

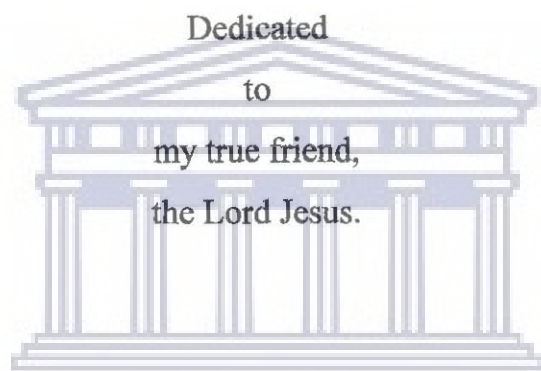
**The development of supplementary materials for English language
teaching in a scarce resource environment: an action research
study**



A mini-thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
M. Phil. in the Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape,
South Africa.

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September 2001



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STATEMENT

I declare that “The development of supplementary materials for English language teaching in a scarce resource environment: an action research study” is my own work and all sources quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

September 2001

Abrahaley Habte



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many people deserve my heart-felt gratitude. Only a few are mentioned but the contribution of all involved, one way or the other, is acknowledged.

Foremost, my gratitude goes to Prof. Albert Weideman, whose insight and comments spurred me to work harder. I am indebted to him for his constant academic support. I extend my gratitude to him and his wife, Anna Weideman, for lending me their computer during the writing of this mini-thesis.

I extend my gratitude also to my father, Ato Habte Ghebremariam, and my mother, Weizero Meaza Habtesellassie, to whom I should have rendered my filial duties during these two years when I studied for my masters. My brother, Ghirmay Habte, also deserves my warmest thanks for his continuous support.

My gratitude also goes to Ato Petros Hailemariam, and Ato Abraham Tecle in the Ministry of Education for their involvement and hard work during my and my colleagues' study at the University of the Western Cape.

Ato Iyob Kiflay's support should be acknowledged. He and his colleagues made the study at his school pleasant and rewarding. My sincere thanks also goes to the Grade 9-1 (2000/2001) students, whom I enjoyed teaching English and who taught me how to teach English through information gap tasks.

Robel Netscreab, one among many, also deserves my special thanks.



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ABSTRACT

Task based language instruction has generated some debate among researchers. Some argue in favour of task based language instruction by claiming that tasks focus learners' attention on meaning and thus facilitate second language acquisition (Prahbu, 1987; Pica and Doughty, 1986; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun, 1993). Others argue against task based language instruction and call into question the concept of comprehensible input, the idea upon which the whole task based approach is based (Sheen, 1994).

In light of the above, this study tries to investigate the constraints involved in using information gap tasks. In an attempt to understand the possibilities they offer, and the constraints they present, the study investigates these tasks in a series of cycles.

This study reports on an action research study which investigated ways to refine information gap tasks and constraints associated with such tasks. This mini-thesis has six chapters, the first being the introduction, the background of the study. In the following chapter, I review the literature on communicative tasks with a special emphasis on information gap tasks. In chapter three, the research methodology and data gathering techniques are discussed. The data is presented and discussed at length in chapter four. In chapter five the data is analysed in light of current second language acquisition theory as discussed in the literature. At the same time I present the findings of the study in this chapter. The final chapter, chapter six, discusses the findings of the study and concludes it.

Designing tasks, which is the most important aspect of the study, has received considerable attention. The study has employed low-cost materials in order to overcome financial problems associated with development of language materials. The findings show that, while many constraints such as students' lack of interest, discouragement, students' unwillingness to take responsibility for their own learning, etc., beset communicative language instruction, possibilities abound to use information gap tasks effectively. It argues that information gap tasks designed to the students' level (with appropriate pairs) can effectively be used in second language instruction. Arguing that information gap tasks increase student talk, it shows how such tasks encourage verbal interaction between students in pair work. It also shows how to maximise such interaction without jeopardising the students' interest in the tasks.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

CONTEXT

Finding the right materials for language teaching in an environment where resources are scarce is a problem for many teachers in Africa. It is also the main motivation for the investigation that will be described in this study.

The study was done in a context that is characterised by a number of elements that may make it unique. Nonetheless, I shall attempt to draw comparisons, and do analyses of this context in relation to similar settings, that may shed further light on the issues that will be addressed here.

Though many of the observations below are echoed in the analyses of others, the introductory remarks I make here stem in the first instance from my personal experience of language teaching in Eritrea. This experience is also the basis for my concern in this study with the introduction of methods in Eritrean schools that provide new ways of teaching language and offer alternatives to grammar-based second language instruction. I would like to believe that my observations, however, concern not only me, but are the professional concerns of many others who find themselves in similar positions.

The introduction of communicative syllabi has not brought about change in Eritrean language classrooms. Required to teach a structural syllabus during the Ethiopian occupation (before 1991, when Eritrea was liberated), and unable to break with the past, Eritrean English teachers still stress grammar and structure. Though they are now required to teach communicative syllabi (since structural

syllabi have lost favour with the Ministry of Education, as they have world-wide) teachers do not seem able or willing to abide by the Ministry's directives or to heed the textbooks, which require from teachers, *inter alia*, that they use group and/or pair work when they conduct communicative classes. Teachers simply ignore the directives and continue to teach in the old ways (Tesfamariam, 2000: 90, 91).

There could be many different reasons why teachers are reluctant to abandon obsolete methods, or why they water down the new communicative syllabus and continue to emphasise grammar, paying only lip service to the communicative approach, which stresses the acquisition of communicative competence (Johnson, 1982: 121).

One reason often claimed by teachers as compelling them to stress grammar at the expense of the students' communicative skills is class size (Tesfamariam, 2000: 100, 113). It is often heard that large class sizes (in Eritrea classes are as big as 70 or even bigger) prevent teachers from giving each student the attention they deserve to develop their communicative competence. Teachers doubt whether second language learning is possible without substantial help from them, and do not believe that students learn from each other in pair and group work. The challenge that class size presents teachers seems to have only one solution: it forces Eritrean English language teachers into whole class, teacher centred instruction, an approach that is known to be quite ineffective for teaching communicative skills (Pica and Doughty, 1985).

Student attitude is another reason. Students seem to have erroneous and distorted ideas about language learning, what languages are for, what to master a language means, and how to achieve it (cf. Taylor, 1983: 83). The common wisdom among people in Eritrea, especially among students, is that one learns a language by first learning its structure and grammar, and not vice versa. Though using English communicatively (especially speaking the language) is an asset that people from all

walks of life (including students) desire to possess, teaching students to use the language communicatively is not an easy task. Teachers find it very difficult to convince students to use English communicatively; that they need not first master the structure of the language. Students generally refuse to be persuaded. Thus, teachers would claim that another reason for their failure to teach communicatively is students' resistance to anything but the teaching of grammar.

Another related reason, yet one with significant implications for language instruction, arises out of the culture of teachers and learners (Stevick, 1990: 89, 90). There is a tacit understanding that it is a teacher's duty to speak and explain, 'to pour wisdom into empty vessels', while the students are expected to hold their peace and listen attentively. As Shaalukeni (2000: 85) points out,

teachers and parents in African countries have a picture in their minds of a classroom as a place where silence and strict discipline should prevail. This is the kind of classroom our teachers carry around in their minds, the one in which they wish to teach.

Though students' freedom to ask questions is not restricted, they often do not ask, probably because they are afraid of making a silly mistake, and fools of themselves, in front of the whole class. For this reason, they prefer to clarify their understanding with the teacher in private, after class. This restricts their participation, and limits students' opportunities to practise English and develop communication skills. Indirectly, the expectation that students are expected to listen and not speak almost seems to compel English teachers to fall back upon grammatical explanation.

There is perhaps a fourth reason, and one that may be related to students' reservations in class: that of their language incompetence. Students often forward as a reason their inadequate English competence for not trying to express themselves in the language. Many English teachers encourage this by explaining things to students in the vernacular (Duff and Polio, 1990: 161, 163) and allowing

students to ask and/or answer questions in their first language. English as a medium of instruction is, therefore, restricted to the teacher's explanation and to the language of the text and reading books. Thus, when students fail to understand, teachers explain to them in the vernacular. This practice encourages students not to take the trouble of becoming proficient in English.

The results of this are that students are discouraged from practising their English and that they would therefore resist English teachers' requests to discuss ideas or carry out tasks in English. This resistance disheartens English teachers, who, in turn, do not try out the new methods they may come across in English language workshops they attend, and they fall back on the old ways, which create the comfort of the familiar (cf. Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 1-2).

Weideman (2000: 9-10) claims that teachers' beliefs about effective methods influences their practices in language teaching significantly, and he stresses the need to critically analyse the assumptions that inform different methods (2000: 9-10). Karavas-Doukas (1996) finds that English second language teachers in Greece, though they profess to use the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, in practice fail to realise what they say is a successful way of teaching English. This, in part, may also explain why English second language teachers have so far been unsuccessful in implementing the CLT approach in Eritrea (Tesfamariam, 2000).

Shaalukeni and Weideman (2000) argue for the need to search for more effective ways to influence teachers towards making their language classes more student-centred. They argue that no amount of advice can convince teachers to increase learner participation, because this is in direct conflict with their beliefs about language teaching (2000: 7).

Markee (1993) discusses innovation diffusion at length, and explains why innovations in language teaching fail. He claims that different sociocultural constraints affect innovations positively or negatively (1993: 234; cf. Shaalukeni and Weideman, 2000: 8-9). Further, though these constraints are comprehensive, he argues that their impact and importance vary from context to context (1993: 233-234).

In addition to sociocultural constraints, however, psychological factors and the perception of teachers about trying new methods play a significant role in the adoption or rejection of innovations (Markee, 1993: 236). The influence of such psychological factors should never be underestimated, as they indicate the factors that are directly at work in a school setting. For this reason, the attempt to try new methods becomes doubly difficult for English teachers when they are perceived by their colleagues (and perhaps by the principal) as belonging to those instructors who waste precious time in useless group and pair work or language games, while the other subject teachers wisely use their time and help their students. In other words, both colleagues and students frown upon their innovations, and discourage such English teachers' initiatives.

The University entrance examination, which high school English exams imitate, also significantly influences English teachers' classroom instruction (cf. Ibrahim, 2000: 82-89). A lion's share of the English exam of the Eritrean Secondary Education Certificate Examination (ESECE) is devoted to grammar and reading comprehension, in addition to writing (a recent addition), which accounts for 20% of the exam (Ibrahim, 2000: 82-89). English teachers feel it their duty to prepare their students for this exam and, therefore, to stress grammar. This grammar-based instruction means that they neglect nurturing the communicative competence of students in English. It is the latter which the ESECE, perhaps unintentionally, discourages. Thus, English high school teachers in general (Grade 11 English teachers, at which grade the exam is taken, in particular) teach for the exam

(Morrow, 1985: 6; Ibrahim, 2000: 85, 94, 95; Davies, 1990: 1, 24; Hughes, 1989: 1-2, 44-45).

The irony is that though students desire that they be taught grammar and think that this would be to their benefit, it nonetheless does not seem to appeal to them or provide them with meaningful learning. My own experience is that they often do not listen to the teacher, and do badly in grammar.

In the light of the above, this study intends to identify some of the constraints faced by teachers in communicative classes. The study attempts to find out, through action research, the means to overcome a number of these constraints. Some of the constraints discussed above (class size, student attitudes, scarcity of teaching materials and other constraints) will be discussed and analysed in detail in what follows.

It is essential, however, to say a few more words here on how this study was conceived. At the University of Asmara, in Eritrea, a few years back, the only training English teachers received included one or two courses on how to teach reading, speaking, listening, and writing, in addition to grammar and pronunciation. The University at that time was an under-resourced institution, with very few books (and these very old and outdated) being available to students. Thus, students depended to a large extent on their lecturers for their learning. The lecturers' knowledge of the communicative approach was limited, and hence they paid less attention to it than the situation warranted. Students learn from their teachers' words and deeds. Naturally we learned from the ways the lecturers taught. Unfortunately for me and the other English students, except for one or two notable exceptions, none of the lecturers themselves encouraged discussion, group or pair work. Thus we learned the only method the lecturers had to offer — a teacher - fronted approach.

I was taught and trained in such an institution and in such instructional styles. The only thing I remember learning about teaching English was that I had to teach the four language skills, but not how. The absence of any sharp memory of something worthwhile that could help me in my profession has always concerned me. If our opinions were asked, or debates and discussions organised, it was outside of language training classes.

My first encounter with the communicative approach, then, did not occur during my student days (as an English language student), but years later as an English teacher. I was teaching English to Grade 10 then and I was not satisfied with the way I taught my students English. On one particular day, the lesson was so successful that I wondered what the reason was. Though I had discovered a successful way of teaching English to students, I did not yet fully understand the principles behind the communicative approach, and especially information gap tasks. The experience, though significant, did not last long, because it needed a more solid foundation, a basic understanding of the principles of the communicative approach, which was to occur years later.

It is this sense of success (which I experienced years ago and is still fresh in my mind), and the revelation that there is a new way of teaching English, that have influenced me to take up this study to find out more about information gap tasks and what limits their effectiveness in class. It is against this background that the study is cast. Yet, these are not the only reasons that influenced me. There are further reasons to which I will return shortly.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The current trend in the teaching of English as a second language has been to move from a teacher-centred approach toward a student-centred one, in which students have greater participation and involvement, and take greater responsibility for their own learning. This shift is shown in the move from a teacher-fronted mode of

instruction towards more communicative, and more participatory classes, in which students are allowed to contribute their inputs and have their opinions heard.

This move towards classes that are more student-centred was fuelled in no small measure by dissatisfaction with teacher-fronted classes that do not promote communication skills (Pica and Doughty, 1985: 129). Instead, small group tasks were found to be better alternatives in that they provide students with good opportunities to practise the target language, negotiate meaning, and acquire that language, or develop communicative skills (Pica and Doughty, 1985: 132).

There is, however, another problem with teacher-fronted instruction. Because of their experience with students, teachers understand their students' vague or unclear ideas, and hence students are not compelled to modify, clarify or explain their utterances. Thus, they are denied opportunities to modify or negotiate meaning in the target language, which is without doubt essential for second language acquisition (Pica, Young, and Doughty, 1987).

In addition to limiting the negotiation of meaning, the teacher-fronted approach restricts communication to that between student and teacher, creating a pattern which limits students' opportunities to practise the target language. The opportunity for students to learn from one another is wasted, and their chances of developing their language skills, which are maximised in group tasks (Pica and Doughty, 1985:132), are also restricted. As others have shown, this negotiation time between students is maximally exploited when tasks are provided for working in pairs (Foster, 1998: 14, 17, 18).

The Eritrean curriculum stresses that teachers stick to student-centred approaches. It discourages teacher-centred approaches, in which the teacher takes the centre stage while students take the back seat, with passive and spectator roles, that cannot help them learn the language in any way. As in many other countries (cf.

Shaalukeni, 2000 for an example of a similar situation elsewhere), however, having a new policy and an alternative curriculum does not necessarily result in a change in the way that languages are taught. In fact, working from the framework of a typology of language syllabi, Tesfamariam (2000) has shown that there is an almost complete mismatch between the Grade 8 English syllabus in Eritrea and its implementation in the classroom.

Within the communicative approach, information gap tasks have a significant place. In fact, the information gap technique may be the defining characteristic of communicative teaching (Weideman, 2000: 31, 36).

In a series of studies done over more than a decade, Pica *et al.* claim that they find information gap tasks effective for second language instruction in that they promote negotiation of meaning in the target language and hence contribute to second language acquisition (Pica and Doughty, 1986; Pica, Young and Doughty, 1987; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, and Morgenthaler, 1989; Pica, 1994; Pica and Doughty, 1985; Pica, 1996).

Based on findings of their studies on using information gap tasks, Pica and Doughty (1986: 322), for example, conclude that “group work — and for that matter, pair work as well — is eminently capable of providing students with opportunities to produce the target language and modify interaction.” Relating their findings to current second language acquisition theory, they claim that “such modified interaction makes input comprehensible to learners and leads to second language acquisition” (1986: 322).

Though she confirms a number of Pica and Doughty’s findings, Foster, however, questions some of their conclusions on the grounds that the studies do not reflect real classroom situations and that such conclusions are unlikely to occur in real

classrooms. Students hardly negotiate in second language classes, she argues (Foster, 1998: 4, 13, 15).

To find out how far negotiation takes place in classrooms, Foster carried out a study (1998: 5). In her study, in contrast to Pica and Doughty's findings, she finds group work to be less successful than pair work, as the latter leaves the students no option but to engage themselves in discussion to complete the task (1998: 10, 14).

There is a major difference between Pica and Doughty's research, on the one hand, and Foster's, on the other. Pica and Doughty saw no significant variable in the setting of the research study, and took their subjects out of class when they administered their research. Foster, on the other hand, considers the setting a very significant variable and takes it into account (1998: 4). The results Pica and Doughty (1986) report should, therefore, be understood in this light.

One point on which Doughty and Pica's and Foster's research concurs is that both studies find pair work an effective way of organising classroom interaction to enhance negotiation of meaning between students (Doughty and Pica, 1986: 316, 322; Foster, 1998: 14, 17, 18). This finding (i.e. pair work as an effective vehicle of interaction and negotiation of meaning) has important implications for language instruction in the classroom. One of these is the change that should be introduced in language classroom interaction patterns: "... if comprehension of the target language is the goal, then there would have to be radical changes to conventional forms of teacher-student interaction" (Weideman, 1998: 21). Discussing the implications further, Weideman argues that these studies justify a new kind of classroom interaction in which the students take an active and meaningful role in order to understand and learn the language. With reference to Pica, Young and Doughty (1987: 755), he explains:

The kind of interaction that they refer to is, of course, not the conventional form of classroom talk Rather, it is the kind of communication that takes place when the learner is in a position to ask questions (for clarification, to check understanding), and the answers given by the teacher are intended to help the negotiation of meaning along (Weideman, 1998: 21).

Classroom interaction need not be limited to a teacher-student pattern, but can be extended to include student-student interactions, so that students' talk time is maximised.

The implications of Foster's study indeed do not contradict the principles of interaction for acquisition, but further reinforce the justification for communicative language teaching, or CLT, 'the new orthodoxy':

Although at times strongly critical of previous research, Foster's findings do not indicate that communicative teaching is not justifiable in terms of classroom interaction studies, and that we therefore have to return to conventional transmission teaching, but that one has to be quite aware of which types of task have the better chance of eliciting learner talk (Weideman, 1998: 22).

A further implication of Foster's critique (cf. Weideman, 1998: 20), and one which is closely related to this study, concerns materials development for language teaching. Earlier, Pica and Doughty (1986) had found that two-way information gap tasks generate more talk than one-way information gap tasks. Further, Pica, Young, and Doughty (1987) had found that interaction plays a major role in rendering texts comprehensible. In fact, they argue that simplifying texts by shortening sentences and removing embedded clauses actually impedes understanding. In other words, their claim is, as long as it encourages negotiation, any text can be used for language teaching.

It is this issue of designing appropriate teaching (as well as testing) materials, and refining them, that the current study takes as a problem for consideration. This study discusses the outcomes of an action research study on this that was carried out at a secondary school in Eritrea.

As we shall note below, using the communicative approach in real classrooms is not without its drawbacks. Indeed, some researchers have identified a number of constraints associated with communicative language teaching (CLT). Li, for instance, finds that introducing the communicative approach in South Korea involves constraints caused by teachers, students, the educational system and CLT itself (1998: 686-695). Others have studied these problems from different perspectives (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Karavas-Doukas, 1996).

In a communicative classroom in Eritrea, what constraints surface? What problems that frustrate negotiation of meaning in the target language arise? And how can these constraints be overcome? This study tries to address these questions in a classroom-based study. In addition, it tries to evaluate the effectiveness of two-way information gap tasks and explore ways to improve and refine them through action research.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Teaching English in Eritrea, as should be apparent from the above, is a very difficult task. English teachers are required to teach large classes, and conduct numerous and tiresome language tests in addition to the paper work they do, and that they share with other teachers. Furthermore, they are expected to teach students to use English communicatively and give extra help to weak students.

The task becomes more difficult when students do not have texts or reading books or anything suitable, which is written in English, to the level of their comprehension. Often such texts are hard to come by: students cannot afford their textbooks because they are poor. In such situations, teachers are forced to make the most of the only book — the teacher's copy — that they have. In rare cases — and most often in big towns — students are 'blessed' with a small school or public

library; in small villages, schools are unthinkable, let alone libraries (World Bank, 1994: 115). But because these libraries are often stocked with books beyond the comprehension level of the students, they cannot use them. The libraries offer no help to students. Thus, the responsibility of teaching the students English lies totally with the teacher, and the students are completely dependent on the teacher.

In addition to shouldering such responsibilities, teachers have to administer a series of activities to evaluate their students' progress. To evaluate students, English teachers have to test students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in accordance with the Ministry's directives. Teachers lack appropriate materials to carry out these activities. Thus, they test students with whatever material they can lay their hands on, which is often not appropriate, and neither evaluates the students' communicative skills nor helps them in any way academically. Barely acquainted with materials development, teachers do not have the knowledge or the skill to design language teaching or alternative testing material that will help their students.

I have discussed above the challenges that face Eritrean English teachers. I have observed that English teachers are required to evaluate their students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, but often lack appropriate texts to carry out such tasks. To carry out such tasks, however, one need not use costly texts. One can develop information gap tasks out of low cost materials. It is this issue of developing teaching and testing materials and trying their effectiveness that the study addresses.

This study tries to find out the effectiveness of information gap tasks, which the researcher designed out of low cost materials, that can supplement costly textbooks in text-scarce environments.

A word before I bring this chapter to a close. Here and in the chapters that follow, to avoid awkward sentence construction, I have mostly used the gender neutral terms 'they' or 'their' instead of 'he' or 'she,' or even '(s)he.' It is not my intention to indicate prejudice towards either gender, male or female, so where reference is made to 'he' or 'she' it is either imperative for the sake of accuracy, or required by the particular formulation, or unintentional.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This study reports on an action research study which investigated ways to refine information gap tasks and constraints associated with such tasks. This mini-thesis has six chapters, the first being the introduction, the background of the study. In the following chapter, I will review the literature on communicative tasks with a special emphasis on information gap tasks. In chapter three, the research methodology and data gathering techniques will be discussed. The data is presented and discussed at length in chapter four. In chapter five the data is analysed in light of current second language acquisition theory as discussed in current literature. At the same time I will present the findings of the study in this chapter. The final chapter, chapter six, discusses the findings of the study and concludes it.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets out to relate the procedure of using information gap tasks to the history of communicative language teaching, before considering five principles of communicative task development, and discussing various classifications of communicative tasks. It also sets out the requirements for such tasks, and how five types of task contribute or fail to contribute to language learning goals in terms of these requirements. The limitations of information gap tasks are then addressed, as well as their practical uses, as reported by teachers who have employed them in their classrooms. These practical implementations of a relatively simple instructional procedure are brought into sharper relief by surveying some of the empirical studies that first confirmed their usefulness. As we shall note below, the critically important arguments around the concept of the modification of verbal interaction, on which much of the empirical study is based, are related to broader concepts in second language acquisition theory. Finally, this discussion is placed within the framework of the often problematic introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) into an instructional culture that is strongly traditional.

AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION

The main concerns of this study, viz. the development of appropriate low-cost materials that use information gap tasks in order to maximise the negotiation of meaning in the target language, are tied up with the history of communicative teaching. One communication feature that came to prominence with the communicative approach to language teaching (one very much related to its early stages) was the use of authentic texts (Maley, 1980: 12-13; Weideman, 1988:91; Weideman, 2001a: 28-31; Johnson, 1982: 19-22). Challenging what he considers

to be erroneous assumptions about language use, Johnson, for example, stresses the need to teach real language use to learners (1982: 23-31).

The use of authentic texts of course provided one way in early communicative teaching of exposing learners to real language use. Though in principle Maley agrees with the teaching of 'language use', he disagrees about using real language in classrooms on the grounds that teaching it is very difficult (1980: 12-13). He argues that real language, collected and used for classroom purposes, already takes away some of its authenticity (1980: 12-13). Instead, he argues for an approach which stresses the authenticity of the students' reactions (1980: 13).

Like Maley, others have found using authentic texts for classroom purposes, especially for testing, difficult (cf. Bachman, 1990: 308- 312). They argue that contrived, interactive materials can be used to good effect, and that testing materials need not necessarily be authentic (cf. Bachman, 1990: 308-312). For these researchers, authenticity should rather be defined as the dynamic interaction between language users, the discourse, and the context (cf. Bachman, 1990: 317).

One major difference between the two views is evident; while the 'real language' view insists that authentic language texts be used for instruction and testing, the interactive approach argues that what matters most is not the material, but the authenticity of the interaction between the learners, the material, and the context (cf. Bachman, 1990: 9-10, 41-42; Maley, 1980: 12-13).

Lynch (1991) takes that latter view forward by arguing that language classes should reflect the real world outside the classroom, and by giving three reasons why teacher and student roles should be reversed, and classrooms be more communicative – i. e., be a more accurate reflection of the world outside (1991: 202-204). He argues that linguistic, interactional, and psycholinguistic reasons

justify the change towards more communicative language teaching (1991: 202-204).

Linguistically, Lynch argues, classrooms should reflect real communication outside of class, and should not maintain a teacher-learner relationship in which the teacher asks uncommunicative, display type questions that deny students the opportunity to use and learn the language communicatively (1991: 203). He notes that students asked by a teacher to provide information that they know (but the teacher doesn't) produce longer responses than routine display questions that the teacher asks (Lynch, 1991: 203). Following Pica, Young, and Doughty (1987), who found that students who were allowed to interact among themselves understood materials provided to them better than others who were given a simplified text, but were not allowed to interact, he argues that the distribution pattern of questions should change so that interaction among students is maximised (Lynch, 1991: 203).

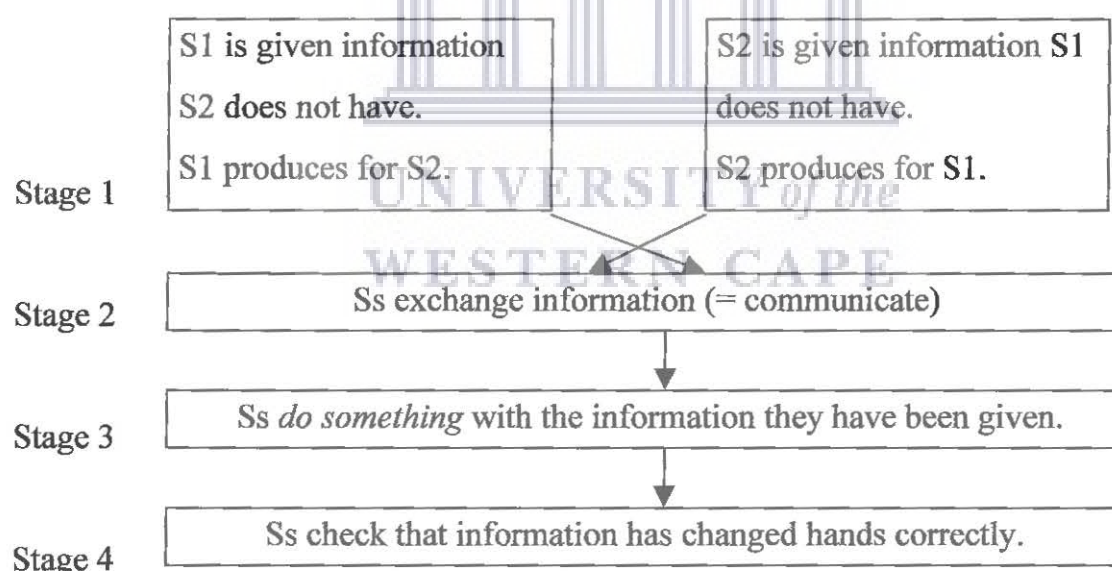
Lynch's second major argument rests on interactional grounds. As a setting of social interaction, the classroom should provide space for activities that promote different social interaction roles. Commenting on van Lier's observation that an analysis into classroom questioning patterns should in the first instance investigate different tasks, and what kind of opportunities related to asking questions such tasks should provide learners, Lynch notes:

Here, the argument is that well-rounded proficiency in a foreign language involves being able to take on a variety of roles in social interaction in the target language – active/initiating as well passive/responding – and that the conventional patterns of teacher-learner discourse tend to equip the learner primarily for a submissive, client role (Lynch, 1991: 203).

Lynch's final argument is related to psycholinguistic aspects of foreign language learning. Following those who argue for input to function as intake, he contends that students should start asking questions designed to repair the source of difficulty, which in face-to-face interaction would be addressed to the speaker (cf. Lynch, 1991: 204).

What the literature makes clear, however, is that one does not simply start teaching 'real language'. One has to use tasks that satisfy the demands for more communication in the classroom. To design such tasks so that they reflect real communication, one has to find out what characterises real communication. It is to this issue, the characteristics of real communication, that we now turn.

In a lengthy discussion of real communication in relation to language teaching, Johnson identifies five principles of communication that can be incorporated successfully into real language classes (1982: 163-175; Nunan, 1983: 107-111). Since these five principles form the essentials of task-based communication and provide useful information on tasks and task-development for language classes, I will discuss them in some detail. To discuss these five principles, Johnson provides a model, which embodies the principles, and which he uses to illustrate his points (1982: 164). In the following, 'S' is for student (or learner).



This model shows a cycle in which some information is exchanged between two or more communicants (stage 2), who use the information they receive to accomplish some task (stage 3). As often happens in life, when communication occurs, information is checked if it has been understood well (stage 4). If information is

misunderstood, negotiation of meaning continues. Let us look now at each communication principle in turn.

The information transfer principle

One feature that distinguishes CLT (communicative language teaching) from traditional methods of language teaching is the emphasis it gives to the comprehension of meaning (Pica *et al.*, 1987). Comprehension, however, is possible only when there is an exchange of information between communicants, and it is realised when those principles, which underlie real communication, are observed.

Johnson illustrates these principles with examples. In one example, learners are given letters of application whose contents they are required to transfer into application forms (1982: 164-166). Though in Johnson's example this principle is presented for individual work, it need not be restricted to such tasks. It can successfully be used with pair or group work. The example which Johnson uses to illustrate communicative reading tasks can equally be used for speaking, writing or listening tasks.

The information gap principle

A meaningless exchange of questions and answers characterised interaction in language classes before the advent of CLT (Lynch, 1991: 202). In such classes, teachers ask their students display questions, not to communicate some meaningful message, but to evaluate their students' knowledge of the structure of the language (Lynch, 1991: 202). Since teachers know the answers, students have nothing new to provide. In such cases, no real communication is said to have taken place, because no information gap exists.

The lack of information that a communicant has that his interlocutor possesses, the phenomenon called information gap, is an essential ingredient of communication,

according to Johnson. He explains that the concept of the information gap involves doubt, without which an exchange is rendered non-communicative (Johnson, 1982: 151).

Johnson is correct in arguing that that non-communicative methods of teaching (in which students are provided with structure practice but not involved in meaningful communication) fail in two respects (1982: 151). First, these classes fail to capture students' interests as they repeat 'the known to the knowers' (Johnson 1982:151). Second, these classes also fail because they do not 'involve the processes by which interaction takes place' (Johnson, 1982: 151). These processes of interaction centrally depend on there being an information gap between interactants. Johnson explains that if the listener already knows the content of what his interactant will say 'no scanning of information will be done.' Thus, the listener is discouraged from framing a response to the utterances directed to him/her in real time. In other words, uncertainty as to what the speaker is going to say is vital for communication and for fluency practice (Johnson, 1982: 151). Stressing the need to expect what the speaker is going to say and how this develops fluency, Johnson underlines the place of responding in real time:

If interactions are to continue in a natural way, the formulation of utterances and the process of scanning and evaluation which precede it must of course be made extremely quickly – within real time. The ability to do this is what we generally mean by fluency in a language ... (Johnson, 1982: 149).

In the model above (Fig. 2.1), the transfer of information is signified by the arrows joining stages 1 and 2, while the receiving of information takes place in stage 2.

The jigsaw principle

An extension of the information gap principle, the jigsaw principle, requires that students exchange mutually exclusive information distributed among them to complete a task (Nunan, 1983: 110; Johnson, 1982: 167-170). In an example, Johnson gives a writing task in which two students work in pairs. In this task, each

student is required to convey information to their partner and produce a letter of application from a completed form which is provided to them (1982: 168-170).

The task dependency principle

This principle (stage 3, Fig. 2.1) is useful in language classes because it gives students a reason to engage themselves in listening, reading, speaking and/or writing activities. Johnson argues that if learners are to be successful interactants they need to participate in three processes (1982:149). First, an interactant 'scans' their interlocutor's utterances to extract that part of the total information conveyed which contributes to the information required by the speaker. Thus, listeners maintain a state of readiness to extract the information which they want to receive. The desire to extract this information from their interlocutors' words keeps them alert in the task of listening. Second, once this information is received, it is assessed according to the speaker's aim. This involves comparing one's aims and the information received so that in case of discrepancy the next utterance is produced to decrease the discrepancy or correct the mismatch (1982: 149). The production of the utterances tends to reduce discrepancy or correct a mismatch, and constitutes the third process.

Johnson believes that the best way to practise these processes is in language teaching through 'task-oriented' teaching (1982: 149-150). This gives speakers tasks that help them to scan as well as evaluate information successfully. He explains that it is in this regard that traditional methods of language teaching have failed:

... One way in which such a language teaching fails is that it does not develop fluency in the processes involved in language use. We cannot expect listeners to approach interactions in a state of readiness, to learn how to scan for pragmatic information, unless we provide them with a reason for scanning; nor can we expect them to evaluate information against a speaker aim, unless we provide them with a speaker aim (a communicative intent). Finally we cannot expect them to make appropriate selection from meaning potential unless they have an intention from which to derive meaning ... (1982: 150).

It is not only because it gives the criteria against which to evaluate tasks that the task dependency principle is useful. The application of this principle in task design compels the interactants to take the task seriously and foster accountability for the way they use language. Arguing that the gap between classrooms and the world outside is hard to eradicate, Johnson asserts that the classroom shields students from the consequences of their verbal mistakes, which in the world outside may lead to serious consequences (1982:170-171). The advantage of applying this principle, however, is that the task dependency principle narrows the gap between classrooms and the real world, and makes students responsible for the mistakes they commit.

The correction for content principle

The correction for content principle (stage 4, Fig. 2.1) demands that students check communication effectiveness by evaluating their partner's information for adequacy and the degree of success with which it has been conveyed:

The correction for content principle argues that *at some stage* the student's language production should be judged on its communicative efficacy in relation to a specific task. But the principle does not negate the utility of teacher correction for grammatical accuracy at some other stage ... (Johnson, 1982: 171).

In a speaking task, the task may fail not because the speaker fails to convey the information, but because the listener fails to understand the speaker, or there is some misunderstanding because of some other reason. In such cases, a speaking task gives much less room for mistakes in information passing unnoticed than does a writing task, because there is the probability that the speaker may identify the mistake or the listener asks for clarification, leading to the subsequent negotiation of meaning (Varonis and Gass, 1985: 72-73).

TASK CLASSIFICATION

Though he provides principles that should underlie language tasks, Johnson (1982) does not discuss different language tasks, as some researchers have. Basing their classification on the two factors of goal and activity, Pica, Kanagy and Falodun

(1993) present a detailed theoretical discussion of communication tasks. In their discussion, Pica *et al.* (1993) identify five task types, but they argue that only two would generate sufficient discussion to give students practice in communication (1993: 19, 31). The two communication tasks they highlight in their article are particularly relevant to this study: jigsaw and information gap tasks.

According to Pica *et al.* (1993), tasks differ because of the interactional activity and communication goal they embody (1993: 14, 15).

Interactional activity involves interactant relationship and interactant requirement. Interactant relationship, which frames the relationship between participants, is concerned with how much information each participant holds, requests, and/or supplies to achieve a communication goal shared by (an) other participant(s).

Interactional relationship determines the direction of information flow. For example, in a mutual interactional relationship of request and suppliance between participants, information flows in both directions, but this bi-directional flow is disrupted and becomes unidirectional if the mutuality of request and suppliance is not maintained (Pica *et al.*, 1993).

Interactional activity also involves interaction requirement. An interactional requirement places obligations (required or optional) on participants for the task to be successfully completed and the communication goal to be met. These requirements control information flow and may lead students either to be active in the task or to be passive onlookers. A task in which information exchange is obligatory compels participants not to withhold information, and interaction is maximised (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 13). An optional task requirement, on the other hand, leaves the responsibility of participation to students' discretion, and hence discourages interaction (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 13).

A communication goal, in turn, is broken down into goal orientation, i.e. “the collaboration or convergence versus independence or divergence required of interactants in meeting the goals of their task ...” and outcome options, i.e. “the range of acceptable task outcomes available to interactants in attempting to meet the task goals” (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 13, 15).

In short, Pica *et al.* (1993) claim that some features built into tasks either facilitate or discourage verbal interaction and interlanguage modification. They claim that tasks with the same or convergent goals, with only one acceptable outcome, and providing interactants with mutually exclusive pieces of information, and requiring them to request and supply information, get interactants involved enough to understand one another’s utterances and make theirs understood (1993: 14, 15). In a similar manner, they argue that tasks that do not provide the above mentioned features of goal outcome option, supply and request requirements, and distribution of information among participants, discourage verbal modification and comprehension of participants’ utterances (1993: 14, 15).

Thus, a task that promotes maximum interaction meets the following requirements:

- (a) Each interactant holds a different piece of information which must be exchanged and manipulated in order to achieve the task outcome.
 - (b) Both interactants are required to request and supply information.
 - (c) Interactants have the same or convergent goals.
 - (d) Only one acceptable outcome is possible from their attempts to meet this goal.
- (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 17).

Under such conditions every participant is compelled to interact to meet the same goal and achieve one and the same outcome. Such an arrangement leaves no room for any participant to be passive, as every piece of information will be required to produce the single outcome.

Information differentially distributed among participants produces different types of interaction. For example, information concentrated in the hands of one participant, and supplied only when other participants request it, logically produces a different kind of interaction than the one that meets all the requirements discussed above.

In cases where information is controlled by one participant, unless goals are convergent and there is a single outcome, the participants may not get involved and, hence, it affects the communication seriously (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 18).

Interaction is also discouraged under a condition in which each participant has access to either identical information or overlapping portions of information which they are expected to use to carry out a task (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 18). If the information provided is identical, the necessary requirement to interact and exchange information is denied. Interactants are then expected to interact, request and supply information, but are not obliged to do so. In such cases, since information exchange is optional, interaction becomes limited (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 17). Though the participants are expected to interact and come to mutual comprehension, there is no guarantee that they will do so (Pica *et al.*, 1993:18).

As is clear from the above, different tasks can therefore be set by building different features into tasks such that the different requirements of interactant relationship, interactant requirement, goal orientation and outcome option are combined. Pica *et al* (1993) list and discuss five tasks (see below). Each task type differs because of the unique features built into the tasks:

Jigsaw tasks

Closely related to the jigsaw principle discussed above, jigsaw tasks are one of the most effective for language learning. In jigsaw tasks, the information (which must

be exchanged and processed) is distributed among participants to meet one goal and achieve a single outcome (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 20).

One of the features that contributes to the effectiveness of jigsaw tasks is the interaction requirement which compels every participant to interact, since every piece of information must be pooled towards the single goal. There is also one single outcome, which contributes to the discussion. Though very important, the outcome alone does not determine the interaction among participants. The fact that information is distributed among all participants, and every participant is required to contribute to the realisation of a single goal, influences the interaction dynamics. Thus, information flow is bi-directional, which if disrupted brings the task to a standstill (Pica *et al.*, 1993:20).

Since interaction is required, information flow is bi-directional, and participants work towards a convergent goal and a singular outcome. Jigsaw tasks leave no room for passive participants. For this reason, it is considered one of the effective task types. Concerning jigsaw, Pica *et al.* argue:

... this task can be considered the type of task most likely to generate opportunities for interactants to work toward comprehension, feedback and interlanguage modification processes related to successful SLA (1993:21).

Not everyone agrees with this view. In an article that is critical of Pica and Doughty's experimental studies, Foster questions claims made that jigsaw tasks are so effective. She argues that required two-way information gap tasks (in which every participant is required to interact) do not necessarily encourage negotiation of meaning, as Pica and Doughty claim (Foster, 1998: 11, 12). Effectiveness such as Pica *et al.* claim, Foster argues, shows up when jigsaw task features are coupled with a pair work format, which leaves participants no option but interact to complete a task (Foster, 1998:18).

We should perhaps note that tasks which have the features: two-way information flow, mutual exclusion of information distributed among participants, requirement for all participants to request and supply information, same (or convergent) goal and only one acceptable outcome option (all jigsaw task features) are called by the common term, (two-way) information gap tasks, in Pica and Doughty (1986) and Foster (1998). Some commentators do not differentiate between information gap and jigsaw tasks (cf. Walz, 1996: 488). I have retained the more common term information gap tasks throughout to refer to tasks that display such (jigsaw task) features because, in addition to referring to task type, it implies the gap that characterises successful communication tasks. Note that, in this study, the term 'information gap tasks' is used generally to indicate two-way information gap tasks, and is used differently from the definition in Pica *et al.* (1993), which is discussed below.

Information gap tasks

The term information gap tasks (activities, exercises) is used to include tasks that exploit the technique of the same name and covers tasks that permit one or two-way information flow and not necessarily tasks that permit only one-way information flow, as Pica *et al.* (1993) claim.

As defined in Pica *et al.* (1993), information gap tasks are different from jigsaw tasks in that the interactant relationship is organised in such a way that one participant holds and supplies all the necessary information, which the other participants must request in order to meet the task goal (1993: 19, 21). Such a concentration of information in the hands of one participant results in the information flow taking a uni-directional course, which makes such information gap tasks less effective than jigsaw tasks. If a task is designed so that the information flows only in one direction, it puts those positioned in the place of information requesters at a disadvantage.

To correct such shortcomings of uni-directional information gap tasks, Pica *et al.* (1993) suggest several alternatives. One possible course of action is for “the information receiving interactant to present information which needs to be confirmed or rejected by the original sender” (1993: 21). A different solution requires that another task be provided in which roles are reversed (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 22).

Problem-solving tasks

In problem solving tasks, participants start off with shared information. Though interaction is possible, tasks can be done without it, because every participant is given all the information necessary to carry out the task. Such tasks do not encourage interaction because no information gap (which creates the need to communicate) exists. This condition is further exacerbated because, though they have convergent goal orientation, and a single outcome option, participants are not required to interact, but it is left to their discretion to do so. Problem solving tasks, however, at one point are different from decision making and opinion exchange tasks in that they provide a singular goal and one outcome option (both of which are not defining characteristics of the latter two task types) and hence encourage interaction in which participants may seek (and provide) help to make sense of information. In such a case, participants might modify their utterances to achieve comprehensibility (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 22).

Problem-solving tasks, though useful for more proficient students, are not easy to engage in and learn much with, because they require a higher level of proficiency to engage in the intense negotiation that results from being involved in solving the problem under discussion. Comparing problem-solving activities to language games, Legutke and Thomas (1991) explain that the former demand more than information transfer skills:

It is more than a question of degree. The latter [language games] concentrate on providing practice for particular language items, often in the form of an extended drill, while the information in the former [problem solving tasks] is more complex and the solution only approachable through extensive negotiation. They often require additionally a multi-skilled response on the part of the learner (Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 100-111).

Legutke and Thomas further show what difficulties problem solving tasks present to learners. They claim that problem solving tasks are unsuitable to beginners and low proficiency students because they require from students (among others) skills to compare, agree, suggest, and/or summarise (1991: 105). Further, they claim that because learners feel unsure of themselves in such tasks, students often withhold their participation until, at least, their confidence matches their competence. Because problem solving is not prioritised equally in all cultures, such tasks may become unsuitable for some students in multilingual classes (Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 105).

Decision making tasks

Decision making tasks are different from the other three previous tasks, i.e. from jigsaw, information gap, and problem solving tasks. In decision-making tasks, as in problem solving tasks, all participants share the same information. Again, as in problem solving tasks, though there is the possibility of carrying out a two-way interaction, interaction in such tasks is low because the basic communication requirement, the information gap, does not exist. The only thing that may encourage participants to engage in communication is that they are required to produce an outcome. This by itself may not be a strong enough motivation, because participants are not required to agree on one outcome.

Opinion exchange tasks

This kind of task dates back to traditional language teaching, especially perhaps to the fondness of the Direct method for individual spoken production and debate (Weideman, 2001a: 16). These tasks are also the least effective of the five tasks

(Pica *et al.*, 1993:23). In opinion exchange tasks, in which little interaction is expected, participants are *not required* to communicate though they are expected. This expectation, however, is difficult to realise because the necessary requirements that encourage interaction, i.e. the presence of an information gap and a singular task outcome, do not exist (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 19, 22). Lack of a single outcome, lack of an information gap and the optional nature of the interaction render opinion exchange tasks less interactive and less effective (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 23):

The fewest opportunities for comprehension, feedback, and modified production would be found in opinion exchange tasks. There is no requirement for interaction, ... and therefore a single interactant (X or Y) might dominate. As interactants are permitted, but not expected to converge toward a single outcome or goal ... any number of outcome options, including no outcome at all is possible Thus, the opinion exchange task can end with interactants continuing to hold the contrasting opinions with which they began ... (Pica *et al.*, 1993: 23).

Prahbu, too, thinks that opinion exchange tasks (which he calls opinion gap tasks) are problematic. Prahbu notes that, since opinion exchange tasks are open-ended, they do not provide learners with fixed outcomes, which help students to find out if they have done the task successfully. Arguing that students often need a sense of security about what they learn, he asserts that opinion gap tasks discourage this (Prahbu, 1987: 47). He underlines their unsuitability for beginners, as they lead such learners to the imitation of other learners' or the teacher's verbal behaviour, a goal very much contrary to the purposes of communicative teaching (1987: 48).

Prahbu expresses a preference for what he calls reasoning gap tasks (1987: 48-49). He argues that reasoning gap tasks (unlike information gap tasks which are limited to information transfer) involve deriving meaning or information from another, 'working things out in the mind', and not just encoding or decoding given information (1987: 48). This 'working things out' in the mind gives students the feeling that the meaning derived is their own and they think of it as having arrived at the outcome themselves (1987:49).

Noting that information gap tasks, while safer, do not offer the opportunity to express one's meaning, he argues that this feature is unique to reasoning and opinion gap tasks (1987:49). Although opinion gap tasks offer this opportunity to express one's meaning, the sense of failure that sets in when opinion gap tasks prove difficult, makes them unsuitable, however, for beginners or low proficiency students in general.

LIMITATIONS OF INFORMATION GAP TASKS

It is of course true that information gap tasks are not without limitations. As we have noted above, Prahbu, for example, argues that information gap tasks do not offer the opportunity to express one's meaning. Meaning in information gap tasks is borrowed or derived from an outsider, he claims (1987: 49). However, he seems to ignore the equally limiting factor in reasoning gap tasks: that reasoning gap tasks add to the students' information processing load, and hence might make communication less fluent as students are delayed to think before speaking. For fluency to develop, students need to prepare a response to an utterance in real time (Johnson, 1982: 149, 150). Skehan and Foster find that students' attention is divided on what to focus in a communicative event (1999: 113). They also find that fluency is affected negatively by an unstructured task (1999:112), which might be the case with reasoning gap tasks.

Prahbu fails to consider, it seems, that there may be a way to help students express their own meaning through information gap tasks without resorting to reasoning gap tasks. Such an alternative overcomes the drawbacks of reasoning gap tasks.

Joycey identifies a similar problem with information gap tasks, viz. the need to address students' individuality:

Often, in group work, all the learner is doing is taking information, the content of which is personally meaningless, and using transactional language which has been practised previously, in order to cross an information gap. The learners are not made aware of the strategies associated with the process of choosing their own ideas, which they then have to communicate (Joyce, 1982: 25).

Joyce's objection, therefore, is the lack of individuality in such tasks, and the demand to make personally meaningless choices. Instead, she proposes that learners as individuals be given more space to bring their own ideas to the interaction, and suggests ways to carry out such a proposal in classrooms (1982: 26).

The majority of the studies referred to in this review, however, point to how suitable information gap tasks are. There is one further aspect which needs to be considered, viz. why information gap tasks are effective, which I will discuss in the following section.

THE PRACTICAL USES OF INFORMATION GAP TASKS

Legutke and Thomas claim that information sharing activities provide learners with the space to practise their language without any outside pressure on them to achieve accuracy (1991: 99-100). They argue that information sharing activities offer opportunities for successful interaction in complete contrast to teacher-led dialogues. The learners have a kind of independence in their communication that other forms of classroom talk do not possess, and the advantage is that the instructional procedure is simple.

There are several examples in the literature of where teachers have employed this uncomplicated procedure to good effect. Scullard used information gap tasks, for example, to build her students' confidence in a transition from a controlled role play to more challenging free expression, and claims that information gap activities create 'a relaxed atmosphere conducive to learning' (1986: 83). In such a conducive atmosphere, students are able to practise speaking the target language

(which Scullard thinks is the most relevant skill in the workplace) without fear of making a fool of themselves in front of the whole class (1986: 83).

In an attempt to show how to take students from a controlled role play practice to free expression (in between which information gap and opinion gap lie on a continuum of difficulty), Scullard shows how to build some features into information gap tasks to make them more challenging. She argues that including features such as unpredictability, choice or unavailability, helps material designers make materials more challenging (1986: 85).

In another example of how information gap tasks can be employed effectively, Edge proposes a model in which explicit instruction preceding such tasks assists language learning. Based on his conviction that instruction contributes to learning a second language, he proposes that explicit language instruction be used immediately before information exchanged through discussion (Johnson's stage 3, Fig 2.1) is synthesised. Edge, however, reminds readers that this formal language instruction is optional and should be carried out when it is deemed to be necessary (Edge, 1984: 259). Edge's approach allows the teacher to intervene at stages of the lesson, and to exercise control. Admitting that his model does not strictly follow Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis, Edge argues that the control it introduces nonetheless serves a useful purpose (1984: 259). The model offers focus on both meaning and form, and accommodates comprehensible input and explicit grammar instruction. As such, it should be useful for teachers who want to give their students communication practice but want to monitor their students' language as well.

A third example of teachers reporting on their use of information gap tasks comes from Walz in his comments on experiences with elementary school French foreign language pupils. Though carrying out the tasks took some time, he reports that it was time well spent, because the students learned information seeking skills and

the development of cultural information and themes inherent in authentic documents (1996: 488).

Others have used information gap tasks for testing students' oral performance or propose that they be used for this purpose (Bowker, 1984; Brown and Yule, 1983; Brown, Anderson, Shillcock, and Yule, 1984; Kitao and Kitao, 1996).

Bowker, for example, claims that testing through information gap tasks is more effective than through interviews (1984: 249). He uses authentic texts from which he deletes some content words and the students are required to ask questions that elicit the deleted content words.

Brown *et al.* (1984) have also used information gap tasks for teaching and testing speaking. They hold that such tasks are not only useful, but they also see no insurmountable problems in scoring the tests (1984: 49-72, 80-100), which is a problem that is often encountered when traditionally trained teachers adopt a communicative approach.

SOME EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Though the practical implementation of information gap tasks discussed in the previous section is of obvious importance, much of this took the form of reporting on instructional practice. It was in Doughty and Pica's study (1986) that information gap tasks, however, were first empirically established as an effective means of second language acquisition.

What had given rise to their focus on information gap tasks was that in a previous study with optional information gap tasks, they had found, contrary to their expectation, that more modified interaction occurred in a teacher-fronted approach than in a group work context, in which four students per group had to discuss and decide which person from a number of possibilities should receive a heart

transplant. Since the results left them uncertain about what caused more modification of the verbal interaction, they set up another study in which they set out to test the effects of task type, i.e. varying tasks in terms of the optional/required parameter, and participation pattern i.e. teacher fronted/group or pair work (Doughty and Pica, 1986: 306-307).

In their investigation, they found that the two features of task type and participation pattern indeed influence the amount of modified interaction (Doughty and Pica, 1986: 314-316, 318). They found that required information gap tasks generate more modified interaction than optional information gap tasks in both the teacher fronted and group/pair work participation patterns. But they also found that modified interaction was greater in group work than in the teacher fronted participation pattern. Interpreting their findings in the light of current second language acquisition theory, they concluded that information gap tasks facilitate second language acquisition (1986: 322-323).

But how do information gap tasks facilitate second language acquisition? What does research have to say about this? The issue revolves around the concept of 'modified (verbal) interaction' and requires some further discussion.

Second language acquisition studies are often based on Krashen's comprehensible input theory (Krashen, 1982: 21-22). Krashen argues that people acquire a second language if the input directed at second language learners is such that it is a little beyond the level of their comprehension. According to Krashen, context and learners' knowledge of the world play a part in rendering the input comprehensible. Comprehension indeed plays a major role in this theory.

The main task of second language research since Krashen's input hypothesis (of which comprehensible input is part) has been to discover ways to render second language instructional material comprehensible to non-native learners. In addition,

second language research has investigated how teaching can produce more comprehensible input (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Pica, Young and Doughty, 1987; Gass, 1988; Pica, 1987; Long, 1985).

Long (1985), for example, finds that a text prepared for non-native speakers was better understood than another meant for native speakers. In his study, he also finds that those who listened to the adjusted text felt they understood the text better than those who listened to the unadjusted text (1985: 384, 387).

Others, however, took a different approach than the one Long adopted here. (Varonis and Gass, 1985; Pica, Young, and Doughty, 1987; Gass, 1988). In these studies, interaction is hypothesised to increase the potential for modification of input (and thus render it comprehensible), and was therefore given more importance. Varonis and Gass (1985), for example, investigate NNS-NNS interaction to find out if NNS-NNS (non-native-non-native speaker) combinations really allow greater opportunity for negotiation of meaning than NS-NS (native speaker and native speaker) and NS-NNS (native speaker and non-native speaker) combinations do (1985: 71).

In a model they use to explain the negotiation of meaning among non-native speakers, the most crucial parts are what they term the trigger and the resolution. The trigger, which starts the negotiation process, causes the non-understanding and leads the listener to ask for clarification in the form of a request, or for confirmation in the form of a confirmation check, or other signals of non-understanding (1985:78).

The resolution, which includes the indicators, the response and the reaction to the response, is whatever comes after the trigger and starts the process which eventually leads the participants to mutual comprehension (Varonis and Gass, 1985: 76-79). Some responses trigger other non-understanding signals and lead to

an extended negotiation of meaning. The negotiation continues until the non-understanding is resolved, and the discussion or conversation is back on track. It continues smoothly until it is side-tracked again.

In their study, Varonis and Gass found that negotiation of meaning is greater in NNS-NNS dyads than NS-NNS and NS-NS dyads. In addition, they found that participants with unshared backgrounds (different L1 and different levels of proficiency) produced more negotiation of meaning than those with shared backgrounds. Commenting on the results, they observe:

These results support our hypothesis that the greater the degree of difference which exists in the backgrounds of the conversational participants, the greater the amount of negotiation in the conversation between two non-native speakers (1985: 84).

Pica *et al.* (1987) produce evidence that supports the hypothesis that modification of interaction produces more comprehensible input than conventional ways of simplifying language to render them comprehensible to learners (Pica *et al.*, 1987; Weideman, 1998: 20). This finding (which clearly requires that interaction among learners receive more attention than it does now) has far reaching implications for language lesson organisation, if teachers are to enhance comprehensible input:

Perhaps the most significant pedagogical implication to be drawn is that any teacher or method that facilitates a realignment of the traditional roles of teacher and student, so that students can take greater initiative or assume more responsibility for their own learning, is likely to encourage in-class oral interaction, which in turn can increase comprehension of input (Pica, Young, and Doughty, 1987: 755; cf. too Weideman, 1998: 20).

The central point in these studies has been to show that modified verbal interaction produces comprehensible input. It has been assumed that the more negotiation there is, the more input is modified through interaction. Hence, there is also more comprehensible input. Interpreted in the light of Krashen's input theory, this means

that interactants' language ability has been stimulated to develop further (Krashen, 1982: 21).

Long (1985: 378) reduces the whole process of second language acquisition research to three steps:

Step 1: Show that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (b) comprehension of input.

Step 2: Show that (b) comprehensible input promotes (c) acquisition.

Step 3: Deduce that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (c) acquisition.

The notion of comprehensible input has, however, been criticised (Sheen, 1994; Swain, 1985). While comprehensible input is essential, it does not explain the grammatical development which is supposed to follow it, Swain argues (1985: 236). Providing evidence from French immersion classes, she argues that comprehensible input cannot explain the differences in grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic oral and written performances between immersion students and French L1 same grade students, who did significantly better in exams given to them. The data she cites consistently shows that French L1 students outperform their French immersion students in these three aspects of communicative competence (Swain, 1985: 238, 241, 244- 245). She therefore argues that while interactive input may offer some help, it does not explain everything. What is missing is comprehensible output, she argues (Swain, 1985: 248; cf. too Pica *et al.*, 1989).

Nevertheless, similar to the suggestion of Pica and others on the best course of action for second language learning, Swain suggests that students be given opportunities to engage in learner-learner classroom interactions that encourage negotiation of meaning:

... one to one conversational exchanges provide an excellent opportunity for this to occur. Even better, though, are those interactions where there has been a communicative breakdown - where the learner has received some negative input – and the learner is pushed to use alternate means to get across his or her message ... (Swain, 1985: 248).

As we have noted above, Foster's (1998) study presents a further argument that pair work promotes negotiation of meaning, which is generally accepted to lead to second language acquisition.

There is another aspect to pair work, however. From data gathered in an intact, naturalistic context of a real classroom, Flanigan has found that more proficient learners can effectively teach their low English proficiency classmates language, which they themselves were learning (1991: 144, 152), though there may have been no negotiation of meaning. Flanigan observes, however, that the 'peer tutors' had no difficulty to adjust their language to the level of their 'learners' (1991: 151). As we have noted, it is the adjustment or modification of verbal interaction that is crucial for understanding and, subsequently, acquisition.

In a different situation, Oliver (2000) has found that students use negative feedback directed at them better in pair work. In data gathered from intact classrooms, comparing pair and teacher-led tasks, she has found that the students used the negative feedback directed at them more effectively in pairs than in a teacher-led format.

The empirical studies therefore all emphasise either the negotiation of meaning or the modification of language in verbal interaction amongst peers. The literature seems to indicate that such modifications can work effectively when information gap tasks are employed in verbal interaction between the two members of a pair of learners that either are both non-native speakers or at least have different levels of competence in the target language.

Since information gap tasks are a central feature of CLT, we turn, finally, to a consideration of difficulties associated with the introduction of CLT in a context where teachers are traditionally trained and where expectations of what must happen in a classroom remain purely conventional.

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

There are a number of problems associated with the conduct of communicative, learner-centred classes. Li (1998), for example, finds that in introducing the communicative approach to Korea, teachers were faced with different constraints (caused by teachers, by students, the educational system and CLT itself) that prevented communicative language teaching from being adopted as approach. Similarly, Medgyes (1986) argues that CLT does not take teachers' daily reality into account. He claims that CLT proposes ideas which do not take the majority of the language teachers' difficult work conditions seriously.

Ellis (1996), on the other hand, discusses the unreflective acceptance of CLT by teachers without considering the host culture. He argues that the basic assumptions of CLT often are in conflict with a culture foreign to that of the West, in which talk is given importance. In such cases, the foreign language teacher should mediate between the two seemingly conflicting cultures and find a way in which to present CLT that is acceptable to the students (Ellis, 1996: 217-218).

While Karavas-Doukas (1996) finds disparity between teachers' professed beliefs in CLT and their practice, Kamaravadivelu (1991) discusses the disparity between teacher intention and learner interpretation. Karavas-Doukas argues:

Teachers' educational attitudes and theories, although in many cases unconsciously held, have an effect on their classroom behaviour, influence what students actually learn, and are a potent determinant of teachers' teaching style ... (1996: 188).

Kamaravadivelu (1991) discusses the differences between students' and teachers' interpretation of tasks and identifies ten possible areas of mismatch in a task-based pedagogy.

Studies done on the African continent (Shaalukeni, 2000, Tesfamariam, 2000, cf. too Weideman, 2001b) have emphasised the difficulties associated with the introduction of CLT in our context. Some of the findings on how to address such problems will be discussed in chapter four with reference to the findings, but we first turn, in the next chapter, to a discussion of the methods of data gathering employed in the investigation.



CHAPTER THREE

ACTION RESEARCH AS A RESEARCH METHOD

INTRODUCTION

Researchers take different things into consideration when they decide on the research design they want to use. Chief among these are the kind of problem under study, the sample size of the study, and the purpose of the study, i.e. whether the study is carried out to solve practical problems or just to gain a fuller understanding of the problem under investigation.

In this chapter I will set out to explain why action research has been chosen as a research method to carry out this study. First, I will briefly explain how action research differs from other kinds of research. In this section, I will discuss the distinctions made between three kinds of action research and why I found action research (and the teacher-researcher mode, in particular) most suitable for my purposes. Having fully explained the four stages of the action research cycle as they apply to the teacher-researcher mode, I will then discuss the different techniques that I used to gather the data for this study.

WHY ACTION RESEARCH?

One feature that sets action research apart from other kinds of research is that it is not wholly initiated and/or owned by external bodies. Though there are different types of action research, most of them permit the involvement of the practitioner and the researcher, though to varying degrees. Some, however, do not permit the complete control of the research by the practitioner, and are jointly initiated and jointly owned (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131; Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993: 6; Cummings, 1985; Berg, 2001: 186-187). Action research, it is argued, should be

practitioner initiated, and practitioner owned, which reserves problem definition for the practitioner. Some action research proponents (those inclined towards making problem definition the sole reserve of the practitioner) have gone so far as to claim that there should be no division of labour between the practitioner and researcher (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131). It is argued that action research should be an investigation of the practitioner's practice by the practitioner (Altrichter *et al.*, 1993: 4-5). It is also argued that this investigation, which emphasises systematic data collection, analysis and reflection, should lead to better understanding of the practitioner's practice and to its improvement (Ebbutt, 1985: 170, 171).

Though some proponents of action research argue that action research should be initiated and owned solely by practitioners, some modes of action research flout this. These other action research modes, though they permit involvement of practitioners, do not encourage the practitioners to define and investigate their own problems. Instead, external researchers define problems and decide what issues are worth investigating or which should be prioritised (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131; Cohen and Manion, 1980: 228-229).

THREE KINDS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Kelly (1985) and Berg (2001) each discusses three kinds of action research, based on the roles given to the practitioner and the researcher, i.e. who defines the problem, whether the practitioner and the researcher roles are combined or separate, and their purposes (Kelly, 1985: 131; Berg, 2001: 185-187). Since their distinction clearly explains the reason why I chose the 'teacher-researcher' mode of action research, I will discuss each briefly, placing more emphasis, however, on the teacher-researcher mode.

Experimental social administration mode

The first kind of action research Kelly discusses is the experimental social administration type, close in nature to Berg's technical collaborative mode (Kelly,

1985: 129-130; Berg, 2001: 186). This experimental or quasi-experimental action research requires that ends and means be stated clearly (Kelly, 1985: 130). The action suggested to solve the problem brings two separate professions, action workers and research workers, together (Kelly, 1985: 130). Though there is collaboration between practitioner and researcher, this model favours the researcher in that the researcher, as an expert, identifies and defines the problem, while the practitioner works as liaison between the researcher and clients. Berg's technical model (though also disempowering) is more advantageous than Kelly's experimental social administration mode, in which the practitioner has no significant role to play (cf. Berg, 2001: 186; Kelly, 1985: 130).

Simultaneous-integrated action research mode

The second kind of action research Kelly discusses is simultaneous-integrated action research, in which action and research are 'integrated and proceed simultaneously' (Kelly, 1985: 132). Discussing the practical mode, which is close to Kelly's simultaneous-integrated, Berg explains that in this design the problem is defined only when the researcher and the practitioner have assessed the situation and reached a mutual understanding (Berg, 2001: 186; cf. Kelly, 1985: 132). This kind of action research seeks to improve the 'practice and service delivery' of the practitioner through the application of a common understanding of the situation of the participants (Berg, 2001: 186). Berg explains that interventions implemented may effect lasting changes in the groups that participate in the action research programme. However, Berg argues that:

... Unfortunately, the changes that result in such projects tend to be associated with the change agents (those facilitators working in the research), consequently, the interventions may cease to be used when these individuals leave the system (Berg, 2001: 187)

The teacher-researcher mode

The third, and final, kind of action research Kelly discusses is the teacher-researcher kind. The teacher-researcher mode rejects the division of labour which

the other two permit (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131). This means that teachers who now combine both teaching and research (and research their own practice), limit it to the research of specific problems to the exclusion of problems which are of more theoretical importance than practical use (Cohen and Manion, 1980: 217, 226; Altrichter, 1993: 50).

Because of its emphasis on teachers' understanding of their practices and its goal of improving the quality of action, i.e. teaching, the teacher-researcher mode is close to Berg's emancipating mode (cf. Altrichter, 1993: 43-44; Berg, 2001: 187).

Berg explains that two goals characterise this action research mode. First, the teacher-researcher mode tries to increase the relationship between problems encountered and the theories used to explain and resolve the problems (Berg, 2001: 187). In other words, this action research mode tries to bring theory and real world situations together.

Ramani (1987) writes of theory formulation based on the reflection practitioners carry out on their practice. The theory developed is relevant to teachers' practice because it is theory formulated and based on teachers' previous experience, and very much related to teachers' real classroom problems.

Similarly, Nunan (1989) employs teachers' reflection on their own tasks and lessons to develop their understanding of tasks and task features. The assumption seems that teachers improve the tasks they use for language teaching once they see the problem with them.

The second goal, according to Berg, that characterises the teacher-researcher mode is that it assists practitioners to clarify their understanding of their profession (Berg, 2001: 187). In other words, because they are engaged in reflecting and examining their practices critically, teachers understand what constrains their

practices from improving. In addition, they see how to overcome these constraints by improving such practices.

Despite its effectiveness to improve practice, some criticise action research because of its perceived laxity in respect of scientific rigour. Action and research start from different orientations, thus it is difficult to reconcile both orientations without subordinating one to the other, the critics argue (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 228-229).

On the one hand, limiting research to small samples and situations hardly similar to other situations, similarly, raises questions of generalisability and replicability. Cohen and Manion (1980) are of the opinion that these issues can be addressed successfully, and to the satisfaction of opponents, if action research programmes become more extensive, use larger samples, become more standardised and less personalised (Cohen and Manion, 1980:226).

Others, on the other hand, argue that replicability and generalisability are irrelevant to action research, as it deals with specific contexts and addresses specific problems (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131). It is argued that action research is carried out to enhance teachers' understanding of their particular practices, and it is the only valid research for teacher development. Generalisability and replicability are less important than authenticity and accountability, these commentators argue (cf. Kelly, 1985: 131).

WHEN IS ACTION RESEARCH APPROPRIATE?

Cohen and Manion (1980) identify situations in which action research can most appropriately be used. They explain that when the purpose of a study is to gain knowledge of a specific situation about a specific problem, action research is the appropriate method to choose. They also explain that action research is ideally used

to introduce innovations and evaluate their success, and improve the action to suit the situation and enhance its uptake (Cohen and Manion, 1980: 226-227).

To understand them satisfactorily, a discussion of these issues at some length is necessary. How does action research help teacher-researchers gain specific knowledge of a problem? And how does it help introduce innovations and evaluate them at the same time? I will discuss these issues below, relating them to the research problems of this study.

Action research to understand one's practice

Berg (2001) states that action research targets two main tasks. He explains that action research uncovers or produces information and knowledge that will be directly useful to the group of people who are directly associated with the research (Berg, 2001: 179). In other words, action research first tries to understand a specific situation and then uses this new understanding to improve the action under study to the benefit of those involved in the research. This two stage investigation and treatment explains how the teacher-researcher comes to the specific understanding of the situation under scrutiny (Cohen and Manion, 1980: 217).

In the first stage, the diagnostic stage, the problem is analysed and hypotheses developed. This is the planning stage of the four-stage action research cycle or spiral (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 33-37). The teacher-researcher's fact-finding, which brings the researcher to a better understanding of the situation, leads them to analyse the specific situation and formulate a hypothesis.

The second stage, the therapeutic stage, is the one in which the hypothesis is consciously tested in a social situation. In the four stage action research cycle, this includes the implementation, observation, and the reflection stages. In the implementation stage, the teacher-researcher implements, and tests the idea which is expected to improve the situation or solve the problem. In the observation and

reflection stages, the effects of this intervention are observed and studied to help reach a decision as to the best course of action about what to do next (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 37-46). It is this cycle of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection which leads to the enlightenment of the teacher-researcher about the specific problem. Such enlightenment (Berg's second primary task of action research) leads to the empowerment of the average practitioner (Berg, 2001: 179).

Action research for the investigation and refinement of tasks

This study sets out to accomplish two things. First, it attempts to identify tasks suitable for Eritrean Grade 9 students and refine the tasks by subjecting them to critical examination of the action that emerges from the co-operation of the students and the teacher (myself). This examination discusses what constitutes successful communication tasks and what features prevent tasks from achieving the desired success.

Second, the study attempts to identify constraints associated with using information gap tasks. In addition to identifying the constraints that frustrate negotiation of meaning in pair work tasks, it will suggest ways to overcome these constraints.

Taking the purposes of the study into account, it becomes clear why action research provides a more suitable research method to investigate and understand the specific problem and refine the tasks under study. In fact, action research (by rejecting objectivity as traditional research interprets it) offers an appropriate kind of intervention, which helps the teacher make sense of an instructional situation by reflecting on it.

Action research offers the additional advantage in that it does not require control of variables, but offers opportunities to understand the context in its totality. This mode requires that classroom conditions be understood in their natural setting, and

that all necessary factors that affect classroom conditions be considered for a real understanding of the classroom situation (cf. Weideman, 2001c: 13).

There are various references in the literature to the irrelevance of experimental research findings to instructional settings, in which language is eventually learned. Instead, naturalistic studies, in which variables are not controlled nor events manipulated, provide reliable information to understand the particular context under investigation (cf. Weideman, 2001c: 13). Explaining that in ethnography the teacher-researcher and other participants use a variety of data collection techniques, Weideman observes that all the different data help to build a rich picture of the context (Weideman, 2001c: 13).

In this investigation, I had to study information gap tasks and constraints associated with them as they apply to intact, naturalistic classroom conditions. Such conditions are necessary for the valid investigation of classroom conditions such as the one this study attempts to undertake.

Action research offers yet another advantage (difficult for other research designs to offer) in that it permits the teacher-researcher to intervene and introduce changes. This intervention permits researchers to understand the issue they investigate under different conditions, and the effects of their intervention. This enables them to understand the practice better, and work towards its improvement.

One of the purposes of this study is to refine information gap tasks. To achieve this, I had to observe lessons in information gap tasks (which I taught for a period of about two months), and to identify task and classroom conditions that frustrate negotiation of meaning or draw students' attention away from meaning, and, hence, from communication, so that these can be eliminated in subsequent tasks (cf. Ramani, 1987; Nunan, 1989).

Such close investigation of one's own practice, and reflecting on it, bring teacher-researchers to a better understanding of their practice, the specific conditions in which they teach, and in which their learners learn.

Action research to introduce innovations

In addition to providing teacher-researchers with an appropriate and relevant way of gaining knowledge of a specific situation, action research enables teacher-researchers to introduce and evaluate innovations (Cohen and Manion, 1980: 226-227). Since action research enables the teacher-researcher to observe and intervene, they have the flexibility to observe innovations, implement changes, and evaluate the effectiveness of innovations in a specific context.

Above, I have discussed Foster's (1998) criticism of Doughty and Pica's (1986) claims about the effectiveness of the group work format to generate negotiation of meaning. In the same article, Foster confirms Doughty and Pica's claims about pair work (Foster, 1998: 14, 17) though she questions Doughty and Pica's finding that two-way information gap tasks generate the negotiation of meaning (1998: 14, 17) considered necessary for second language acquisition.

In Eritrea, pair work tasks are rarely used and so can be considered innovative, in a loose interpretation of the term (Markee, 1993: 232; Tesfamariam, 2000: 90-91, 95-96, 108). This study attempts to combine Doughty and Pica's (1986) two-way information gap tasks and Foster's claims about the effectiveness of pair work for the generation of negotiation of meaning. Though it will not compare classroom organisation formats, the study will attempt to find out how effective pair work tasks are in the Eritrean classroom. This may point to a shift towards a more student-centred approach as a goal of action research (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 30; Hammersley, 1993: 213).

WHY THE TEACHER-RESEARCHER MODE?

Above, I have tried to explain why I have chosen action research as a research design as opposed to other kinds of research. Yet there is one more issue which needs explanation, a question which, though I have touched upon it when I discussed above why I chose action research, nevertheless needs a more detailed discussion. The following section deals with that question: why the teacher-researcher mode and not the other modes of action research?

I did not decide to use either of the other two (experimental social science or the simultaneous-integrated) types of action research because they create an unnecessary complication (at least for smaller scale studies such as mine) by separating the teacher and researcher roles. In addition, neither offers the teacher-researcher the necessary degree of reflection that is so crucial to the attainment of my research purposes, as the teacher-researcher mode does (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 238).

Locating it in the post-modernist generation of applied linguistics, Weideman explains that the teacher-researcher mode of action research empowers practitioners and enables them to retain control and influence the direction of the investigation (Weideman, 2001c: 12). After noting some of the short-comings of post-modernist views, he also notes the lessons that can be learned from the post-modernist tradition:

... what we should rather learn from post-modern critiques of science is the valid criticism that is made of (potentially and actually) abusive relations within the wider field of language teaching

Showing that external researchers have unjustified hegemony over the ownership of traditional research, he questions their supremacy (Weideman, 2001c: 12). This view advocates that practitioners have, at least, equal ownership of the research with external researchers.

The teacher-researcher mode ensures that practitioners are not denied the power at least to define the research problem. In addition, it also makes sure that the intellectual inquiry is of use to participants in some way. Further, this mode tries to make certain that the 'exploitative and abusive relations' are eliminated and that different perspectives are considered for eventual interpretation (cf. Weideman, 2001c: 13).

In contrast, the experimental social administration type offers the practitioner no significant place in the definition of the problem, which means that practitioners are denied the opportunity of investigating problems that really matter to them (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 238).

The simultaneous-integrated style, on the other hand, though it offers practitioners more recognition than does the experimental social administration mode, undermines their position, as it does not give practitioners the sole right to define their own problems: the research problem has to be negotiated, which means that teachers have to make compromises regarding research problem definition (Berg, 2001: 186; Cohen and Manion, 1980: 238). In addition, changes in the simultaneous-integrated mode are closely associated with the change agents, a situation which endangers the sustainability of the changes gained (Berg, 2001: 187).

STAGES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Having explained why I chose one particular mode of action research as a research method, we now turn to the stages of action research, which form the core of the research method.

Of much significance in the action research cycle is the intervention introduced. This intervention, which is carried out to improve the action, comes as a result of

the treatment to bridge the gap that exists between the planning and the reflection stages of a cycle (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178). The intervention, however, is not implemented haphazardly, but is a result of the careful consideration of alternatives and a serious reflection based on the data collected. This shows that to use action research successfully, teacher-researchers need to understand each stage well. Let us look at each of the stages in turn.

Stage one: Planning

At the planning stage, the teacher-researcher carries out different activities that set the whole process of action research in motion. Here, the teacher-researcher identifies what problem in one's teaching to focus on, or what the aspect of teaching is that they wish to transform, and prepares the physical resources for the action, which ensues once the planning stage is completed (Altrichter *et al.*, 1993: 7; Berg, 2001: 181-182; Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 33-37; Weideman, 1998: 28).

The planning stage involves producing a general idea and formulating some objectives, against which the success or failure of the action is to be evaluated at the reflection stage (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178). At the planning stage, it is necessary to clarify the general idea through fact-finding about the situation (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178; Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 34-35).

From the planning stage two items should emerge: 'an overall plan' of how to reach that objective, and a decision regarding the implementation that follows the planning (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178). In other words, at the planning stage, the teacher-researcher devises ways to reach the objectives they set and how to introduce the action in the implementation stage. In addition, the teacher-researcher negotiates the research with concerned parties, and devises ways to gather the data, which is used to make further decisions for subsequently revising the general plan.

Stage two: Implementation

The planning stage results in the teacher-researcher taking a decision to change one aspect of their practice. Since action research starts with the dissatisfaction with one's practice, one starts with designing action to change the unsatisfactory aspect of that practice (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 37-39). In the case of an innovation, the implementation stage starts with taking the innovation into the classroom and putting it into action.

Since theory should first be confirmed through practice before it is accepted, the teacher-researcher's new ideas have to be put into action for confirmation or disconfirmation (cf. Hammersley, 1993: 214). Thus, the implementation stage tries the new ideas in practice (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 39).

To summarise, the implementation stage includes designing the action for practice. This is followed by putting the intended action into practice, which is subsequently observed closely.

Stage three: Observation

In the observation stage, the teacher-researcher looks at the new action they have introduced into the classroom with the aim of assessing its effectiveness or success. This observation is carried out with some purpose in mind, and the data gathering takes this into account (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 40).

Since in the planning stage the teacher-researcher decides what and how to implement, the data gathered in the observation stage should shed light on the action implemented and help the teacher-researcher evaluate the action (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 40). This facilitates the decisions to be taken at the reflection stage and firmly establishes it on the basis of solid data.

Since the data gathered serves many purposes, its importance cannot be overemphasised. Thus, to ensure that relevant and sufficient data is gathered, the teacher-researcher needs to be familiar with appropriate data collection techniques and when to use them. In this study, I have used different techniques, which will be described below. The reason for the use of each technique is explained in the last section of this chapter.

In general, the observation stage includes gathering information in order to gain an understanding of what has happened in the implementation stage, by studying the data (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 43).

Stage four: Reflection

In the final stage, the reflection stage, the teacher-researcher critically looks back at the process so that they may be able to decide how to act in the future. It is at this stage that the teacher-researcher examines all the relevant data gathered and understands it, intending to learn something new about the new action implemented (Davidoff and van den Berg, 1990: 44). It is important that the interpretation includes all participants, or ensures that their perspectives are taken into account (Altrichter, 1993: 46-47).

Sometimes the reflection stage is not stated as a separate stage, but combined with the observation stage and only implied (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178). Nevertheless, reflection serves four purposes (cf. Kemmis, 1993: 178). First, it establishes if the action designed and implemented has been satisfactory. Second, the reflection stage provides one with the information that leads to planning the next step. Third, it provides the basis for modifying the general plan. Lastly, it gives the teacher-researcher a chance to learn from the process of inquiry.

DATA GATHERING TECHNIQUES

The observation stage in the action research cycle plays a crucial role in what course of action is taken once the first cycle is completed. In fact, data is so significantly crucial that without it no meaningful decision can be made in the reflection stage, where the teacher-researcher weighs the evidence they have gathered to plan the next course of action. For this reason, it is argued above that sufficient and relevant data should be gathered, and that different perspectives should be considered in the interpretation of the data.

To ensure that different sources of data are tapped in this study, I have used different techniques of data collection, which enable teacher-researchers access to different sources. I have used interviews with students, a teacher-researcher's diary, tape recorded student discussions, completed information gap tasks, and recorded communicative oral tests. To give a more complete picture of the data collection process, I will discuss below each technique, explaining the reasons for their use.

Interviews

Interviews, especially unstructured interviews, provide the researcher with the flexibility that they need to explore issues in some depth (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 162, 163; Cohen and Manion, 1980: 309). For example, while questionnaires limit elicited information because there is no flexibility to clarify vague questions, unstructured interviews avoid such constraints because the interviewer can clarify a vague question, and an interviewee is also at liberty to do so (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 308). Unstructured interviews have other advantages. With tact and friendliness from the interviewer, they enable the teacher-researcher to tap into information otherwise inaccessible through other techniques (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 319; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 159, 160). Besides this, unstructured interviews permit a researcher to explore issues in depth, because the researcher can probe them by asking for clarification and re-directing and re-

focusing interviewees' attention on issues of interest (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1980: 326; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 162).

To collect the data for this study, I used a combination of unstructured and focused interviews. I decided to use an unstructured interview because the interviewees, who were students, were expected to keep silent and not discuss anything with any teacher. If I was to get any information, I had to bridge this cultural gap. I had to make them feel at ease and talk to me as if they were talking to a friend. Features of a focused interview were, however, also included, because I wanted to redirect the students' attention to issues of relevance to the research problem.

Teacher-researcher's diary

Diaries, like unstructured interviews, offer the teacher-researcher the opportunity to explore the affective and intimate thoughts of the diary keepers (cf. Weideman, 1998: 24; Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 134, 163). Murphy-O'Dwyer (1985) explains that diaries used in naturalistic inquiry serve a useful purpose for recording events as observed. Of these events those which are of critical importance can be selected for the purposes of the writer, she states (1985: 97-98).

Weideman echoes this point:

The important purpose for a researcher, teacher or learner keeping a diary is, of course, not merely to have a record of language learning and teaching events, but to employ such a record for the purpose of identifying recurrent patterns, or pivotal events in the process of learning and teaching (Weideman, 1998: 24).

Others have used diaries for purposes of reflection. Thornbury (1991) explains that keeping a diary enables teacher-trainees to become aware of their students and the problems they face in learning a second language. Lowe (1987) describes an experiment some teachers carried out through role reversal, in which they took on second language learners' roles and recorded their experiences. Lowe explains that keeping a diary provided the teacher-learners with the opportunity to identify and reconsider some of their professional preconceptions, and argues that this practice enhanced their self-awareness (1987: 95). Similarly, Jarvis (1992), discussing

teacher-trainees' experiences with keeping a diary, states that diaries help teachers to reflect, and that this reflection, in turn, makes them take more responsibility for changing their teaching (1992: 142).

During the two months I taught the class with which I carried out the action research, I kept a diary because I thought it would give me the opportunity to record my views and at the same time help me to reflect on events that went on in class long after they had happened. Since diaries also help a teacher-researcher to record events faithfully, they provide a rare opportunity to examine one's teaching. Diaries describe instructional events (successful ones or failures) in such a way that they enable the teacher-researcher to explain the reasons why some succeeded and others failed (Altrichter *et al.* 1993: 11). For this reason, I kept a diary throughout, recording my experiences and thoughts.

Tape recordings

Altrichter *et al.* (1993) explain that tape recording can be used for different purposes. They state that tape recordings can give valuable insights into learners' thinking processes (1993: 96). Hitchcock and Hughes also advise using tape recorders to capture a more complete record of what is said (1995: 170). Altrichter *et al.* admit that the tape recorder fails to capture non-verbal communication, yet encourage teacher-researchers to use it (1993: 93, 104). Stressing the importance of a tape recorded data, they give two reasons why a tape recorder should be used. First, data which is tape recorded is more authentic than data merely observed and recorded in writing. Second, tape recording data frees a teacher-researcher to observe something else, and not to be distracted by what is being recorded.

Seeing these advantages in tape recording data, I used a tape recorder to capture some of the student-student classroom pair work conversations in information gap tasks and interviews.

Tests

Tests often evaluate students' learning of certain items. Often, however, they fail to test what students learned but focus on something else (cf. Alderson, 1981a: 52; Alderson, 1981b: 64-65; Davies, 1990: 20, 21).

In the same way, I have used communicative (in the sense that they require students to communicate to receive and transfer information) tests to find out if the students had learned what they had practised for two months. Though they can hardly be called tests, I have also used the students' completed information gap tasks as a source of data to evaluate the students' oral performance. Though these tasks could have been copied or faked in some way, they provide useful information. Whatever is found to be suspicious can, in any event, be checked by comparing it with the oral tests which were carried out under the supervision of the teacher-researcher or recorded on tape.

To summarise, in this chapter we have discussed action research as a research method. I have also tried to explain why I found action research more appropriate as a method, and why the teacher-researcher mode, in particular, is more suitable for the purposes of this investigation. Further, I have discussed the different stages of the action research cycle to explain how action research works in practice. In the last section, I have explained why I used different data collection techniques, and given the reasoning behind the use of each technique. In the chapter following, chapter four, I will discuss data collected through these techniques from different sources.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

In the preceding chapters, I have discussed the background of the study (chapter one), reviewed the relevant literature (chapter two), and discussed the research design I used in the study (chapter three). The current chapter contains the narrative of the action research project I carried out. I will take the reader through a discussion of how I tested out and refined some information gap tasks that I designed for use in a Grade 9 class in Eritrea, and relate the changes that I made to refine these tasks in the particular context of the Tsaeda Christian Junior and Senior Secondary School in Eritrea.

To begin, I wish to provide, first, some facts about these students' experiences in English language classes. Then, I will explain how information gap tasks are carried out and show how the principle of employing an information gap technique underlies such tasks. In the rest of the chapter, I will relate the students' and my experiences of the four kinds of information gap tasks in the action research project, in which we jointly participated between December 20, 2000, and February 15, 2001.

The class, 9-1, is a big class though not unique in size, since most sections here have more than 70 students. With 73 students, this class is often noisy, and teachers describe the students as both noisy and disruptive, though one or two teachers told me that with tact and some patience the students were not unmanageable.

I had taught most of the students (whose ages fall between 15 and 24) before in the 1999-2000 academic year. I was their teacher for about four months, which is long enough to get to know the students well. The rest of the class, some 20 in all, I did not know from before. About half of the learners I knew fairly well form a special sub-group, being students I had taught English in Grade 8 in the 1998-1999 academic year. These special students, detained either in Grade 8 or Grade 9, or who may have dropped out the previous year, were not particularly brilliant in English. I remember them as being quiet, or missing classes often, or mumbling their English oral exams. This was just about the only time I came face to face with them and was able to form a good judgement of their communicative skills.

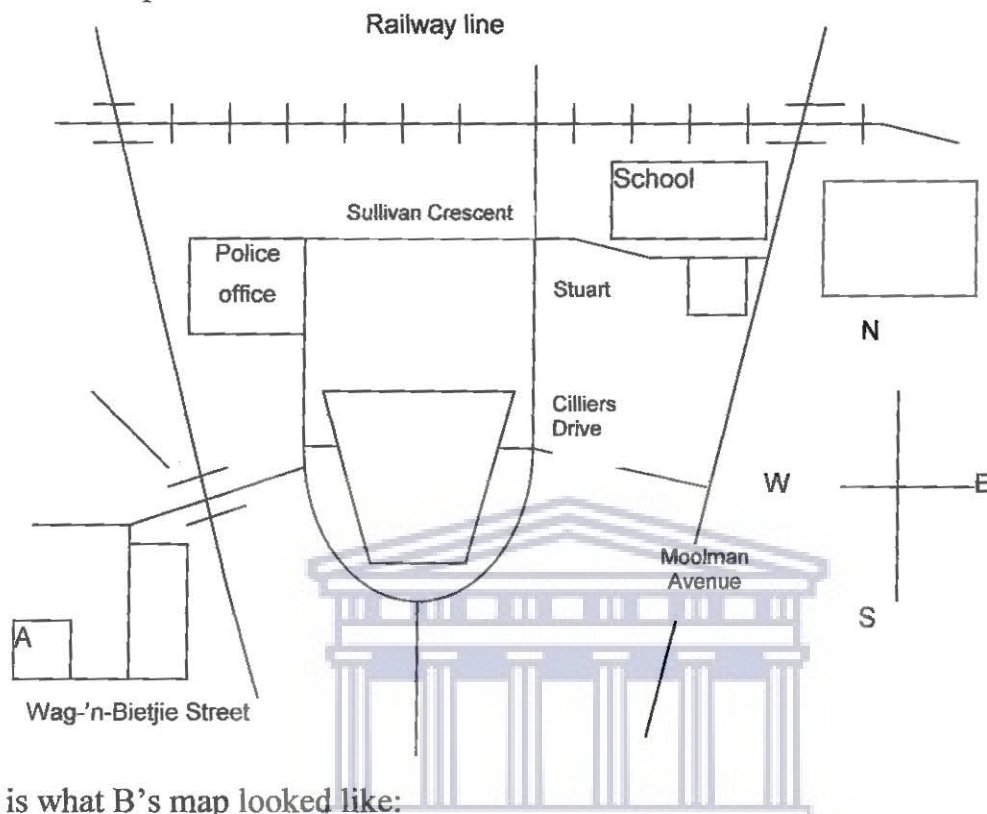
We should note right from the beginning that the only time my former students (and the other students, I guess, as well) had the opportunity to use a variety of information gap tasks was during this action research project. Let me first discuss how information gap tasks work, however, before I relate the outcomes of the action research project.

Information gap tasks work well only when there is an information gap which is created by providing communicants with different pieces of information. The information gap that exists between communicants serves a communication purpose because it creates the need to bridge the gap towards completing the task (Johnson, 1996: 45).

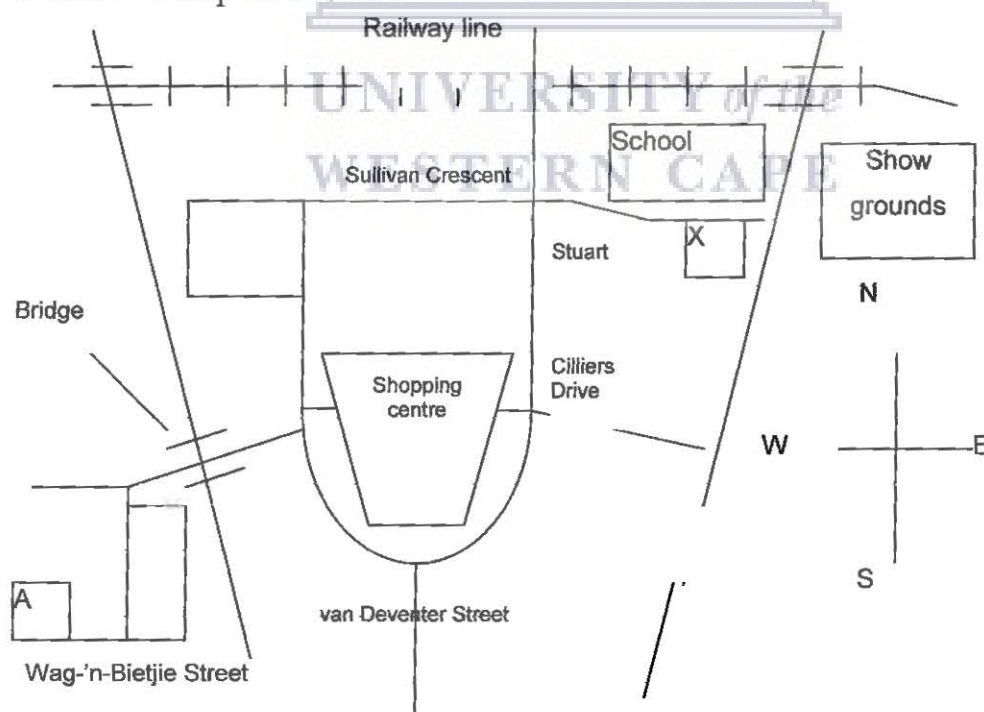
The following example, adapted from Weideman 2001a, illustrates the point made above. In this example, student A is provided with a map of an area in which some places are named and marked, while other places are unnamed and unmarked (those places he doesn't know in actual life and need to be pointed out to him; places known are marked in both). Student B is given a map of the same area in which the buildings and streets named/unnamed and marked/unmarked are

different from the ones on A's map. Driven by different reasons to know the area, they exchange the information they possess to produce a complete map of the area.

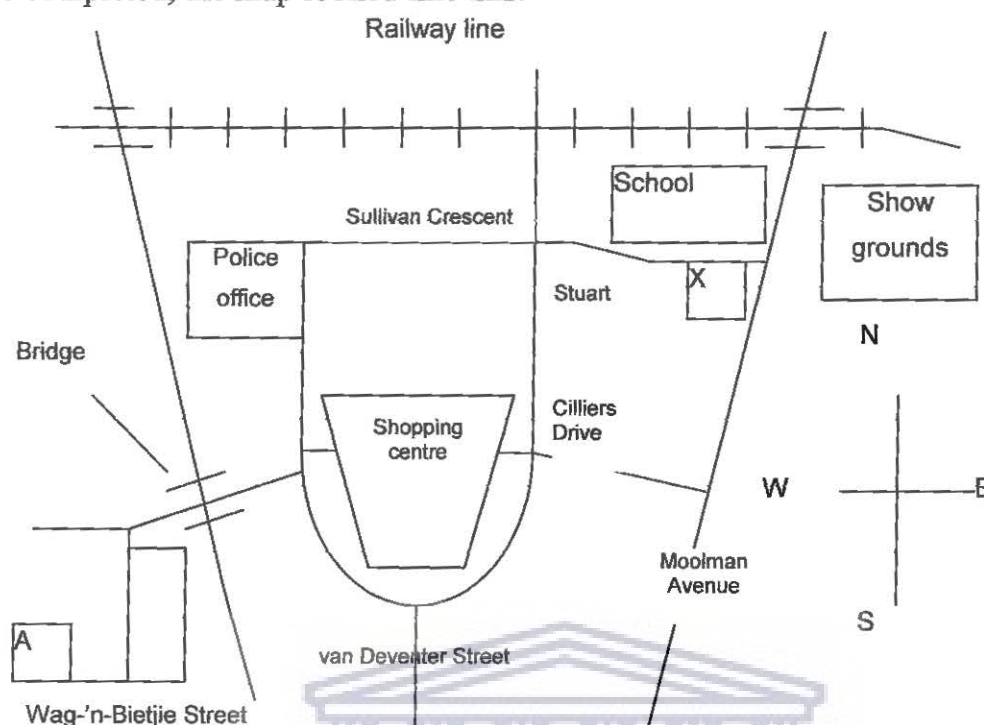
Here is the map that A had:



This is what B's map looked like:



Once completed, the map looked like this:



To maintain the information gap before it is bridged in discussion, creating a physical barrier is often necessary. Erecting a physical barrier discourages students from cheating. Removing the physical barrier makes oral information exchange and, hence, communication, unnecessary. This physical barrier can be erected by making the communicants sit in a back to back position, a technique I used throughout during the project.

The tasks discussed in this chapter include figure dictation tasks. I used the tasks described here to teach students the skills to transfer and receive information through description or instruction. Through these tasks I have tried to find out how far developed students' information transfer skills are (and how far they can be taken). The different tasks reported here require different levels of information transfer skills. This chapter reports on the investigation into the different levels and tries to identify the features that distinguish one task from another.

We now turn to the narration of the action research project I undertook in Eritrea.

Four cycles discussing five tasks are described. Each cycle discusses a task from its planning stage through to its final, reflection stage, which evaluates the implementation of the task based on the data gathered in the observation stage. My goal in the project has been to study the constraints that complicate information transfer across all the different tasks, and refine the tasks so that the students would be able to use information transfer skills across all the tasks used in the project.

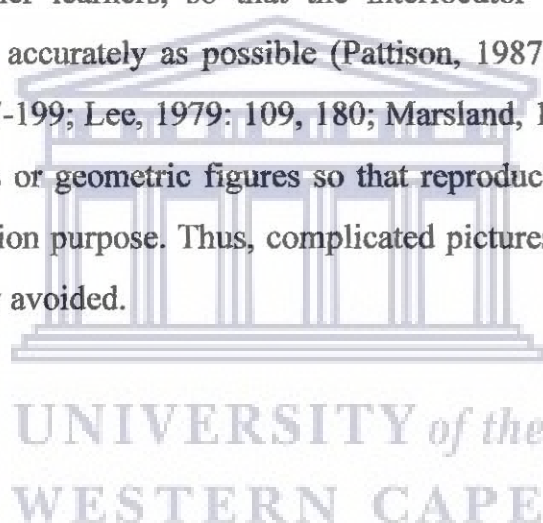
FIGURE DICTATION

Figure dictation tasks are communication tasks in which learners describe simple geometric figures to other learners, so that the interlocutor would be able to reproduce the figures as accurately as possible (Pattison, 1987: 133, 153; Maley and Duff, 1978: 187, 197-199; Lee, 1979: 109, 180; Marsland, 1998: 74-75). Such tasks use simple pictures or geometric figures so that reproducing them does not frustrate the communication purpose. Thus, complicated pictures that could defeat this purpose are generally avoided.

FIRST CYCLE

PLANNING

To teach the first figure dictation task, I prepared the students by providing them with an example on the blackboard. I prepared some simple figures and dictated the figures to a student on the blackboard. When the student had finished, I pointed out a mistake he had committed, to which the students objected, claiming that I ~~had~~ instructed the student to draw a rectangle and not a triangle. In the rest of the period, I asked them to prepare such simple figures but not show them to any student. I asked the students to draw simple figures for them to describe and for their partners to draw, and then to dictate the figures to their partners. I had the students undertake this round of practice so that they may have no difficulties the next day when they do the information gap task I prepared. The students prepared



figures, but some of them were too complex. The students, however, I believe, understood the information gap principle well in the exercise.

IMPLEMENTATION

On the next day (8-1-2001) I taught the lesson on figure dictation. I distributed the task and told the students not to expose them to any student. The lesson consisted of a simple figure dictation pair work task. The task was easy because each student was required to notice two missing figures and draw these figures. In addition, each student had one diagram divided into four quadrants, which made the task a bit more challenging, though hardly insurmountable for their level (see figure below).

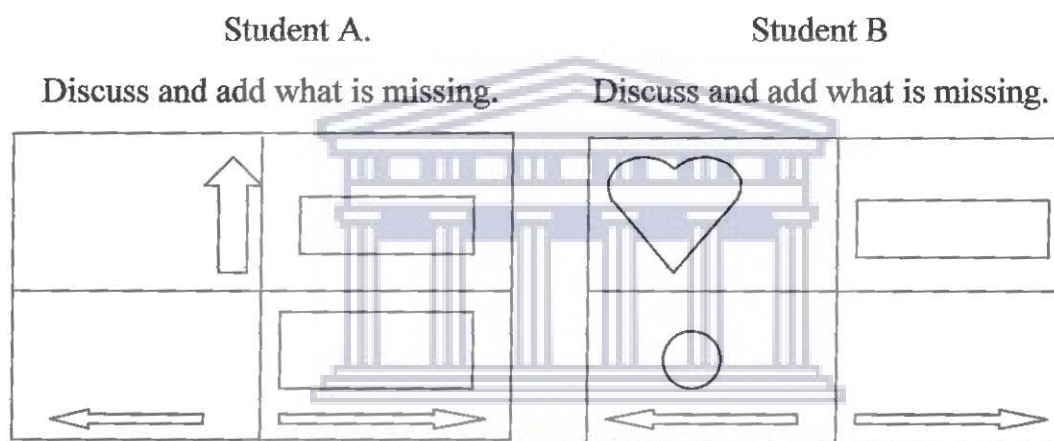


Figure 4.1: Task D

Students worked in pairs and were required to describe their figures and understand the differences between what was described to them and what already existed in their diagrams. The students were also asked to add the figures missing from their diagrams. The students immediately engaged in the task.

OBSERVATION

A few minutes later, however, a good number of students started to call for me and for the observer, who helped me during the observation of this and two other lessons. Many difficulties cropped up right from the beginning, in fact since the distribution of the task. Though I had planned and paired students with partners, I

had not informed them who their partners would be. I thought I would be able to take care of this in the first few minutes of the period. The distribution of the task took up much more time than I had expected. For this reason, I was compelled to drop the pairs I had prepared beforehand, both because the lesson had to be taught during that period and because the information gap had to be kept intact before it is bridged through discussion. I decided against postponing the task to the next period because I thought the students would expose the information and bridge the gap by talking about their figures and showing them to one another. Thus, I distributed some of the pieces of paper by assigning students who share the same desk to the same pair.

During the lesson, I observed that some students did not observe the warning that they should not disclose the information they had to transfer verbally. Instead, they exposed the figures they had before them, which made communication in the target language unnecessary. Some students discussed the tasks in Tigrigna, their first language, whenever they thought that the teacher or the observer was out of earshot. When I approached pairs to observe them (these were made-up of non-proficient students or non-proficient and average students), they reverted to English.

In addition, instead of drawing the missing figures, many students drew all the figures all over again. Unlike the other problems, however, this was not limited to the non-proficient and the average, but affected the proficient as well.

REFLECTION

As a new task, the students did well, though there were some difficulties. It is possible that the students felt compelled to complete the task in the little time left after the long distribution process. It is likely that this created some stress, which the students opted to overcome by using their first language. Trying the task in the target language would have complicated the task and added to their stress.

It is also likely that the students who engaged in exposing their tasks to their partners felt threatened by the short time given and the absence of support from a proficient student. Thus, not to expose themselves as incapable of completing the task, the students engaged themselves in accomplishing the tasks in what to them was the most obvious and efficient way. One could, perhaps, consider allowing students to complete such a task in their first language, as a dummy run, before switching to a second task in which everyone would, by prior agreement, work in the target language.

The observer believed that the back to back technique caused a number of misunderstandings, and that the task would have been easier if the students sat side by side and covered their diagrams with their books. Of course, the noise created during the task may have distracted students, and made listening to and understanding one's partner difficult. However, the suggestion the observer offered presented no better option. In allowing students to sit side by side, one maximises the role of gestures and guessing. Hence, these would reduce the role of verbal interaction. The purpose of the task is to develop verbal information transfer, and the option the observer suggests to some extent goes against this goal.

However, the task caused no real problems for the students. If it did, it was not something insurmountable at their level. In any case, I believe, the students (paired properly and given enough time so that those weak students receive support from the proficient and are not constrained for time) would be able to overcome some of the constraints that surfaced during the lesson.

SECOND CYCLE

PLANNING

I addressed some of the problems encountered in the previous task so that they were not repeated in the present task. I told the students that they need not have

drawn all the pictures all over again and that this time they needed only to notice the missing figures and draw these figures only.

I explained to them that the main purpose of the tasks was not to draw the pictures, but to use English to draw them. I further explained that if students exposed their figures to their partners they did their friends a disservice, and did not help them learn the target language in any way. In fact, they denied them a rare opportunity to develop their English proficiency. However, I did not tell them not to use their first language, because I thought students used it in spite of themselves, and each student wanted to speak in English. I also believed that the use of the mother tongue would cease once students got involved in the tasks and found them fairly manageable and enjoyable.

In the second task, I wanted to teach students to transfer information as accurately as possible, while explaining problems and clearing up uncertainties with their partners. I wanted to develop the students' skills to negotiate – to ask and to clarify – and reproduce a figure (which I think is equivalent to ascertaining in real life the content of information in a part of a message by asking relevant questions).

IMPLEMENTATION

Since the first task was fairly successful, I wanted to improve it by making it slightly more challenging. So the second task was a bit different from the first, because it was intended to be a little more challenging. I wanted to test what the students' limit or capacity was to handle a number of missing figures to be drawn, without disrupting the task or creating unnecessary stress on the students. For this reason, I added one further diagram instead of one for each student to handle. I *only* added more missing figures and figures within figures to make it a bit more challenging. Thus, each student was required to describe and draw four missing figures instead of two as in the previous task (see figure below).

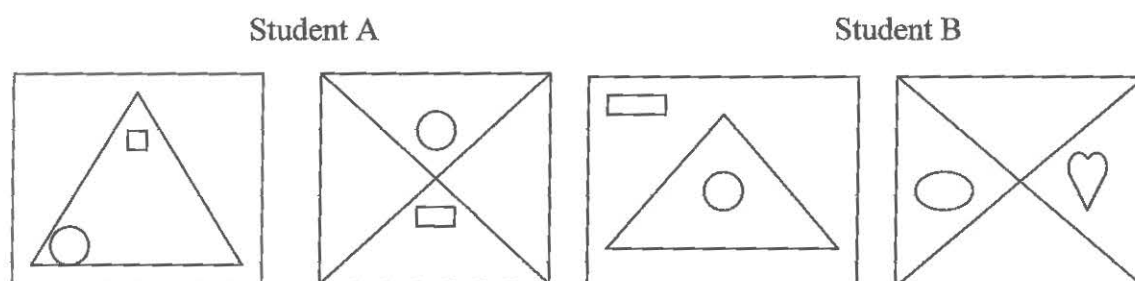


Figure. 4.2: Task E

Because in the first task I observed that pairing patterns affected the outcomes of the task, I tried to pair a non-proficient student with a proficient one, though it was difficult to pair all students in the same way because the proficient were greatly outnumbered.

OBSERVATION

In many of the pairs this strategy worked well: the proficient provided support to their non-proficient partners. However, this strategy was far from perfect as some non-proficient students failed to use their more proficient partner as a source of help. In one pair, I observed that a non-proficient student failed to understand his proficient partner: he remained confused, and lost.

I knew the non-proficient student well from my previous classes. He was my student before, never doing homework and missing many classes. He also made different excuses to avoid the different tasks given, and failed to submit his assignments for checking. The proficient student, on the other hand, was a motivated one. He often engaged me in conversation in English and asked questions in class in English.

Since I thought that the non-proficient student was confused in the task because he felt self-conscious (he knew I was observing closely) I withdrew but continued to observe from a distance. However, that was not the reason. He still failed to make progress and to understand his partner. It seems that, as a result, he persuaded his

partner to expose his figures so that he may copy and reproduce them. My eyes met the proficient student's, and I saw that he felt ashamed of having done this. In any event, this particular behaviour obviously had less to do with the nature of information gap tasks than with a general pedagogical problem.

Many other pairs, in fact, tackled the task successfully. My observation of some pairs convinced me that the tasks were successful to get students talking in English, which is, to some, the most difficult thing to do in English second language classes.

In contrast to the problem pair's performance, it is worthwhile looking more closely at another pair who accomplished the task successfully. In this pair, both students engaged in the discussion seriously. Their discussion drew me to observe them closely. None of the two tried to copy or speak in their first language, though one of them was not very proficient. Each handled the task in English, and it seems that each was determined to make the task a success.

At the end of the period I reminded students that I would start giving them an oral exam, which students were required to take to earn 35% of their total marks. I held these exams outside the class in after class sessions. Often, in these cases, each student comes face to face with the teacher and relates a story of their choice, but I compelled them to try a different story each time, and did not permit them to repeat the same story in two or more exams. This time, I decided to change the way it was conducted and also to introduce figure dictation tasks as an option. To find out who and how many would be willing to tackle such a task, I asked them to show me their hands. Most opted for figure dictation tasks; only a handful chose story-telling tasks.

REFLECTION

Three different kinds of pairings seem to reflect two different ways of performance: a proficient student and disinterested non-proficient make an

unsuccessful pair. On the other hand, a proficient student and an average but motivated and determined student make a task like this a successful learning experience. Two non-proficient students, determined though they may be, experience difficulties, since their lack of proficiency works against them. The latter may have difficulties to accomplish these tasks successfully, and often need support from proficient students.

The three different tasks tried out made me aware that pairings should be designed carefully and organised on some basic information about the students' interest and motivation. Listening to a recorded discussion made me aware of another issue: would students who know each other act the way these students did (from the recorded discussion I had gathered that a proficient and a non-proficient discuss almost half the task in their first language)?

Though I had become confident that figure dictation tasks are a successful means of teaching English to my students, I was not entirely sure of the students' attitude towards the tasks. I was pleasantly surprised, nonetheless, to find that more than 75% of the students opted for them for the upcoming oral exam. But I was much more surprised to find that the same students had such a distaste for story telling tasks, which they had done for some time the previous year and were more familiar with. Why were they so against them?

In general, I was made aware that knowing one's students helps in the effort to help them improve their English proficiency. I was also aware that this task was more difficult than the previous one (Task D) but that it was not too difficult for them, and I thought, therefore, that the students could undertake the completion of a more difficult figure dictation task. Knowing that one can go back to one's starting point if a more challenging task failed, encouraged me to use a bit more challenging task.

THIRD CYCLE

PLANNING

To teach the third figure dictation task, I paired the students in terms of proficiency difference after checking that no two students who knew each other were assigned to the same pair. I had found from the previous task (Task E) that, especially if one of them is not motivated, students who knew each other did the task unsuccessfully or carelessly. To avoid such unsuccessful task completion, I paired students so that the factors that affect the results of the task negatively were avoided as far as possible. The pairings that I organised, however, did not always work, perhaps because I did not know all the students.

This task directly follows from the previous two tasks in that it built on the improvements made there, and was based on the experiences gained from them. The second task included more missing figures than does the first, and was more challenging than the latter. However, I wanted to find out how far the number of missing figures can affect the successful completion of tasks. Thus, to determine if the number of figures included in the diagrams affected the task negatively, I added some figures to increase the demand on students to perform verbally.

In Task F, students were required to discuss figures inside two diagrams. But unlike in Tasks D and E, students were required to describe and draw one more figure inside another figure, which itself is inside one of the diagrams. In addition, I expected Task F to be more difficult because the number of missing figures involved was greater than those in Tasks D or E (See Task F below; cf. Tasks D, E and F).

IMPLEMENTATION

I distributed the task but gave no example, because the students by now had understood the tasks. I also had no other problems because the students had already got used to working in pairs, so that now they did not think it strange.

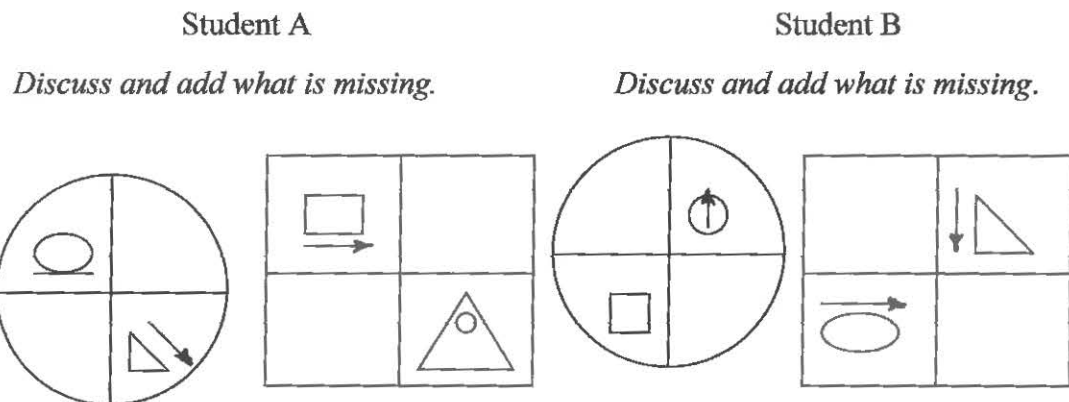


Fig. 4.3: Task F

OBSERVATION

In this period, I found out that verbal interaction (negotiation) takes place most productively in proficient/non-proficient pairs. In some pairs, the students successfully negotiated and completed the tasks, while in others, though the students negotiated the tasks, the time provided (a 40-minute period) did not allow the students to finish the whole task. This probably occurred because this task included more missing figures than the previous tasks, which led the students into an extended negotiation.

In one pair, a proficient student engaged a non-proficient one in a discussion to complete the task. First, the proficient student described his figures, while the non-proficient asked questions for clarification and drew the missing figures. Though not successful in every single respect, the task was completed satisfactorily on the whole. The most negotiation, however, took place when the non-proficient student started describing her figures. Though the proficient student asked many questions, his partner failed to answer them or to explain successfully. For this reason, when the task came to an end, the second part was much less successful than the first. From the completed tasks I observed that many negotiated the completion of the tasks seriously, which I could see from the deletions they had made. It is difficult to say that those pieces with no deletions did not adequately negotiate the tasks. Many of those obviously negotiated task papers show that the verbal interaction that took place helped students to accomplish the task correctly, though, of course,

there were some pairs who failed to make corrections. However, many more also failed to tackle the tasks successfully, and to a much greater extent than what happened in Tasks D or E.

REFLECTION

Though I felt happy about the verbal interaction that took place in this task, I became aware that it was certainly more challenging than Tasks D or E. The reason that many students failed (after negotiating the task for more than half an hour) to reproduce the figures accurately can probably be attributed to the number of figures involved in the task. The fact that the students were required to describe and draw the figures in a short time – through discussion in a second language – puts some pressure on them. Though this task took more time (as there were perhaps too many figures to draw) it was less successful in that the negotiation that took place in many cases did not help the participants to reproduce the missing figures accurately. This, however, should not be taken to mean that the students completely failed to reproduce all the missing figures. It only means that compared to the previous tasks, the students reproduced relatively more inaccurate figures, though there also were more items in the task.

In the previous tasks, the proficient students played important roles in enabling the non-proficient ones to understand and reproduce missing figures accurately. In this task, despite the length of time, their influence was more limited. Hence, many figures were inaccurately or even wrongly drawn. One reason (perhaps the only one) why this task proved a bit difficult is because too many figures (too many arrows and too many triangles) were included, and may have confused the students. To tackle such tasks successfully, one needs to describe figures accurately in relation to different diagrams and other diagrams. This may be a task too that learners at this level find difficult to cope with, and especially so low-proficiency students. In addition, the task included many similar (in comparison to Tasks D and E) figures in the two diagrams, which increased the probability of confusion in

addition to the stress the back to back technique created (because of the noise in the classroom the students had difficulty to hear one another) on students in processing the information in a second language. However, since tasks without such features (Tasks D and E) were tried and proved suitable, I decided that the next tasks would deal with tasks that don't pose much difficulty for the students.

FOURTH CYCLE

PLANNING

Doing Task F with students showed me that the number of missing figures included in a task complicated it, though they provided suitable opportunities for negotiation of meaning. In addition, Task F also proved too difficult for less proficient students, who make up a majority of the class. For this reason, I decided to design a less difficult task in order to provide the majority of students the opportunity to do the tasks successfully and give them some sense of achievement, so that they do not feel overwhelmed by a sense of failure. Thus, I reduced the number of diagrams to one and missing figures in the tasks by half (from eight in Task F to four).

The exam included different tasks, though of more or less the same level of difficulty. To check that the tasks do not vary too much, I kept the number of diagrams constant and the differences to the minimum. The only differences the tasks had were that some tasks placed figures outside other figures, while in others they were placed inside. In addition, some tasks used straight lines to divide the diagram into four parts, while others used diagonal lines (See Fig. 4.4 and 4.5 below).

IMPLEMENTATION

I gave the tasks to the students to complete. The only difference that existed between the situation in Task F and this task was that as an oral exam this task was given outside class. Otherwise there was no interference whatsoever from the teacher, and the students tackled the task on their own. The students were, of

course, expected to be tense. They were generally in a hurry to leave, because they had not had their lunch, and so wanted to complete the task quickly. These factors need to be considered, since they could have affected the students' performance.



Fig. 4.4 (First oral exam task)



Fig. 4.5 (Second oral exam task)

OBSERVATION

In some proficient-proficient pairs the tasks were successful. The students appeared to be tackling the tasks with enthusiasm and had heightened negotiations to describe their figures satisfactorily. In one pair, I had to intervene where a proficient student had no vocabulary to express the diagonal lines drawn in his diagram. This student worked hard to describe two sections of a circle divided into four by two diagonal lines which criss-crossed each other at the centre of the circle. However, he failed to describe the diagonal lines though he successfully indicated to his partner that the left and right sections of the circle were shaded. Though he failed to use the word shaded, he used the word black, which his partner understood.

In another pair, the negotiation was even more intense. In this pair, a non-proficient and an average student worked on a task in which a diagram is divided into four quadrants, and each had to identify four missing figures.

REFLECTION

Students' completion of the exam tasks, though these were different in some respects from each other in the ways discussed above, showed little difference from what went before. The students had heightened negotiations probably because these were exam tasks and the scores mattered a lot or perhaps they had by now had enough prior practice, and knew how to handle these tasks more efficiently. It is significant that the students were observed to check if they had done the tasks successfully. In most cases the students therefore did the tasks successfully.

A further point worthy of note is that the students used almost no Tigrigna in the oral exams, probably because they thought this would be to their disadvantage, though I can understand how great the temptation must have been for less proficient students. The students also did not expose their tasks to each other, probably because my presence influenced them. The tasks left me with the impression that they must be the quite appropriate for the students' level, because they encourage negotiation and could be done without much difficulty. Overall, therefore, the refinement process that was attempted through subsequent cycles of action research had been successful and satisfactory. I was left with the feeling that I had accomplished what I had set out to do.

INTERVIEWS

To be able to understand the intrinsic constraints, which are inaccessible to direct observation but nevertheless affect the effectiveness of the tasks, I conducted some interviews with students from the class I taught. I conducted the interviews at the end of the semester and the English oral exams. I interviewed six students (four males and two females) who, at the request of the teacher-researcher, volunteered to be interviewed. The interview was conducted in Tigrigna, though one offered to speak in English and the other two (being two of the proficient students in the class) would have managed successfully in English. I decided otherwise, because I

felt some of the issues may prove too difficult for them to express in a foreign language. The other two students were average students, while the remaining student was a non-proficient student, but much interested to improve her English. Later the interview was transcribed and translated into English. Though I interviewed each individually, two of the interviewees were on the spot, listening, while I was interviewing two of the other interviewees.

Asked what constrains information gap tasks, and what prevented their successful completion of the tasks in class, A (the students are designated by the first letter of their names) stated that instead of transferring information verbally, students simply copied the figures, thus frustrating the goal of the whole task. Student M1 and H agree with him.

Generally, most of the interviewees state that lack of proficiency in English affects the tasks negatively. H refers to the lack of the 'right words' affecting the students' comprehension of their partners' utterances, and their own production. T, A, M1 and M2 agree with her. M2 briefly states: "Little proficiency could also be a problem".

A, however, spoke generally about students' learning problems which could affect their performance in the tasks:

What should one do to succeed in English? Does one just read or are there other things to do? Students have problem in this area.

However, he holds that students do not work with enough commitment to realise their wishes to improve their proficiency in English, with which they are generally dissatisfied. Many feel that they were overwhelmed by the enormity of the task:

The problem is that not everybody wants to make efforts to learn. They want to speak, but that proves difficult. Or there is this problem to conclude something is difficult before one even tries it.

In the same vein, M1 states that many students are unwilling to use information gap tasks, while L holds that some students, who are discouraged by their lack of progress in education, disrupt class. M2 mentions a similar problem in class: "There are some who come to learn ... others come to pass time."

Intent on exploring what the non-proficient students thought of, and what their reactions were to the tasks, I asked the interviewees their opinions of what their non-proficient peers think about the tasks, and whether the non-proficient learners perhaps preferred teacher-fronted classes. A spoke in generalities. He remarks that non-proficient students are easily discouraged and are unable to cope with the demands of the tasks. He added that they hated to work hard. Instead, they took the way of least resistance and merely copied the information, without any verbal interaction, he explained. L said that their bleak future discouraged non-proficient learners, and they often wasted the time allocated to doing a task. M1 remarked that non-proficient learners were unwilling to make a success of the tasks. T, however, disagrees with them, remarking that non-proficient learners like the tasks and try their best.

I also explored with the interviewees the criteria students use to choose their partners. Most of the interviewees admit that they prefer to work with other more proficient students. L said he wanted to work with students more proficient than him because they inspire him to work harder. A admits that a proficient student who worked with him contributed to the success of the task and even corrected his mistakes. T, on the other hand, said that the non-proficient learners could not express themselves well, so he avoided them, and instead chose other students with comparable proficiency. On a similar note, M1 stated that the non-proficient ones confused him. A and T admitted that they did not choose non-proficient partners in the oral exam, lest their scores suffer from the non-understanding that might have ensued in the task.

The interview also explored what goes on when there is a lack of comprehension. Asked what she did when non-understanding occurs, H said that, as a last resort, she reverted to Tigrigna, though she claims that only a few cases of non-understanding surfaced in the tasks in class. M1 said that since repeating the same term which had caused the non-understanding in the first instance does not help to clarify things to one's partner, he had simplified or expressed the problem word in terms of other, easier words. M2 said she explained until her partner understood. In addition, in an after-task discussion, M2 holds, she explained to her partner how to set about completing future tasks. She points out that in pairs in which both the students were non-proficient, the students often did not negotiate the tasks, and the mistakes committed are carried over to the end.

The interviewees see different solutions to these problems, some of which, they remark, they used with their weaker partners. To overcome low English proficiency, T suggests that low proficiency learners be given separate extra classes, in which they are taught to improve their communicative skills in English. M1, on the other hand, suggests that examples of tasks be given beforehand, while A believes that, since students learn from the mistakes of their classmates, the teacher should ask pairs to try the tasks before the whole class, turn by turn. M2 supports him on this point. M1, on the other hand, thinks that students themselves should show an interest in their own learning, and work hard to improve their proficiency in English. A makes similar comments.

Some of the interviewees believe teacher supervision could help to discourage 'copying' and encourage initiative. L, for example, suggests that classes be smaller to have effective teacher supervision. Commenting on an 'experiment' the teacher-researcher did earlier, H suggests that classes be smaller for effective supervision. In a similar vein, A explains that smaller classes permit little room for cheating, because they make teacher supervision easier and more effective.

In this chapter, I have presented the data I gathered from different sources. First, I presented data about three different kinds of tasks from my diary, from recordings of tasks being completed by learners, and from completed assignments. Then, I proceeded to present data gathered from the oral tests I gave the students on two of the three tasks. Lastly, I presented the data gathered from student interviews. The analysis of the data is dealt with in the next chapter, chapter five.



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CHAPTER FIVE

INFORMATION GAP TASKS: POSSIBILITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the analysis and interpretation of the data discussed in chapter four. The figure dictation tasks which the students took for their English oral exam is analysed after Task F. Following the analysis of the tasks, this chapter presents the analysis of the interviews conducted with students so that intrinsic constraints may be further articulated. Before the analysis of the tasks, however, it is appropriate that the designing of these tasks be discussed in some detail, because the tasks can only be considered successful in the light of the purpose they were designed to achieve. For this reason, the next section is devoted to the discussion of how the tasks were designed, emphasising the five communicative task principles discussed in chapter two. Following this discussion, the tasks are analysed, based on the data gathered.

DESIGNING THE TASKS

Designing communicative tasks, especially information gap tasks, is not difficult (Walz, 1998: 488). One needs only to understand the principles that generate verbal interaction and how this interaction is best handled for effective second language acquisition. Once these principles are understood, they can be used for task design for effective communication. Since task design is the core of this project, it needs to be discussed in some more detail, and with more emphasis on designing information gap tasks.

To design a communicative task, first of all, one must decide at what level the task is going to be used. As discussed above (chapter two), different communicative tasks require different levels of proficiency for successful second language acquisition. It has been argued that opinion gap (or opinion exchange) tasks put greater demands on students' language proficiency than information gap or reasoning gap tasks do (Prahbu, 1987: 47; Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun, 1993: 23). It has also been noted that for different reasons problem solving tasks prove difficult or inappropriate for low proficiency or low level students (Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 110-111; Pica *et al.* 1993: 23). Further it has been argued that though information gap tasks are not perfect, their weaknesses can be identified and overcome, whereafter they can be used effectively to teach students to use a second language communicatively (Joyce, 1986).

The discussion below on how to design communicative tasks will stress information gap tasks, which I used in the project because the literature strongly supports the notion that they are appropriate for low proficiency students, a category to which my students belong.

Johnson (1982) discusses five principles that inform information gap tasks that need to be considered when designing communicative tasks. He argues that effective communicative tasks exploit these principles since they lay the foundation for real communication. I will discuss these five principles in relation to how I used them to design the tasks used in the project. For a detailed discussion, the reader is referred to chapter two of this mini-thesis, and to Johnson (1982).

People transfer and receive information in a communicative event. The principle of information transfer creates one of the conditions for real communication by creating the requirement for communicants to impart and receive information (Johnson, 1982:

164). In designing the tasks, I used this principle by requiring the students to ask for and provide information each has in their possession so that they and their partners would complete the tasks set. In the figure dictation tasks, for example, the students were required to describe the figures in their diagrams so that their partners would understand and draw them, while in the story telling task, which for lack of space is not reported here, they had to tell a part of the story and listen to another part. In a word, the tasks incorporated information transfer without which the tasks could not have been done.

The tasks also incorporated an information gap, which entails the distribution of information among the participants. The principle of the information gap provides task designers with the tool to divide information between participants so that each participant is required to seek information necessary for the completion of the task from the other participant(s).

To create a gap in information, I divided the information between the participants in such a way that each participant possessed a part of the information necessary for the completion of the task. In the figure dictation tasks, for example, I divided the missing figures that need to be described and drawn among the participants by placing different figures in the two participants' diagrams.

Though tasks can be described in such a way that the tasks give one participant (or party) more opportunity to speak while relegating the other to a listener role, I designed the tasks to be two-way information gap tasks, which require both participants in a pair to practise the target language more or less equally. In other words, I used the jigsaw principle to provide an equal opportunity to students in each pair to practise the target language (Johnson, 1982: 167-170). I thus divided the information in each task as equally among the participants as I could. In this way, each

learner describes an equal number of figures in the figure dictation tasks, and names an equal number of places in the map work tasks, while each student narrated half of the story in the story telling task.

The tasks also employed the task dependency principle, which gives participants a reason to engage in verbal interaction to complete them (Johnson, 1982: 170-171). For example, the students were asked to name the different places on a map, for some of which they had to ask their partners in order to produce the complete map with all the names of the different places. In the story telling task, they were required to write the story after they had received the other half from their partners. These tasks, which required the students to do some task after they had received accurate information, were designed to give them a reason for verbal interaction. These map work tasks, like the story telling task, are not reported here for lack of space.

After they had done the tasks, the students were expected to compare their figures and assess how successful their pair work sessions had been. The students were expected to discuss their completed tasks and talk about where and why they went wrong, if they did. They also were expected to discuss how they could overcome such problems in the future, since they had to do a series of information gap tasks. In other words, they were expected to use the correction for content principle, which helps participants solve their communication problems through discussion and joint assessment of the sessions (Johnson, 1982: 171-172).

Once one understands how these principles work, designing tasks is therefore not difficult. Designing the tasks nonetheless took some time, because I used a computer to draw the figures and maps. To reduce the time and cost involved in the designing of tasks, however, teachers could use a ruler, and a piece of paper. This is equally effective and reduces time and expenses.

To start designing communicative tasks, the best place to start is a number of books on communicative tasks. Many of these provide an assortment of tasks from which designers can take tasks for adaptation or design new ones. Some task designers provide excellent examples of low cost, easy to design tasks (Pattison, 1987; Maley and Duff, 1978; Marsland, 1998). Pattison provides, for instance, examples on figure dictation and other tasks while Marsland explains how to design tasks with little or no material at all, reducing the cost of designing tasks further.

To use tasks designed, one needs only to photocopy and use them. In Eritrea, where photocopying is considered to be expensive, photocopying the tasks did not cost me that much. One can also reduce the cost by designing the tasks manually. Not using a photocopier could be difficult, especially with big classes such as the one I taught. However, schools can be involved in covering photocopying costs of these kinds of materials if they are persuaded that information gap tasks help students to practise the target language.

FIGURE DICTATION TASKS

The figure dictation tasks required each student to discuss and find out what figures were missing from their diagrams, and to draw these figures, checking with their partners for their size, their location in the diagram, and for other features.

TASK D

In the first task, Task D, each student was required to describe accurately two figures missing from their partners' diagrams. To simplify the task, however, a host of other figures common to both students' diagrams were included. These figures were intended to give some landmark in relation to which to describe or draw the missing figures.

In this task, most of the students successfully completed the task. As a new task, however, it created confusion even among proficient/proficient pairs, a situation which drove many pairs into using their first language (Tigrigna is the students' common first language, and Tigrigna expressions are in italics), as this exchange shows. Proficient/proficient pairs rarely reverted to their first language.

B: Draw only heart.

M: Heart only?

B: Yeah.

M: *Dehriue ke?* [= Then?] So ... how ... how could I draw it? Another heart?

B: There is –

M: Another heart?

B: *Ewe ... Kemuula mish?* [= Yes, is it not that way?]

M: Not [Inaudible].

B: *Natey ... abnatka kilte* [Inaudible]. [= Mine ... In yours are two [Inaudible]]

M: I have to cancel. Leave and ask the teacher.

When the students' first language occurs in few cases in the discussion, it seems to appear in B's utterances. M uses his first language and when he does, he does to express his anger, which flares up when B fails to understand him. Anger, one supposes, is an emotion difficult to express in a foreign language.

B: In the right ... is that crosses the heart?

M: No. In the right part of the heart; in the right part of the heart there is an arrow goes upward. You know upward?

B: ... Upward? To the right?

M: Upward! [Angry]

B: Goes upward ... like this. Upward ...

M: *Ewae ata entay konka daa?* [= Man, what is wrong with you?]

The employment of the first language, however, does not seem to have affected the verbal interaction in the target language here much. The few cases in which the students' first language is used barely went beyond expressing M's frustration about his partner's failure to understand his utterances. M's outbursts which occur now and again, also seem to have affected B in such a way that B fails to make the correction

of a figure he wrongly drew, as the following exchange shows (cf. Appendix: Task D):

M: I told you a rectangle only.

B: Second picture?

M: Yes, second picture. Rectangle. Rectangle *ekoyu* [= It is rectangle.]

B: *Ewae?* [Is that so?]

M: Rectangle *mish eleka*. [= I told you it was a rectangle.]

B: [Inaudible]

M: I told you rectangle even if you heard ...

It seems B was intimidated and dropped the question. It would be wrong, however, to claim that B would have understood the task perfectly if M was not angry. In fact, both students' inattention to the size of the figures seems to suggest that he may have failed to draw this figure accurately as well. There is one big rectangle in the top, right quadrant. The same rectangle is presented in the shape of an envelope in the diagram on the right. In the task, both M and B failed to talk about the size of this rectangle. Their accurate understanding of its size might have led them to the right conclusion that the quadrant would have no space for more figures. This might have helped B correct his mistake. As it was, however, they failed to discuss the size of the missing figures.

The students' inattention to size is seen also in M's wrong reproduction of the bottom-left circle and B's reproduction of the bottom-right rectangle (cf. Appendix: Task D).

On the other hand, the students were conscious about the location of the missing figures and in some cases the direction of the arrows. Thus, location of the missing figures in relation to common figures attracted their attention more than their size did, and generated more negotiation. In other words, the students made efforts to describe the location of the missing figures, and also made sure that they understood their location correctly. In the following exchange, in which B describes the circle in the

bottom-left quadrant, he makes sure that his partner understands the position of the circle in relation to the arrow.

- B: ... there is an arrow which looks to left
 M: Goes to left direction.
 B: And ... on and above it there is a circle
 M: Above it ...
 B: ... there is a circle.

Both the confirmation check (M's "Goes to the left direction") and the one partner's completion (B: "... there is a circle") of the check by M: ("Above it ...") indicate the high degree of negotiation that is typical of many of these exchanges.

In the following, B tries to find out where exactly in the bottom-right quadrant the rectangle should be drawn. Note that he doesn't ask about the size of the rectangle, and note also M's angry outburst in the same exchange.

- B: Ok. What about the rectangle? Is that above or [Inaudible].
 M: Above!
 B: Above?
 M: Above! Above the rectangle.
 B: Rectangle?
 M: I tell you!

Though M's frustration might be showing through, there is again a good amount of checking and confirming ("Above? /Above! /Rectangle? /I tell you!").

TASK E

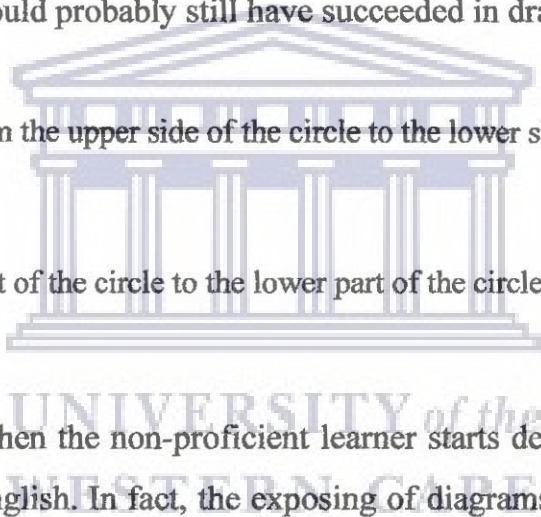
In the second figure dictation task, as we saw in chapter four (Fig. 4.2), each student was required to deal with two diagrams and describe four figures missing from their partners' diagrams. As stated above, this task is more challenging than Task D, as it included more diagrams and more figures.

In the analysis of the task the responses of three pairs will be considered. In the first, a non-proficient/proficient pair of learners (who shared the same desk in class) tackled the task. In the second, two non-proficient students (one male and another female)

completed the same task. In the third, one proficient learner and an average learner discussed and completed the task.

In the first pair, the two tackled the task almost exclusively in Tigrigna, their common first language. In addition, the two students exposed their diagrams to each other, an act which violates the information gap principle. For this reason, though the students drew the pictures, it would be difficult to determine how far the target language served to assist them in the process.

At times, the proficient learner in this pair describes his figures in English, and modifies his utterances. One understands from the discussion that if they had used English throughout they would probably still have succeeded in drawing the figures. B is the proficient student:

- 
- B: Draw diameter from the upper side of the circle to the lower side.
 A: Diameter?
 B: Line.
 A: From what?
 B: From the upper part of the circle to the lower part of the circle.
 A: Eh? Draw –
 B: A line. Diameter

This pair, however, fails when the non-proficient learner starts describing his side of the diagram. He uses no English. In fact, the exposing of diagrams and first language use sharply increase during his turn. The analysis of this part of the discussion indicates that they used more demonstratives, which shows that they were looking at each other's diagrams. The same analysis indicates that the students ceased using names of the figures. Consider this exchange:

- B: *Ezen kemzien yebleyn* [= I don't have like *these*]
 A: *Enhelka endo* [= Look, these are the ones]
 B: *Yeblan* [= It doesn't have that]
 A: *Enhelka esandia* [= Look! It is the same]

The same task undertaken by another pair produced fewer cases of diagram exposures and first language use, though one cannot determine how these few cases of exposure in the second pair's discussion undermined the success of the task.

The cases in which the students use their first language reduce the amount of verbal interaction that would have occurred between them. In the following exchange, T (the non-proficient learner) describes the diagram on the left. The Tigrigna expression he uses reassures his partner that the diagram he is describing has already been drawn on his partner's diagram, and hence discourages her from processing the information he transferred about the big square which he is describing:

G: A big square. A square. *Tesaelala. Tesaelala* [= It is already drawn. It is already drawn]

The analysis of the discussion shows that there was very little verbal interaction in the target language between the students. The common pattern was that one of them would describe the diagram, with the other asking almost no questions; the listener in this instance seems to have made up the information which they should have received by asking questions through the glimpses they have of their partners' diagrams. The only time one asks the other is when the speaker is describing a missing figure, while the discussion that should have taken place to find out what figures were common to both is lost, again probably because the students have glanced at their partners' diagrams. Even the little interaction there was, is tainted by the students' first language and diagram exposures – the two easy ways out that the pair were tempted to use frequently.

A comparison of the completed tasks shows that, though the students were accurate in their reproduction of the missing figures, as in Task D, students were not accurate in the reproduction of the original size of the missing figures. This may suggest that the students did not completely depend on exposure of their partners' diagrams, but

negotiated part of the task. An analysis of the discussion shows that the students, as in Task D, discussed the location of missing figures thoroughly. In addition, where the task included figures that were tucked between angles and emphasised size, the students used adjectives that expressed size. Since these adjectives mean different sizes for different students, however, they produced figures of different sizes for the same figures. In other words, they failed to describe accurately the size of the figures drawn. The original and the reproduced figures, however, do not show that great a difference, to lead us decide that the task has been a failure.

In general, though the task suffers from students' exposure of their diagrams and their use of their first language, these two constraints, which can harm verbal interaction in the target language, did not affect the students' performances significantly.

The third discussion, between a proficient learner (L) and an average learner (K), was the most successful of the three. In this case, the students tackled the whole task in the target language, and did not expose their diagrams to each other. In addition, they went over the task again to check whether they had drawn the figures accurately.

One of the features that characterises this discussion is the clear and explicit and co-operation each provides to the other. Consider this exchange, in which K, the average learner, describes the circle in the diagram on the right (See Appendix: Task E3).

K: Ok. In the second picture, second picture

L: Yeah?

K: In the square –

L: Yeah?

K: that has two lines, two ...

L: diagonal lines

K: in the top, in the top

L: Yeah, in the top triangle

Since the two co-operated, and each followed the other's instructions closely, opportunities for mistakes were low. Consider the following exchange, in which K,

corrects L because she (K) has closely followed his (L's) instructions. L is describing the heart on the right.

L: Then also draw a heart. A shape of the heart in the left side. In the left side of a rectangle. Triangle.

K: In the right?

Another feature that characterises this discussion, and one which seems to have helped reduce mistakes, is that both the students make sure that they have described and received the information accurately. In the following exchange, L asks a question to make sure that the information he has to work on is accurate, while K confirms the information by rejecting a possible option. Note that K's "Yes, ..." does not show affirmation as in English. It is one of the first language interferences that appear in foreign language speakers or learners. Here K is merely rejecting his option of drawing an oval shape.

L: May I draw a circle?

K: A circle.

L: Not oval?

K: Yes, not oval!

L: Ok. I draw it.

K: In the bottom draw a rectangle

L: Rectangle?

K: Rectangle, not triangle. Rectangle.



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The discussion leaves one with the impression that each learner was determined to make a success of the task. The task, however, was not a complete success, as a comparison of both students' diagrams shows (See Appendix: Task E3).

The diagrams show that though L, the proficient student, has succeeded in drawing the missing figures in the right place, he fails to draw figures of appropriate size. A look at the script to find out why he wrongly drew the rectangle in the diagram on the right shows that he failed to ask for the size of the rectangle. In the same task, others failed to provide or ask for the size of figures, which also explains why K failed to draw the

rectangle in the diagram on the left accurately. Note also that L failed to draw the circle in the diagram on the left in the right place.

In general, the third pair was more successful than the other two because the students used the target language to complete the task. In contrast to the previous two pairs, this one used no Tigrigna (the students' first language) nor did they expose their diagrams to each other. Unlike the other students in the previous two pairs, these students showed more interest in the task than the others did, which is clearly seen in their co-operation and their clear and explicit instructions to each other.

TASK F

Task F, as we saw in chapter four (Fig. 4.3), requires each student to describe and understand two diagrams and a number of figures in these diagrams. As it included more figures, it is more challenging than task D or E, or the figure dictation exam tasks.

A comparison of the number of the uncorrected mistakes (of pairs) shows that more mistakes were left uncorrected in Task F than in Task E. This confirms the fact that, relatively, the former, which took up more class time, is more challenging than Task E.

Having read the transcription made of the recording of Task F, one is struck by the unusual number of questions asked and the amount of negotiation that took place. One reaches the only conclusion possible, which is that this pair, whose recorded response of Task F is analysed here, is quite unique (comparing it to previous ones) and that the students must have been determined to make a success of the task.

A look at the script also shows that F (one of the students), having discovered that he has drawn a figure wrongly in the top left quadrant of the diagram on the left, asks time and again until the mistake is corrected. Having found out that he has drawn the oval shape that should be drawn in the top left quadrant of the circle, F corrects his mistake.

F also insists that A finish his description of the first diagram before he proceeds to the second. His influence on his partner is such that his partner is forced to answer all his questions, which helps them complete the task successfully.

Having learned (this seems the only explanation) from his partner's mistakes, he describes his diagrams step by step and makes sure that he even uses the diagrams described to him as starting places. Consider this exchange. He [F] starts from the top left quadrant of the circle.

F: Yes. In the first dia – circ – ... in the first side [Inaudible] there is no any drawn?

A: There is an oval drawn. ...

Though the co-operation between the two learners contributed to the success of the task, F's questions are of great relevance. See how a clarification question helps F to draw the isosceles triangle reasonably accurately.

A: At the opposite of ... the first triangle, which means at the fourth quadrant.

F: Ok.

A: At the fourth quadrant an isosceles triangle.

F: Isosceles triangle?

A: Yes. It seems but

F: Two sides are equal?

A: Yes, isosceles triangle. Two sides are equal.

F's questions, however, seem to have irritated A, who sometimes appears not to like them, and then expresses his frustration openly. Consider the following exchange, in which A describes the rectangle in the top, left quadrant of the square:

A: No. The arrow is parallel to ... horizontal

F: Horizontal?

A: Yes. Is it not? At the second diagram ... at the second

F: At this point?

A: Yes! [Tired]

The task owes its success to the students' unusual interaction, in which they describe the figures clearly, and in most cases leave no room for alternatives.

At some point, A describes the oval shape in the circle, but because the task included too many similar figures (arrows, the same number of quadrants in similar positions, triangles, oval shapes), they were confused, and this led to lengthy negotiations. These confusing figures created problems throughout the task.

In general, the task was successful despite the different features that made it challenging. The success, however, was due to the students' unique determination and F's persistent questions. The students also used no Tigrigna, their first language, nor did they expose their diagrams to tackle the task, which all added to its success. This pair's discussion clearly shows that motivated students can make a success of a difficult task.

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THE EXAM TASKS

In the oral exam, most students completed the tasks successfully. To shed some light on the causes of failure in figure dictation information gap tasks, however, two unsuccessful tasks are analysed here.

In the first task, an average student (B) and a non-proficient one (G) worked to identify, describe, and draw figures missing from their diagrams. They worked with the diagrams indicated in Fig. 4.4.

The script (of the first pair discussion) shows that when they start the task, both students fail to speak the same 'language', which caused some of the mistakes. For example, B failed to pinpoint correctly which triangle his partner meant when he referred to the 'third isosceles triangle':

G: No. [Pause]. In the bottom of the ... third isosceles triangle draw a small square.

B: Small square?

G: Yeah. In the third of the [inaudible].

B: In this picture I have I have ... picture here.

Here G fails to understand B's problem. Thinking that the third meant the triangle on the right, B draws a small rectangle and a comparable equally sized oval shape.

B's failure to draw the missing figures in the correct triangle, however, doesn't occur only because each assumed wrongly what this 'third triangle' meant. G's failure to answer questions directed at him to clarify led B to draw the figures in the wrong place:

B: But how can I write here?

G: A picture?

B: In this picture I have I have ... picture here

G: Yeah.

B: In the isosceles triangle.

G: Yeah ... yes.

B: How can I write here?

The following exchange also shows his failure to answer questions or answer them accurately. Here G describes the figures in the bottom triangle. Note that the word 'third' is understood differently.

G: Yeah. Again in the botto – of the sma – square draw oval shape.

B: In where picture? Third? Fourth?

G: Yes. In the small square. I said in the third.

Their failure to use the right terminology to describe the different triangles (quadrants) is evident. They fail to use 'right' or 'left', though G uses the term 'south' in a situation which might have misled B if there was something to draw at that time. If

used correctly, terms that would have saved the task were not used. For example, G fails to use the term 'bottom triangle' in the following exchange which might have avoided some misunderstanding. The long negotiation did not help B understand G's instructions.

G: No. [Pause]. In the bottom of the ... third isosceles triangle draw a small square.

B: Small square?

G: Yeah. In the third of the [Inaudible].

B: In this picture I have I have ... picture here.

It seems that G's failure to describe the figures well caused the failure of the task. In the second part of the discussion, in which B describes G's missing figures, G makes no mistakes, because B renders his utterances comprehensible by modifying them. In the following B describes the figures on the left:

G: Ok. In the small ...

B: It is not small, small circle. Medium, ok?

G: Ok.

B: And in the circle, in the circle draw a re – a rectangle. I mean four sides. Ok?

The fact that G described his diagrams first must have created pressure on him, in which case he had to indicate and distinguish the one quadrant he meant out of the four possible ones, instead of two. B had no such trouble, because two of the four quadrants were described and hence excluded. It could be for this reason that G understood B's utterances easily, and made no mistakes when he drew the figures. Oddly, though B used the same ambiguous terms ('first', 'second') G used to refer to the quadrants, they cause no confusion, as when G used them. The exclusion of the two quadrants must have helped in simplifying the task.

In contrast to Task D, the students use size adjectives a lot. A comparison of the demands the two tasks make on students explains the reason. Task D requires students to describe figures missing that need to be drawn above, beside, or under other figures. On the other hand, this oral exam task requires students to describe figures

inside other figures. In such cases it becomes imperative for students to stress the size of the figures involved. By placing figures inside others, this task downplays the importance of direction. In other words, while Task D stresses location, this oral exam task emphasises the size of the figures.

In the second oral exam task, two students, the one proficient (M) and the other non-proficient (T), attempt to describe the figures indicated in Fig 4.5. Though the figures to be described in the second exam task are different from those in the first oral exam task which is discussed above, the tasks are similar in that both consist of only one diagram divided into four quadrants by two diagonal lines.

In this task, as in the first oral exam task, the verbal interaction did not lead to the successful completion of the task, though for different reasons than those for the first task. In the first oral exam task, an unsuccessful description on the part of the non-proficient learner, and ignoring his partner's questions undermined the effect of the verbal interaction, leading one partner to draw different figures in the wrong places. In the first oral exam task, because his partner modified his utterances and made them comprehensible, and because the number of confusing quadrants was reduced by half, the non-proficient learner drew the figures successfully.

In this task, the non-proficient student fails to understand his partner's utterances. It seems that the vocabulary used creates the confusion. Though it is required of him to draw parallel lines pointing upward, he still draws two parallel lines pointing to the left. Here the learner simply fails to identify the direction of the arrows. It seems that T does not understand the meaning of 'upward':

M: At the right side.

T: The right side.

M: And the arrow ... down up.

T: Down up –

M: Towards up.

T: Towards up? [Inaudible].

He also fails to understand the location of the arrows, as can be seen from this exchange:

M: ... At the right side you have two parallel lines and the arrow is upward.

T: Two parallel lines? The left side, yes.

M: At the right side.

T: At the right side?

He was probably confused because he had to draw parallel arrows in both the left and the right quadrants. He fails to use the phrases that indicate the direction of arrows to distinguish between the two sets.

The fact that the figures missing from T's diagrams are similar might have confused him and created difficulties to determine to which of these similar figures (placed in the two different quadrants) his partner referred. His confusion is clear in the following exchange from a section of the discussion in which both students repeat the task to check, and in which M describes the arrows on the right.

M: ... At the right side you have two parallel lines and the arrow is upward.

T: Two parallel lines? The left side, yes.

Having no idea of what upward means, he tries to understand and make sense of M's words. However, the phrase 'two parallel lines' causes confusion, because the arrows on the left are also two and parallel, and he has already drawn them.

This second oral exam task, on the other hand, shows that, given manageable and easy tasks, non-proficient learners can describe and tackle tasks successfully. T, the non-proficient learner, modifies his utterances in response to M's questions and helps M to correct a mistake committed. He describes the rectangle and the arrow in the bottom triangle (See Appendix: Oral exam tasks).

T: And on the bottom ... draw a ... no equal ... er ... four ... rectangle.

- M: Inside the equilateral triangle?
 T: Yes, at the bottom. At the bottom draw a rectangle.
 M: Ok.
 T: The two sides are equal and the upper and the [Inaudible] are at the
 M: An isosceles triangle?
 T: Isosceles triangle, yes.
 M: Ok.
 T: Rectangle. No isosceles triangle. Rectangle.

Though he fails to understand his partner's utterances, his skill to explain, however, should be acknowledged, as this exchange shows. Here he describes the circle and the arrow in the top triangle:

- T: Draw a circle.
 M: Circ – Inside?
 T: Yes, inside. At the upper.
 M: Ok.
 T: At the centre of the circle draw er ... put a point. Put point.
 M: [Inaudible]
 T: The point.
 M: Eh?
 T: Er ... it is straight line. Parallel lines. The direction is to left side ... from the point.

In this task in general, T fails to reproduce M's arrows because he fails to understand the direction of the arrows, and the arrows on both sides share many features which make them confusing. However, T's success to modify his utterance and clarify his partner's doubts should be commended.

Two features stood out in the exam. First, the students never attempted to copy. Second, the students also did not try to use their first language. This could be because the teacher-researcher was on hand to give tasks to other students who were awaiting their turn to take the exam. The students, I understand, felt that they could not copy or use their first language without risking their scores: the tape recording would have given them away. I understood just how tempting it must be for students to use their first language when a proficient student asked if it was possible for him to explain the figure to his less proficient partner in Tigrigna when the latter failed to understand

him. Their performance on this occasion, however, indicates that when they do not have any choice, students use the target language resources successfully. The request to explain something in Tigrigna also provides evidence, again, of the degree to which students can become engrossed in the task itself, almost losing themselves in it, by putting its completion (rather than the language they are learning) first in order of priority.

THE INTERVIEWS

I interviewed six (three proficient, two average, and one non-proficient) learners. I interviewed them to explore the intrinsic constraints of information gap tasks that create problems for students. Through the interviews I intended in the first place to find out internal constraints that frustrate students' performance in the tasks. The interviews, however, touched on all kinds of constraints, and I have included them in the analysis below.

One of the constraints that frustrates students' performance in information gap tasks is copying, or exposing figures to one another. Speaking in the context of homework, from which the habit spills over to information gap tasks, A advises that copying be taken as a last resort after the student has failed to tackle the task alone. For him copying without understanding is a real problem.

... before you make certain whether you can do it yourself or not if you copy from me or when I copy from another student thought bright or if I copy from you, this has a harmful effect on me.

He spoke as if this 'problem' is widespread. From his words one senses that this problem is rampant among students (M1 agrees it is) and may affect information gap tasks negatively. H explains that copying affects information gap tasks as it affects verbal interaction directly and negatively. She thinks that students copy because they cannot understand their partners and because they cannot describe their tasks effectively. This drives them to their first language or exposure of their diagrams. This

can be understood to mean that the proficient students would not revert to copying unless they find the situation desperate. In other words, it is the non-proficient learners who resort to such acts.

To overcome this constraint, A suggests that the teacher identifies the students who copy and ask them to try the tasks before the whole class in an attempt to discourage such acts. He thinks this sends a clear message to the students that copying doesn't pay and would discourage them from engaging in it. A speaks strongly against copying and advises that teachers be serious about managing students' behaviour and performance. Again, though, we note how focussed the students are on the completion of the task as a first priority.

Lack of proficiency (or lack of vocabulary as the interviewees call it) also constrains information gap tasks. Though the students had problems, they found the tasks novel and innovative and difficult to criticise. They blamed themselves for their non-proficiency while they worked on the tasks, though L intimated that tasks should not include items that create problems for students, and that some tasks could prove to be too difficult. Consider this typical reply from L about interviewees' responses on the tasks:

... They [the tasks] presented no problems to students. ... The reason is [there are] only previous shortcomings on the part of the students. Just a little ... that students are unable to [tackle the tasks] because students had no [idea] ... what words to use and because the shortcomings students bring with them.

T declares that a lack of proficiency prevents students from using the target language and forces them to seek other ways to tackle the tasks. Despite the students' desire to use the target language, they fail to do so.

To overcome this constraint, the interviewees suggest different solutions. While M1 suggests that students read fiction extensively, T explains that special classes organised for non-proficient learners can develop their proficiency in addition to encouraging them to work hard. One does not expect these students to know, of course, that the content of these 'special' classes might very well again be information gap tasks, since these are shown in the literature to be one of the most efficient means of becoming orally proficient! But what these suggestions do perhaps indicate, is that, for students just starting out on information gap tasks, teachers might consider a bit of extra 'warming up' before the tasks get done, in the form, especially, of first introducing the required vocabulary. That is, if the task requires terminology like 'bottom', 'diagonal', 'isosceles', 'left', 'up', 'down', and so on, this vocabulary can be introduced prior to the task being tackled.

The interview also discussed pairings and what criteria students use to select their partners when given the choice in class and during exams. The interviewees explain that in selecting their partners they considered their partners' proficiency. Asked why they chose a certain partner in the last information gap task, A states:

I thought he could give a boost to one's contribution in the pair work and make a success of the work. If both are interested both can make the task successful. Even he can correct mistakes I may commit. ...

He explains that proficient learners' input makes a substantial contribution to the task though he also mentions that the partner's interest plays an important role. He notes, too, that non-proficient students receive some support from proficient students in the form of error correction.

L argues that a pair of non-proficient learners makes a poor combination, and their completion of the task will generally prove to be less successful:

... if two weak students are together ... and both work together even if they wanted to they wouldn't be able to describe it. But if one of them is better than the other ... because the other asks what he doesn't understand ... it means he would ... try to describe [the task].

Here L also stresses the proficient student's potential contribution. One notes that proficient learners contribute to the task because they ask appropriate questions and compel their non-proficient partners to explain to them. This may prove unpleasant with some unwilling, non-proficient learners. This could be one reason why many chose partners who would not force them to explain.

M2, on the other hand, states that if she could she would avoid working with non-proficient learners, as they generally do not understand her. Though the interviewees themselves would not work with non-proficient learners, they believe proficient learners provide support to their partners. When she cannot avoid working with them, M2 states that she explains how the task can be done in an after-task session, which shows non-proficient learners where they went wrong.

In an exam situation, T explains that students would rather select proficient partners, because they want to score good marks. He admits that in this case proficient learners select other proficient learners, leaving the non-proficient learners to one another. He admits that this is unethical and that they should have given support to their non-proficient classmates as non-proficient/non-proficient learners potentially learn less from one another.

The interviewees also discussed other unobservable constraints. For example, they raise the issue of affective factors that frustrate task objectives. They mention such issues as discouragement, a lack of interest, and other issues.

According to some of the interviewees, a lack of interest in one's own education causes negligence or a lack of seriousness among students in tackling the tasks. M2 states that many students do not come to learn but to pass the time. L also seems to pinpoint to the same problem when he speaks of some students' disruption of class. It could also be this lack of interest which persuades learners to follow the way of least resistance by simply copying and submitting their tasks. M speaks of such unwillingness on the part of non-proficient learners to use information gap tasks, though T disagrees, stating that non-proficient learners like the tasks.

Some of the interviewees also claim that students desire to improve their proficiency in the target language, but their efforts do not bear fruit as they are easily discouraged and frustrated:

... to persuade oneself that the task set is difficult for oneself; not to try. For example, if you ask me to describe something in some way, for example, a task I had never tried before I have to try it. If I say 'I can't do it; it is difficult for me' it means I won't be able to learn.

This seems to explain the many neat task papers handed in, which show that no verbal interaction in the target language took place. Often discouraged students do not even attempt the tasks in their first language, as they see no reason why they should tackle the tasks at all. On the other hand, interested non-proficient students are willing to discuss the tasks even after the tasks are over.

This problem, however, does not seem to have any easy solution. Some of the students see improvement being possible only when the situation that drove these disinterested students into school improves. They explain that once the border war with Ethiopia stops, these students would drop out, as they were not interested in the first place.

In general the interviewees identify copying, lack of proficiency, ineffective pairing during tasks, disinterest and discouragement as factors that affect language learning negatively. The interviewees suggest different solutions for these constraints.

This chapter attempted to analyse the data gathered, especially recordings made of students tackling various tasks, the finished task papers, and the student interviews. The findings of the investigation will be presented in the final chapter, chapter six.



CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to conclude the study by bringing together the different issues discussed in the previous chapters. It attempts to describe the possibilities information gap tasks may offer for effective communicative classes, and the constraints that frustrate language performance in such classes.

The analysis of the tasks consistently shows that information gap tasks are effective for teaching and testing English as a foreign language. To a much greater extent than I expected, the students used the target language in tackling the tasks set. The fact that the non-proficient students, properly paired, used the target language to tackle the tasks in itself indicates the effectiveness of the tasks.

The interviews also show students' interest in information gap tasks and their enthusiasm to continue learning English through them. This unequivocally speaks for information gap tasks as a successful means of drawing students into using the target language to tackle a task. The students' choice to use figure dictation tasks rather than story-telling tasks, which probably belong more to traditional language teaching than to communicative teaching, also reveals the level of acceptance that the tasks receive with the students, and their success as innovations with these particular students (cf. Markee, 1993: 235).

Though the tasks were generally successful to generate verbal interaction among the students, many factors affected their effectiveness. Many factors, for example, affect the type and amount of this interaction. For instance, the number of figures

and diagrams within which the figures are placed affects the amount and type of verbal interaction (negotiation) produced. The fewer the figures and the diagrams, the easier the tasks and the lesser the amount of verbal interaction that takes place (Brown, Anderson, Shillcock, and Yule, 1984: 63). In contrast, though more figures mean more verbal interaction and more opportunity to use the target language, students' ability to accomplish the tasks successfully then diminishes:

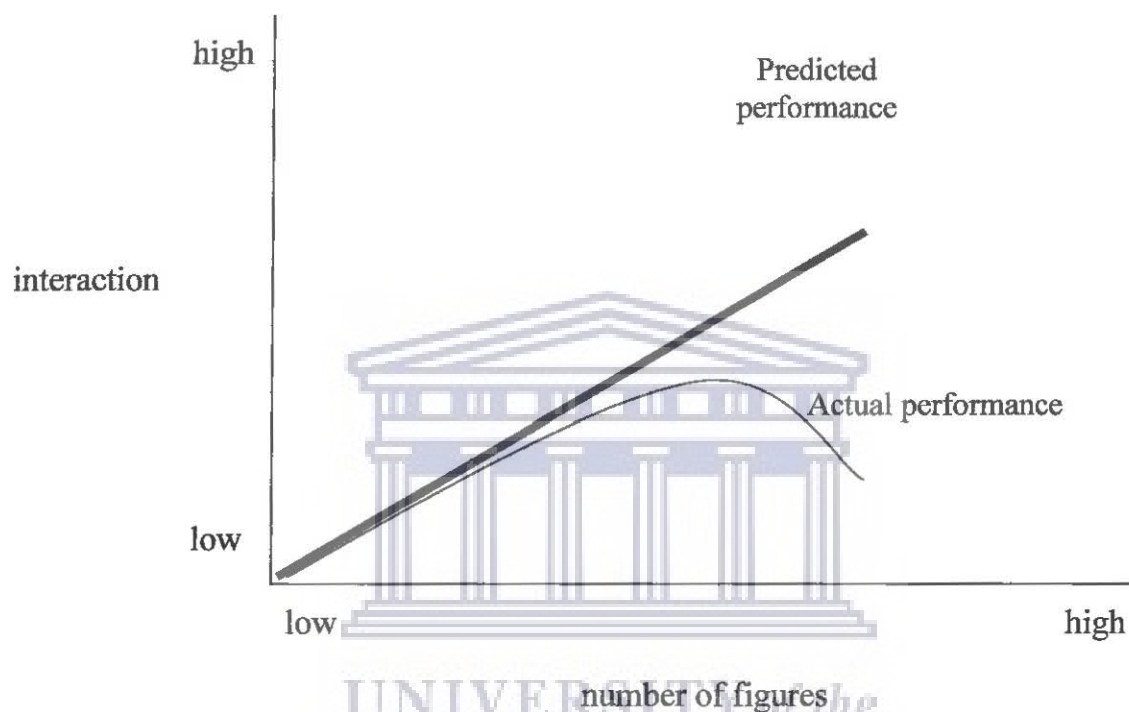


Figure 6.1

Other factors complicate tasks and provide tasks with features that generate more negotiation of meaning. Similar features (similar arrows, triangles, or/and oval shapes, etc.) missing from the students' diagrams that the students are required to talk about and extract from their partners, paradoxically perhaps, complicate tasks, which compels students to extend the interaction to come to a common understanding of the figures and diagrams. Such extended interaction sometimes leads students to ignore troublesome figures instead of negotiating till they come to a common understanding.

Location and size of figures, though not the amount, affect the type of interaction that takes place. For example, in this study, in tasks in which figures are placed beside, above or under other figures students ignore the size of the missing figures when they describe these missing figures. When they describe or ask about these figures, students make sure of the location of the figures. In addition, they may also attempt to find out the location of a missing figure in relation to another figure or other figures.

In contrast, students describe and draw figures accurately, including size details, if the figures are placed inside other figures or placed in diagrams in such a way that their sizes are highlighted. Such tasks compel students to describe and understand figures stressing their sizes, which they make an extra effort to describe or attempt to have a clear mental picture about before drawing them accurately on their diagrams.

It is not only the figures and diagrams that affect verbal interaction and the students' accurate understanding of the tasks. Pairing also affects students' understanding of the tasks, which can be deduced from the completed tasks.

Variations occur in the performances of such pairings with proficient/proficient pairs discussing the tasks more seriously, perhaps because they are slightly more motivated and goal-oriented than the other pair types. However, because they understand one another's utterances well, they do not negotiate as abundantly as proficient/non-proficient pairs. They nevertheless negotiate enough to make details of the tasks clear to each other. In some cases, one of the students (often a proficient one) in some of the pairs affects the tasks. This, it is found, enables the non-proficient students to accomplish the tasks successfully because the proficient student engages the non-proficient student to clarify their utterances. Non-proficient/non-proficient pairs neglect and often fail to complete the tasks

successfully. Often, the tasks that are stimulating and motivating, entice students into heated interaction.

Proficient/non-proficient pairs, however, are generally more successful at producing a greater amount of negotiation. This is specially so when the non-proficient learner is interested in learning and improving their proficiency in English. They then tackle the tasks in the target language, and rarely revert to their first language or expose their diagrams to one another.

Non-proficient/non-proficient pairs present the least opportunity for negotiation of meaning because many such pairs do not attempt the tasks in the target language. Often discouraged by past failure or lack of proficiency, such students try to avoid tackling the tasks in the target language. Instead, they revert to their first language or to copying the figures without understanding the tasks.

Many non-proficient students have difficulty describing the figures because they lack appropriate terminology or even enough vocabulary. They fail to describe the figures fully or to clarify their descriptions when their partners ask questions. Often they lack the right terminology to answer their partners' questions. Thus, negotiation of meaning suffers, and the communicative purpose of the tasks is partially defeated. For problems related to a lack of vocabulary in Eritrean Grade 9 students, the reader is referred to Estifanos (2001).

One constraint prevented complete negotiation of meaning across all pairs. Most students did not bother to extract the details of the figures described to them or to describe fully the figures they describe to their partners. Many assume that their partners have the same understanding of the figures as they do. Thus, unless the position of the figures compelled them, students often omitted any mention of the size of the figures in their diagrams. As a result, negotiation of meaning suffers and the students fail to understand the figures or the whole diagram in the same way.

Some factors affect the tasks because they first affect the students' attitude about their education negatively. Few students take responsibility for their own learning, for example. Most students expect teachers to supervise students' activity and discourage unhealthy practices such as exposing their pictures to their partners, which they themselves can do. In addition, they need a teacher's presence to compel them to do the tasks. Many do the tasks merely because the teacher asks them to and not because they learn something from them.

Students' use of the mother tongue, which tends to occur more often among non-proficient/non-proficient pairs, also affects the tasks seriously. Sharing the same mother tongue, these students slip into it at the merest hint of difficulty.

Students' exposing of their diagrams also threatens to frustrate the communicative purpose of the tasks. For different reasons non-proficient students may complete the tasks by simply copying from their partners.

The students' unwillingness to try the tasks may be related to an unwillingness to engage for fear of losing face. Though the tasks present good opportunities to exclude or reduce the loss of face, many non-proficient learners in this investigation failed to use these opportunities (cf. Varonis and Gass, 1985:87). These students exploit the absence of supervision to evade the instruction to interact verbally and to tackle the tasks. This seriously obstructs the purpose of the tasks.

CONCLUSION

In traditional authoritarian instructional settings, English second language classes suffer mainly from excessive teacher talk, which leaves students little opportunity to practise the language they learn (Shaalukeni, 2000). Though teachers understand what may make a language class effective and successful, they fail to practise what

they preach (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). One reason teachers do not employ student-centred techniques, which receives unparalleled support in the literature, can be because they do not know how to use these techniques in task design (Nunan, 1995).

Sometimes designing and producing communicative tasks can be costly. It is not, however, necessary to use costly materials to produce the kind of communicative tasks used in this study. One can use inexpensive or no materials to design and use both these and other communicative tasks. Or one can adapt tasks from different sources.

The project has attempted to show how to design such low cost communicative teaching materials, and has tried them out in class for effectiveness. Through different cycles of action research, it has also tried to show how to refine tasks to the right level for particular students.

On both the personal and professional level, the project was also successful. Though I had used information gap tasks before in my teaching career, I did not understand them well. Neither was I able to explain why they are effective to generate student talk, where other methods failed. The project has been a rare learning experience for me.

At a professional level, however, the project has been more successful in its materials design aspect. The experience and learning gained from the project will be a good starting point for me to embark on a similar but more extensive one. The usefulness of the knowledge gained to improve one's teaching by designing and refining tasks appropriate for one's students is a skill I now cherish. The knowledge that this narrative has contributed, as a case study in materials design, I hope will encourage other teachers in similar contexts to attempt it themselves. I hope, too, that they will find it an equally enriching and rewarding experience.

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SAMPLE TASK RECORDINGS

FIGURE DICTATION (TASK -D)

B: In the second picture there is a rectanglr that ... that looks like letter ... letter. In the third picture there is an arrow which looks ... looks to the left.

M: ... goes to the left.

B: ... the left. On the above there is a circle. ...In the fourth picture there is an arrow which looks to the right. What about your pictures?

M: Exactly that you told me.

B: [Inaudible]

M: The same. There is no difference. ... I add another ... [Inaudible] so you ask him.

B: Teacher ...

[The two students, M and B had had the same pictures, one of which had to be replaced.]

B: Continue.

M: My picture ... In the first, my picture is it looks ... like a heart but there's ... an angle at the end of the heart.

B: There is an angle?

M: ... at the end of the heart. It is not just like, just ... the heart. It is not like the heart.

B: Don't worry. I have got it. [Inaudible].

M: Then beside the heart towards the right an arrow goes upward.

B: Upward?

M: Yes.

B: Goes upward?

M: Yes.

B: From the left to the right goes upward? An arrow?

M: An ... Beside the heart there is an arrow goes ... up ... upward.

B: To the right ...?

M: To the right direction.

B: In the right is that crosses the heart?

M: No. In the right part of the heart, in the right part of the heart there is an arrow goes upward. You know upward?

B: ... Upward? To the right?

M: Upward [Angrily].

B: Goes upward ... like this. Upward [Inaudible].

M: Ewae ata entay konka daa (= Man, what is wrong with you?) ... In the second picture there is a rectangle only.

B: There is a rectangle only?

M: Yeah.

B: Rectangle?

M: Yes!

B: But on my picture ... on the first there is a heart only.

M: Yes.

B: On the second picture there is a rectangle that looks like just a letter.

M: Yeah.

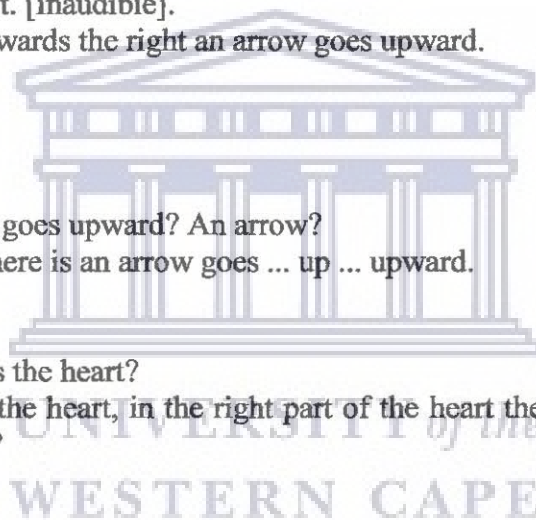
B: ... a letter.

M: [Inaudible].

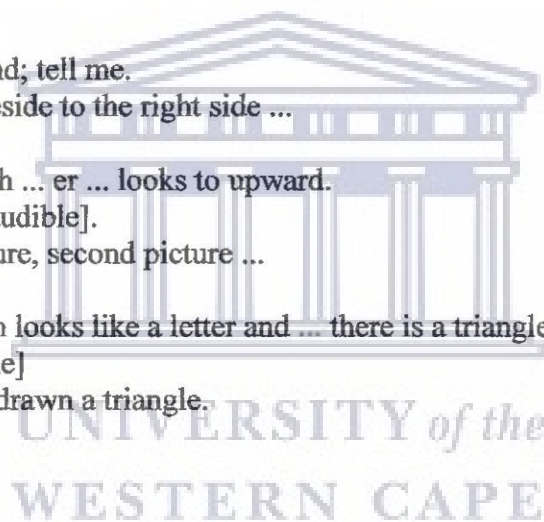
M: And in my picture, in the third, in the third picture it means

B: Yeah.

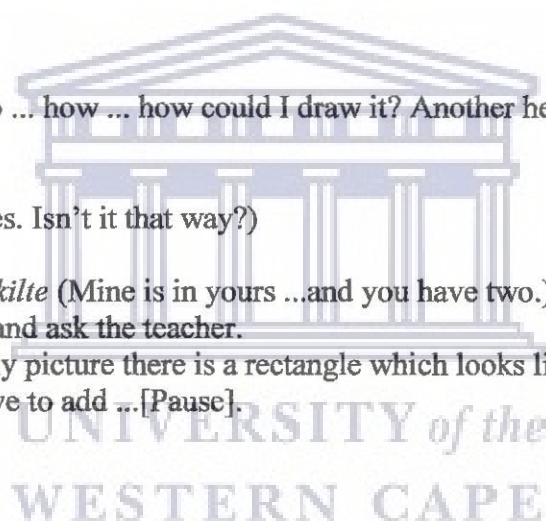
M: ... there is an arrow which goes to the left direction



B: Yeah.
M: ... an arrow which goes to the left direction.
B: Yeah.
M: ... and in the fourth picture there is a rectangle and an arrow goes to ... right direction under it.
B: Er ... where is the arrow?
M: The arrow under ... under the ... rectangle and goes to the right direction.
B: To the right?
M: Yes.
B: Ok. What about the rectangle? Is that above or [Inaudible].
M: Above!
B: Above?
M: Above! Above the rectangle.
B: Rectangle?
M: I tell you!
B: Ok. Rectangle.
M: Did you understand the third picture?
B: What?
M: Did you understand ... my ... third picture?
B: Third picture?
M: Yeah.
B: Yes.
M: Tell me if you understand; tell me.
B: There is a heart. Er ... Beside to the right side ...
M: Yeah.
B: ... there is an arrow which ... er ... looks to upward.
M: Yeah going upward [Inaudible].
B: Yeah. In the second picture, second picture ...
M: Yeah.
B: there is a rectangle which looks like a letter and ... there is a triangle there is a triangle
M: In your picture [inaudible]
B: As you have said I have drawn a triangle.
M: Triangle?
B: Yes.
M: Where?
B: Second picture.
M: I told you ... a rectangle only.
B: Second picture?
M: Yes, second picture. Rectangle. Rectangle *ekoyu* (= It is rectangle).
B: *Ewae?* (= Is that so?) Rectangle *elkas* (= You said it is rectangle).
M: Rectangle *mish eleka* (= I told you it is a rectangle).
B: [Inaudible].
M: I told you rectangle even if you heard ...
B: Ok. What about your ... picture?
M: In the third picture there is an arrow going left ward
B: Left ward ... only?
M: Yes, only. I told you only.
B: On the fourth ...
M: On the fourth picture ...
B: picture
M: ... there is a rectangle and an arrow going ... to right direction under the rectangle.



B: Rectangle? Arrow? Under the rectangle?
M: Yes. Ok. On my picture ... draw it!
B: Shall I draw it?
M: Yes. [Inaudible]. You can draw it. If it is the same, you can leave it. Ok?
B: [Inaudible]. I have drawn them [inaudible] as you have said.
M: Ok. I will ... draw it.
B: Ok. On the first picture, on my picture it means ...
M: Let's first ... let me ask you one question. Is ... your picture, in the another picture are included in one ... in my picture
B: What ... [Inaudible].
M: Shall I cancel it or ... I ... have to draw another?
B: No. It is the same picture [Inaudible]
M: .picture I have to cancel it. You said to me when I have drawn the three parts on my picture. Tell me your ...
B: picture? My first picture?
M: Mmmm
B: Yeah. There is heart only.
M: There is heart only?
B: Yeah. Ok. Draw.
M: There is also a heart on my picture.
B: Draw only heart.
M: Heart only?
B: Yeah.
M: Dihriu ke? (= Then?) So ... how ... how could I draw it? Another heart?
B: There is ...
M: Another heart?
B: *Ewe kemuula mish* (= Yes. Isn't it that way?)
M: Not ...[Inaudible].
B: *Natey ab natka ... natka kilte* (Mine is in yours ...and you have two.)
M: I have to cancel. Leave and ask the teacher.
B: On the second picture, my picture there is a rectangle which looks like a letter.
M: Looks like a letter? I have to add ...[Pause].
B: Did you draw it?
M: Yes I draw.
B: On the third picture ...
M: Third picture ...
B: there is an arrow which looks to left
M: Goes to left direction.
B: and ... on and above it there is a circle.
M: Above it ...
B: there is a circle [Pause].
M: Ok.
B: Ok. On the first ... on the fourth picture ...
M: Yeah.
B: there is an arrow which looks to the right side
M: Yeah.
B: and there is ... only that. There is an arrow which ...
M: An arrow which goes toward ... towards
B: Yeah. We are finished ... yeah the right side.
M: Yeah.
B: Have you finished?



M: Finish.

FIGURE DICTATION (TASK F)

A: At the left side

F: Ok.

A: ...the opposite of the ... at the right bottom ...at the right bottom draw right angle triangle and arrow over the ...

F: as what? In the bottom?

A: Bottom right side.

F: In the right side?

A: Yes. In the bottom.

F: Draw a rectangle?

A: Rectangle. And ... draw an arrow above the hypotenuse. Right angle triangle *mis sealka* (= After you have drawn right angle triangle).

F: The arrow from which direction? Which direction?

A: To dawn.

F: To down?

A: Not perpendicular, horizontal. Not perpendicular, horizontal.

F: To down?

A: Which means parallel to hori – ... to the hypotenuse.

F: Ok.

A: Then ... the ... rectangle or it seems a square already prepared.

F: Mmm

A: The [Inaudible] rectangle or square it seems already prepared

F: Yes. In the ...

A: In the left side of the ...

F: In the left side of the bottom ...

A: Sorry. In the right side of the circle.

F: In the right side of the circle?

A: Yes.

F: In which place? In the upper?

A: The big diagram. The second it seems.

F: The second? Ok. The first finish. The first finish.

A: The first finished already.

F: No. No. First in the left side ... in the left hand side.

A: Yes.

F: On the [Inaudible] what was drawn?

A: There is no drawn.

F: [Inaudible] space?

A: Yes.

F: In the bottom?

A: There is rectangle, right angle triangle and then draw arrow parallel to the hypotenuse.

F: Let me check.

A: The direction of the arrow downward. Have you seen?

F: Ok.

A: Ok. At the first oval shape draw a line under the oval shape. There is a line.

F: In the first ... in the first rectangle ...

A: On the first ...

F: Square ... divided into four

A: Yeah ... in the first circle ...

F: It means in the first quadrant

A: In the first diagram ...

F: In the first diagram ok.

A: ... at the left side you have said you have oval shape? Have you?

F: No.

A: If you have not, draw and under ... under the oval shape draw ... straight line. Under the oval shape draw straight line. ... Then let's come to the first diagram.

F: Ok. On the right side ...

A: Yeah –

F: Draw ... right angle ...

A: Sorry. Triangle? It is already prepared it means.

F: Yes.

A: Then at the left side. At the left side of the square draw a right ang – ... a right ... rectangle

F: A rectangle?

A: Yes.

F: In the upper left side?

A: Yes.

F: In the upper left side?

A: Yes.

F: Draw a rectangle?

A: Mmm. If it is drawn don't include it; leave it.

F: Then the arrow is to downward.

A: The arrow is parallel to ... horizontal.

F: Horizontal?

A: Yes [Inaudible]. At the second diagram ... At the second ...

F: At this point?

A: Yes [Tiredly].

F: *Mish horizontal?* (= Isn't it horizontal?)

A: *Horizontal kizerelka alewo.* (= It should revolve horizontal???) Parallel to the rectangle.

F: *To the rectangle maletka diyu?* (= Do you mean to the rectangle?)

A: Yes. Then pass to the second rec – triangle.

F: Before that ... first before that ... in the first in this way ... what is drawn? In this way [Inaudible] first, second, third, first, second, third, fourth ...

A: In this way ... have you seen ... in this way ...

F: In the left side ... of the upper

A: In the left side of the upper? Rectangle.

F: Rectangle?

A: Yes. Draw an arrow parallel to the horizontal, parallel to the horizontal ... bottom of the rectangle. Have you finished?

F: Continue.

A: At the opposite of the first rectangle which means at the fourth quadrant ...

F: Ok.

A: At the fourth quadrant an isosceles triangle ...

F: Isosceles triangle?

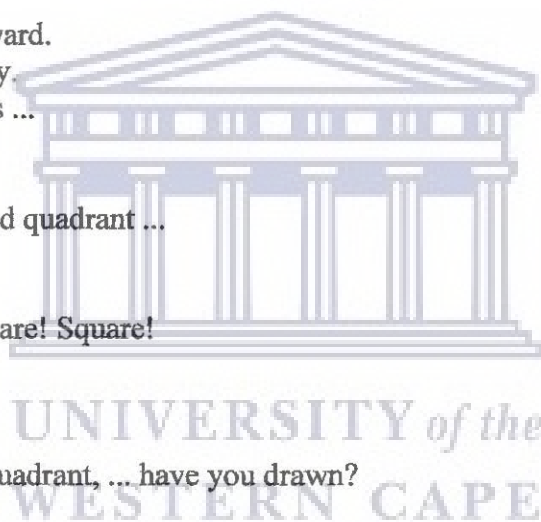
A: Yes. It seems but

F: Two sides are equal?

A: Yes. Isosceles triangle. Two sides are equal

F: Ok. draw.

A: Then draw a circle at the centre of ...
 F: Isosceles triangle?
 A: Isosceles triangle.
 F: Isoceles? It is a small circle?
 A: Yes ...Then continue.
 F: You are finished?
 A: Yes, I am finished.
 F: In the first square ... in the first circle
 A: In first diagram
 F: Yes. In the first dia – circle ... in the first side [Inaudible] there is no any drawn?
 A: There is an oval drawn and a straight line under the oval shape ...Then continue.
 F: In the second ... in the second one ...
 A: In the second quadrant?
 F: Yes. Inside the oval ... means in the second ... in the second write a circle.
 A: Circle? Simple circle?
 F: Yes. A circle.
 A: Ok.
 F: Inside the circle, draw an arrow [Inaudible].
 A: To upward? Upward?
 F: Ewe (= Yes). Draw an arrow to upward.
 A: Ok.
 F: Draw a circle and to upward.
 A: Ok. I have drawn already.
 F: In the third side ... means ...
 A: On the third? As it is –
 F: At opposite –
 A: At opposite of the ... third quadrant ...
 F: Yes. Draw a rectangle.
 A: Rectangle?
 F: Yes. Only rectangle. Square! Square!
 A: Square?
 F: Yes. Square.
 A: Ok.
 F: In number two the first quadrant, ... have you drawn?
 A: Quadrant two? Yeah.
 F: On the second one it means ...
 A: Second quadrant?
 F: Draw a rectangle.
 A: Rectangle?
 F: Right angle triangle.
 A: Right ...
 F: ... angle triangle.
 A: Right – angle – triangle. Mmm.
 F: Then the arrow is to down ward.
 A: The arrow?
 F: To down ward with ...
 A: with the hypotenuse? With the height?
 A and F (together): With the ...
 F: With the height, with the height.
 A: With the height and down ward.
 F: Down ward the arrow.

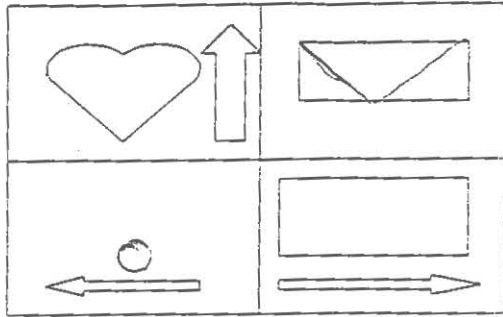


A: Ok. Ok. Then ...
 F: In the third ...
 A: Fourth quadrant?
 F: In the third ...
 A: Ok.
 F: Draw a circle ... like oval
 A: Ok.
 F: Then draw an arrow to the right side.
 A: To the right?
 F: Faces to the right side.
 A: Over or ... over the oval?
 F: Over the oval.
 A: Mmm.
 F: Then in the first quadrant it is having drawn.
 A: Yes. Already.
 F: In the isosceles triangle inside that ... yes?
 A: Abti first diagram there is [Inaudible] oval shape, straight line bottom of the oval shape. At the second, square.
 F: Yes.
 A: At the third a circle ... At the centre of circle an arrow upward
 F: [Inaudible].
 A: At the fourth, right angle triangle and the arrow ... horizontal and the direction of the arrow ...
 F: Parallel to the hypotenuse.
 A: Yes, parallel to the horizontal. It means with ... the isosceles. The direction of the arrow downward. Not vertical ... horizontal. At the second diagram there is rectangular, rectangular ...
 F: Yes.
 A: and ... bottom of the rectangle there is drawn ...
 F: a line?
 A: drawn an arrow parallel to the rectangle which means parallel to the horizontal not vertical.
 F: Only a line.
 A: Horizontal, not vertical; yes.
 F: It is a line only.
 A: Yes, a line only.
 F: Its direction
 A: to the right side.
 F: It is an arrow?
 A: The arrow seeing to the right side, to the right side.
 F: Yes.
 A: *Neyeman getsa eya tikeyed zela malet eyu.* (= It is pointing at the right, it means). At the second diagram there is a right angle triangle and there is an arrow parallel to the height downward its direction which means the arrow ...
 F: Yes, the arrow means downward.
 A: At the second, at the third sorry at the third diagram there is an oval shape.
 F: Yes.
 A: Over the oval shape there is an arrow which shows its direction to the right side.
 F: Yes.
 A: At the fourth there is an isosceles triangle and at the centre of the isosceles triangle there is ...

TASK D

STUDENT A

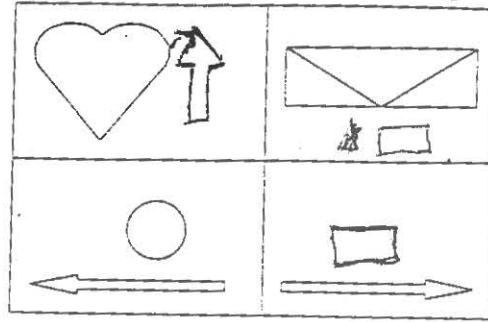
Discuss and add what is missing.



M'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

STUDENT B

Discuss and add what is missing.

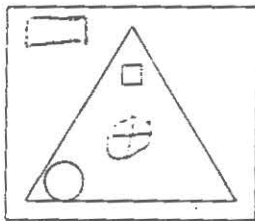


B'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

TASK E (1)

STUDENT A

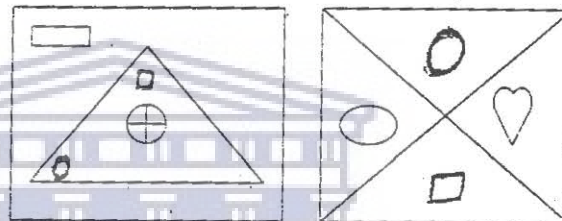
Discuss and add what is missing.



A'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

STUDENT B

Discuss and add what is missing.

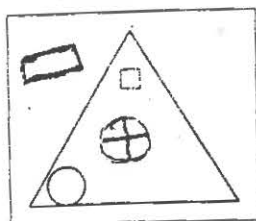


B'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

TASK-E

STUDENT A

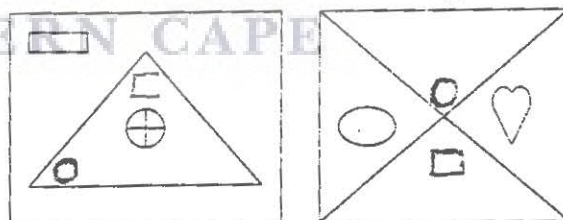
Discuss and add what is missing.



G'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

STUDENT B

Discuss and add what is missing.

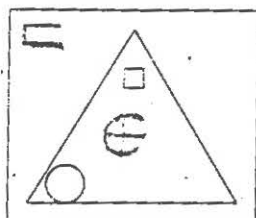


T'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

TASK-E

STUDENT A

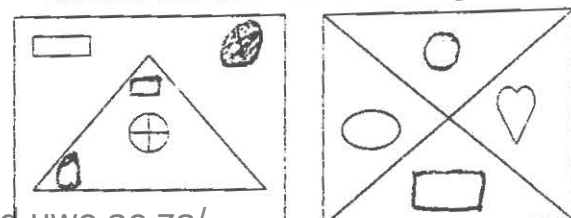
Discuss and add what is missing.



K'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

STUDENT B

Discuss and add what is missing.

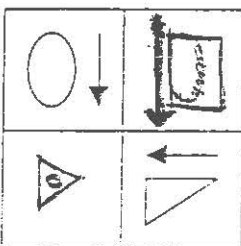
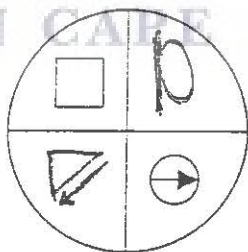
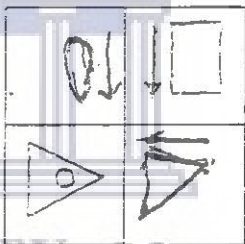
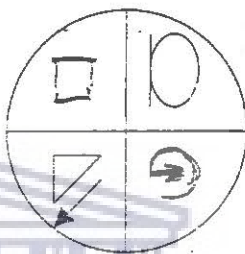


L'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

TASK F

STUDENT A

Discuss and draw what is missing.



STUDENT B

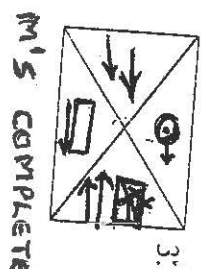
Discuss and draw what is missing.

A'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

EXAM TASKS



T'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

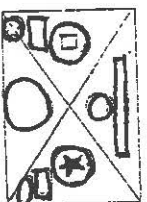


M'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

EXAM TASKS



B'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM



G'S COMPLETED DIAGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH M2

Abrahaley. What problems were there that prevented you from speaking in English?

M2: [Inability to distinguish] which way is east and which west. And we had difficulty to understand the different pictures. Is it a triangle? And is it trapezium or rhombus...?

Abrahaley. So the problem was that you didn't know the directions. What else was a problem? When there is non-understanding what do you do? For example, what do you do when you ask your partner to draw a triangle while they draw a rectangle? Or your partner fails to understand you?

M2: Such things happen, but I make him understand. What kind of triangle? I can only instruct him and not show him. Later I discuss it with him so that he understands for future tasks.

Abrahaley. Ok. You do such things. What do other students do? What do you think?

M2: They must do the same. Others, however, do not do this.

Abrahaley. What must they do?

M2: First they practise. Then, if they fail to understand each other, they show them how it is drawn.

Abrahaley. Do they show each other's pictures?

M2: Later, in a different piece of paper (not in the piece of paper you give us but in a piece of paper of their own) they try at home.

Abrahaley. What about in class? If there is non-understanding in class?

M2: Because they can not show them the pictures it means that they draw what they think is required of them.

Abrahaley. So this means that they draw them wrongly.

M2: Yes.

Abrahaley. How do you evaluate the pair work?

M2: It is good. It develops one's English.

Abrahaley. How? For example?

M2: When one asks and instructs how such pictures and where they are drawn and does it in English, it means that one develops one's English. It means one is developing.

Abrahaley. Do you think it is effective the way we are sitting (side by side) or back to back?

M2: Back to back.

Abrahaley. Why?

M2: If we sit like this though we may converse, it means we will see each other's pictures. While our tongues are busy, we will copy the pictures. But if it is back to back one understands and draws the pictures. For this reason, back to back is better.

Abrahaley. But when you work sitting back to back, do other students' voices not disturb you?

M2: It is not that much distractive.

Abrahaley. Does the noise in class not distract students from understanding their partners?

M2: If one concentrates on the picture and are drawing, it doesn't affect one much.

Abrahaley. So it caused you no problem.

M2: Not much.

M2: Generally the teacher asks them and they answer him. There are some who do not answer. Students who know nothing. In such cases, the teacher should ask each student turn by turn.

Abrahaley. For example, is it better that two students come forward and converse or that all should be asked at the same time?

M2: Two by two – asking them turn by turn.

Abrahaley. What advantage does it have?

M2: One can understand all the message and how students are speaking. Because there are different ideas, one can understand different messages from them.

Abrahaley. Does this not waste time?

M2: Yes it does if we take time into account. But it is this that develops the students.

Abrahaley. Is it necessary that a teacher be present for students to speak in E English?

M2: It means that the students chat their time away. It means that the students won't do the tasks. But if he goes around the class, the students can do the task.

Abrahaley. But if students come to school to learn, why do they do some thing else?

M2: These are the students' views. There are some who come to learn and acquire knowledge. Others come to pass time.

Abrahaley. So we are saying that students' interest is involved [in learning]. And we have also said that sitting side by side is also a problem. We can also mention many other problems. There are other problems that prevent students from speaking in English. What other problems do you see?

M2: Little proficiency also could be a problem.

Abrahaley. What about problems from the teacher? If you were a teacher would you continue using pair work?

M2: Yes, I would.

Abrahaley. Is there anything that you say: 'Abrahaley made a mistake here. If I were a teacher, I would have done this differently.' Is there anything either on the way the lessons were taught or the pictures or in assigning who works with who?

M2: You used your own way –

Abrahaley. Is there any student who you would like to work with so that you may learn more English? Or you think all students are the same?

M2: Me? ...Students are different from each other. Some are proficient; others are not and do not understand one. One asks him to draw a triangle yet he draws a rectangle. So I choose to work with a clever student.

Abrahaley. You want to work with a clever student: is it because the student understands you or is there something that you learn from him?

M2: Through what he speaks to me and what I speak to him we understand each other. And because our ideas are different, I understand from him and he understands from me?

Abrahaley. If you have final comments to make.

M2: The pair work is effective. That this should be continued and that you should continue teaching us. I have seen other teachers: they don't have a good fluency of English. They do the exercises in the text and leave. They use [the periods] to pass time. That you should tech us.