meaning-focused' activity in that the latter involves only attention to meaning as a constraint. While meaning-focused activity accepts the consequence that any abstraction of language structure will be unpredictable in its occurrence and varied in its results, 'meaningful practice' fails to bring about a sustained preoccupation with meaning, not only because of its constant shift of attention between meaning and form but, more importantly, because of the need for the different samples of language to be similar in grammatical structure in order for the activity to count as 'practice' at all. The notion of practice demands a paradigmatic occurrence of similarly structured samples, while a

sustained preoccupation with meaning demands developing discourse which tends to operate syntagmatically through structurally dissimilar samples. Moreover, since meaningful practice involves a prediction by the teacher of the language forms to be employed by learners, it involves a prediction of meaning-content as well and, for that reason, finds it difficult to accommodate negotiable meaning-content or procedures by which learners derive – with varied and unpredictable success – new meaning-content from that which is given. As argued in the previous chapter, the processes by which learners derive meaning and make it their own are important for meaning-focused activity.

There is a further notion relating to pre-selection which involves ensuring the occurrence of samples representing a given grammatical unit by selecting classroom activities in which such samples are predictable. The idea, is that the samples will then occur naturally in the classroom, thus providing the predicted exposure for learners, while at the same time allowing a sustained preoccupation with meaning. No planned repetition or practice is involved and only the teacher, not the learner, needs (it is thought) to be aware of the pre-selection. The question here is not only to what extent samples representing particular units of grammar are, in general, predictable in particular situations but also, and more important, what effect the teacher's act of making the prediction has on the resulting classroom discourse. If a prediction is made, it must matter whether or not it comes true, and the success of the prediction must therefore be, for the teacher, a part of the criterion of success for the activity concerned. As a result, there is at least a desire on the part of the teacher to see the prediction come true and, very likely, a consequent attempt to ensure that it does. This means that the teacher will try to scan his own language grammatically while he is employing it in discourse – an operation unnatural to language use and unlike deployment – or to 'plant' the predicted samples deliberately in the discourse, and perhaps highlight them as language forms in some way. The effect is that the teacher is not as meaning-focused as the learners and the resulting discourse as a whole is less meaning-focused than it would otherwise be. The only justification for such a sacrifice in the quality of discourse is planned progression, the value of which was questioned above.[9] If planned progression and a planned focus on form are both excluded, it then becomes immaterial which samples of

language occur or recur in particular classroom activities, as long as some do. Language therefore becomes free to select itself according to the needs of the activity/discourse and manageability for learners, which is precisely the case with meaning-focused activity.

## Language awareness

It is not claimed that meaning-focused activity eliminates all attention by learners to language samples as form. Such total elimination is probably impossible in any form of teaching, and possibly inconsistent with normal language use. The claim is rather that meaning-focused activity ensures that any attention to form is (1) contingent to dealing with meaning and (2) self-initiated (i.e. not planned, predicted, or controlled by the teacher). Such self-initiated attention to form may in fact have value for learning in that it is likely to be engendered either by the process of meaning-extraction/meaning-expression or by the internal process of structure-abstraction and, in either case, to have a facilitative role to play. Attention to form which is externally initiated or manipulated is likely to remain unrelated to either process and can only be a pedagogic objective in itself.

Learners in project classes were, of course, aware that it was English that was being used in the classroom and that they were being taught English in this way. They often asked to know the meaning or pronunciation of particular words, just as they asked for particular statements to be repeated or explained. They found themselves trying to guess, consciously, the meaning of particular expressions or to find some way of saying what they wished to say – perhaps by 'borrowing' available language. More significantly, there were indications that individual learners became suddenly preoccupied, for a moment, with some piece of language, in ways apparently unrelated to any immediate demands of the ongoing activity in the classroom. For example there was sometimes a repeated mouthing by the learner of a word or a longer stretch of language to himself, or a prolonged gaze at something that was written on the blackboard or on paper, or a retrospective alteration of, or deliberation on, something the learner himself had written earlier in a notebook. Very occasionally, there was an out-ofcontext request to the teacher or a fellow-learner to confirm, or just listen to, a reading or repetition of something that had been written or said. The result,

in all cases, was a temporary withdrawal from the activity or interaction on hand, which was what made the phenomenon noticeable. It was not, however, a phenomenon which was noticed frequently or equally by different teachers, or equally in different classes, and it was only when a teacher had been teaching a class for some time and was used to the ways of particular learners that it began to be noticed at all. It is possible to speculate whether such moments of involuntary language awareness might be symptoms (or 'surfacings') of some internal process of learning, representing, for instance, a conflict in the emerging internal system leading to a system-revision. If so, one could further speculate whether the frequency of such symptoms might be an indicator of the pace of system-development and therefore a correlate of differential achievement between learners. (A 'fossilized' learner might then represent the case where 'conflict' and system-revision have ceased to occur.) It is, however, difficult to see what deliberate use could be made, in teaching, of such a perception: if the instances of involuntary awareness are symptoms of some learning process, any attempt to increase or influence them directly would be effort misdirected to symptoms, rather than to causes.

One might also try to relate the language awareness occasioned by system-development to other forms of language awareness occasioned by system-operation outside a learning context, in normal language use. There are, for instance, moments of language awareness which occur when one has lost track of a sentence half-way through or when one registers a linguistic deviance, the former representing a lapse in the internal system's operation, and the latter a mismatch or conflict between one's internal system and what is being processed. The latter is especially suggestive in that the linguistic deviance gets registered 'vaguely' while the sample of language concerned is being processed for its meaning – a phenomenon analogous to that hypothesized above as language learning, namely that of structure being abstracted subconsciously from a piece of language while the learner is consciously occupied with its meaning. A form of language awareness also occurs during discourse-planning when one tries out some expression or verbal formulation on oneself before speaking or writing it, or in the course of retrospectively checking what one has written when one tests a verbal formulation to see if it 'sounds right' grammatically.[10] There is also the language awareness which is referred to in lin-

guistic analysis as the speaker's intuition, and treated as evidence on the linguistic competence being investigated. Some of these forms of awareness are noticeable in the classroom too: learners sometimes appear to be planning pieces of discourse – deliberating with a verbal formulation, even mouthing it before writing it down or making an intervention in oral interaction.

While on the subject of language awareness, it may be worthwhile mentioning one other phenomenon. Explicit grammar rules 'make sense' when they accord with language samples arising from or conforming to one's own competence, and there is often a sense of satisfaction or of discovery when that happens: what one has 'known' without being aware of it is now confirmed as being right (hence the satisfaction) and is also seen to be rule-governed (hence the sense of discovery). It is tempting to see this phenomenon as an argument for rule-focused activity or, within task-based teaching, for tasks involving rule-discovery, but it is important to remember that the sense of satisfaction arises only because the rule is authenticated by data originating in one's own competence – that is to say, when one has already developed an internal system capable of yielding samples which conform to the rule.[11] When that is not the case, rules are just so much complex information and the situation is not dissimilar to that of trying to read a grammar book of a language one does not know. Setting tasks of rule-discovery before learners have developed an adequate internal system will, correspondingly, be putting them in the situation of a 'structural linguist' attempting to construct the grammar of a language he does not know. Further, the sense of satisfaction and discovery does not imply that the explicit rule of grammar concerned is, in fact, the rule of the internal system. (If it did, we would not be witnessing different schools of linguistics proposing different rules and models of grammar, all with a sense of discovery and satisfaction.) All it implies is some pleasant surprise at output-similarity between the rule and the internal system. This similarity is generally on a very limited scale, in terms of both the amount of data involved and depth of awareness: generations of teachers and learners of English no doubt derived satisfaction for earlier analyses of 'John is eager/easy to please', before transformational grammar came on the scene.

## Comprehension and production

It was suggested above that comprehension and production are both of value to the development of the internal system in that they both bring about a deployment of available abstract structures and thereby a firming-up of those structures. It was also suggested that comprehension brings about the formation of new abstract structures as well as a revision or extension of existing ones, the latter as a result of some form of matching between the structures being deployed and those embodied in the sample of language being comprehended. Comprehension precedes production because abstract structures need to be formed relatively firmly before they are deployed in production. It is possible to point to four factors which help to explain the difference between deployment in comprehension and in production.

First, comprehension is a private activity, not perceptible to others. Production involves a display of language and therefore causes a sense of insecurity. One can afford to fumble, backtrack, or try out different possibilities in comprehension, without revealing one's incompetence or losing face, while any such strategies in production run the risk of being noticed. Learners therefore need a relatively high level of linguistic confidence (arising from a relatively firmly-formed internal system) to engage in production. There are, no doubt, other sources of confidence and insecurity arising from individual characteristics of learners which interact with linguistic confidence; the point being made here is simply that there is a particular form of linguistic confidence which derives from the firmness of the internal system and is demanded more in production than in comprehension.

Secondly, deployment in comprehension is a matter of the abstract structures of the internal system being mapped onto those which are already embodied in given language samples, while deployment in production is a matter of internal structures creating and supporting new language samples. It is easier for unstable or faintly-formed structures to be 'invoked' in comprehension than for them to be 'embodied' in production. Further, comprehension can be partial or selective – confined to as much of the language as is possible, or necessary for the purpose on hand – without there being any sense that the sample of language being comprehended is affected by such incomplete processing. Production, in comparison, calls for a fulness or completeness of linguistic formulation which is determined not

just by the learner's ability and the strict needs of the meaning-exchange being attempted, but by the requirements of language structure as well. Learners, of course, produce linguistic formulations which are as full as their internal systems can support but there nevertheless seems to be some awareness that the formulations are less full than they need to be – and a sense of responsibility for that fact. It is possible that the teacher's incidental reformulation of learners' linguistic formulations contributes to this awareness but it is also likely that the awareness reflects the fact that the internal system is not fully realized in production, that unstable or faintly-formed structures are not being deployed. There is also the fact that incompleteness in learners' processing of a sample is not visible to the teacher while incompleteness in linguistic formulations stands out clearly, thus creating an exaggerated impression of the difference in learners' abilities in comprehension and production.

Thirdly, and relatedly to the above, the degree of commitment or precision in comprehension is controlled by the comprehender: it is possible to hold some choices between possible meanings 'in abeyance' and to operate without commitment to particular interpretations, leaving it to future occasions to make greater precision possible. Production, however, involves verbal explicitness and the words employed can commit the producer to unintended meaning-content. This, too, makes production more of a risk than comprehension and therefore dependent on a higher level of confidence.

Fourthly, comprehension can draw on extra-linguistic resources, such as knowledge of the world and contextual expectations, which can support linguistic resources to the extent necessary and do not need to be marked off from them: the complementary relationship between linguistic resources and extra-linguistic ones, that is to say, is controlled by the comprehender and is readily adjustable. Production, by contrast, is much more language dependent and, when it is inadequate, has to depend on the listener/reader drawing on such extra-linguistic resources as are available: the producer, that is to say, cannot control the use of extra-linguistic resources by his audience. Any use of extra-linguistic resources by the producer himself is, moreover, marked off clearly from linguistic ones and can be seen as a public admission of linguistic inadequacy. Production thus involves a greater sense of dependence on linguistic resources than does comprehension.

Differences such as these help to explain why comprehension

can take place from the beginning of language learning while production becomes feasible only at a much later stage. They also show that the best preparation for production is continual comprehension, since it is recurrent deployment in comprehension that can firm up the internal system to a point at which it becomes deployable in production. This is not to say that production itself has no value for further production: deployment in production, when it has become possible, also helps to firm up the internal system, thus making it more deployable in subsequent production. Since, however, initial readiness for production is not predictable, not observable and not likely to be uniform for different learners, all that pedagogy can do is to (1) ensure continual deployment in comprehension, (2) provide recurrent opportunity for production in case any learner is ready to attempt it at a given point, and (3) guard against the possibility that an inability to attempt production holds back deployment in comprehension. Task-based activity in the classroom involves comprehension at all stages and provides opportunity for production in the pre-task interaction with the teacher and in stating the outcomes of individual tasks, but also allows learners (deliberately, in the early stages) to use alternatives to production such as numbers, diagrams, or 'borrowed' language to the extent necessary for carrying out the activity.[12] What is excluded is 'reproduction' in the sense of planned repetition or externally-initiated borrowing (see pages 60–61), as being of little value in making production possible.

## Groupwork

The project did not use groupwork in the classroom, in the sense of putting learners in small groups and asking or encouraging them to attempt tasks jointly. Learners were, however, given the right at the 'task' stage to consult fellow-learners or the teacher if they wished to, either briefly or to an extent amounting to collaboration. In practice, some learners made more use of this right than others and on some occasions more than on others. The avoidance of groupwork in a more organized form was, at the beginning of the project, due to a wish to confine pedagogic exploration to the project's major principle (i.e. the significance of meaning-focused activity in the classroom) which did not in itself entail groupwork; but more positive reasons for excluding it came to the perceived in the course of the project.

The strongest argument for systematic groupwork in task-based teaching would be that it will generate spontaneous interaction between members of a group, creating opportunities for the deployment of their emerging internal systems. But deployment, as noted above, is a process during which learners' internal systems get firmed up (in production as well as in comprehension) and revised or extended (in comprehension). Opportunity for revision or extension arises when there is a mismatch between the internal system being deployed and that embodied in the sample of language being processed – when, that is to say, the internal system encounters 'superior data' or, in other words, samples of language which embody a more highly developed internal system. It is important for learners' internal systems to be continually encountering 'superior data' so that the process of firming up is balanced by a process of revision, and extension. Since differences between the internal systems of different learners are much smaller than those between the internal systems of the learners as a group and that of the teacher, sustained interaction between learners is likely to provide much less opportunity for system-revision. As a result, the effect of learner-learner interaction will largely be a firming-up of learners' systems: each learner's output will reinforce the internal systems of the others without there being a corresponding process of revision, or at least with less of a balance between firming up and revision than when the teacher is a party to the interaction. There will then be a risk: of fossilization – that is to say of learners' internal systems becoming too firm too soon and much less open to revision when superior data are available. The principle that interaction between the teacher and the learner, or between a text/task on paper and the learner, is more beneficial than interaction between one learner and another is thus part of the concept of learning which lies behind task-based teaching. It is true that the voluntary consultation or collaboration between learners which was allowed, and often took place, in the project classrooms is open to the same effects of learner-learner interaction, but there was at least no pressure from the teacher on learners either to engage in such interaction or to conduct the interaction in the target language. Undue pressure on speaking in the target language can also have the effect of firming up the internal system prematurely.

A second major argument for organized groupwork is that small peer-groups provide a mutually supportive environment

for learners which is less threatening than interaction with the teacher. But at least some learners find it more humiliating to lose face in front of their peers than in front of the teacher: they wish to see themselves as being equal to the former, but not to the latter. Also, some learners wish to work alone, to prove to themselves that they can succeed in doing the task without help. Learners have contrasting personalities: some are gregarious, some individualistic, some dominating, some shy. There are also likes and dislikes, and patterns of rivalry, friendship, and aspiration in the context of the class as a social group. To expect learners to shed or subdue such feelings of conflict in the interests of better second language learning is idealistic, and to cast the teacher in a threatening role and see learners as mutually supportive individuals seems simplistic. What sometimes happens, when the teacher insists on groupwork, is that learners feel a sense of resentment against the teacher himself, thus complicating the existing mix of feelings and attitudes in the class. What is probably most supportive is for the teacher to give learners the right to seek or not to seek help from peers on any given occasion.

Groupwork is sometimes advocated on the grounds that it increases the amount of language practice which each learner gets, but it will have become clear from the discussion in this chapter that the notion of 'practice' (i.e. reproduction, whether or not it is disguised in some way to look like production) has little relevance to the concept of learning which informs task-based teaching. It is also argued that interaction between peers involves certain forms of language use or certain illocutionary functions which the 'unequal' interaction between teacher and learner does not bring into play, but the relevance of that argument is unclear for a pedagogic approach which (1) aims to develop learners' grammatical competence and (2) claims that the grammatical competence which develops through deployment will be deployable generally in different forms and functions of language use.

## Notes

**1** See for instance, Davies *et al*. (1984) for a comprehensive picture of current concerns in the study of acquisition.

**2** Linguistic (or grammatical) competence in Chomsky's sense, i.e. 'the system of rules and principles that we assume have,

in some manner, been internally represented by the person who knows a language and that enable the speaker, in principle, to understand an arbitrary sentence and to produce a sentence expressing his thought' (1980: 201).

3 What motivates the internal system to go beyond the strict needs of meaning exchange remains a matter of speculation in first as much as in second language learning. See Brown (1973: 463–4) on first language learning: 'What impels the child to "improve" his speech at all remains something of a mystery. . . . It is surprisingly difficult to find cases in which omission (of requisite morphemes in a child's speech) resulted in incomprehension or misunderstanding.' It is, of course, easy to find instances of second language learning in which the internal system has apparently stopped short of full development but it is equally easy to find other instances, in which similar conditions obtain, where it has developed far more fully. Second language pedagogy can in fact be viewed as a matter of creating certain learning conditions in which the internal process of system development is likely to go 'further' than in other conditions.

4 See Chomsky (1976: 23) and Chomsky (1979: 82–4).

5 See Corder (1981: 65–78).

6 There is of course the poorly understood phenomenon of fossilization (see note 3 above).

7 See Corder (1981: 66).

8 I take Brumfit's (1984a: 56–9) argument for using accuracy and fluency activities separately (instead of attempting to integrate them operationally) to be a recognition of this conflict.

9 Another possible justification is coverage of language structure. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

10 Such phenomena can be regarded as a form of monitoring, but monitoring should then be seen as a deliberate tapping of language competence (i.e. of the 'acquired' system), in order to overcome the effect of performance factors (in Chomsky's sense of 'performance'), not as a scanning of the output with the help of a separate, consciously-learnt system of rules, as Krashen suggests. Such a tapping of competence is what

happens when speakers of a language, who may never have 'learnt' any grammar rules, exercise their linguistic 'intuitions' (also in Chomsky's sense) to judge features such as well-formedness and ambiguity. It also operates in self-correction and in the production of planned discourse (as in careful – hence relatively slow – speech or writing). What Krashen regards as monitoring seems to me to be largely, if not entirely, a matter of competence tapping, and I therefore do not see any case for teaching descriptive grammar to learners 'for monitor use' (1982: 76–8). Notice also that teaching grammar for monitor use implies an assumption of isomorphism between the descriptive grammar to be taught and the learner's internal system.

**11** One recalls that Palmer (1917) suggested that formal grammar should follow the learning of a language, not precede it. See also Brumfit's (1984a: 40) quotation of Locke's statement in 1693: 'If grammar is taught at any time, it must be to one who can speak the language already.' The fact that many adult second language learners ask to be taught grammar may be partly due to some earlier experience of satisfaction from post-acquisition grammar. Such experience may also explain why many successful second language learners make 'introspective' statements about grammar having been useful or even essential for them in learning the language concerned (see Pickett 1978). It is not at all surprising that attempts to introspect on language learning should result in a recall and highlighting of what was most memorable from that experience.

**12** This is not to say that it is always possible for the teacher to know when a learner is producing, and when he or she is borrowing language; nor is it necessary, in teaching, to be able to tell the one from the other. It is conceivable that borrowing has some direct value for the development of the internal system – that the matching of one's own meaning with a piece of language one has identified or selected brings about some 'intensive exposure' to that piece of language, in the way purposeful comprehension does.