Collaborative tasks and learning occasions in English as a foreign language

Tarefas colaborativas e ocasiões de aprendizagem em inglês como língua estrangeira

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ABSTRACT: The study reported here forms part of a program of qualitative research focusing on the use of collaborative tasks in learning English as a foreign language in Brazil. The research examines the concept of collaborative dialogue (SWAIN, 2000), understood as dialogue that constructs linguistic knowledge within a sociocultural view of language learning. The results indicated that the learners reflected upon the target language, tested hypotheses and reformulated their production in order to promote mutual comprehension in the learning process. The results also revealed that the interaction established during the production of the collaborative dialogue stimulated foreign language learning as the students noticed linguistic gaps in the target language, and sought solutions together.

KEYWORDS: collaborative dialogue, tasks, English as a foreign language.

RESUMO: O estudo aqui relatado é parte de um projeto de pesquisa qualitativa sobre o uso de tarefas colaborativas na aprendizagem de inglês como língua estrangeira no Brasil. A pesquisa examina o conceito de diálogo colaborativo (SWAIN, 2000), entendido como o diálogo que constrói conhecimento por meio de uma perspectiva sociocultural de aprendizagem de línguas. Os resultados sugerem que os alunos refletiram sobre a língua alvo, testaram hipóteses e reformularam sua produção, a fim de promover compreensão mútua no processo de aprendizagem. A interação estabelecida durante a produção do diálogo colaborativo estimulou a aprendizagem da língua estrangeira, visto que os aprendizes perceberam falhas linguísticas na língua alvo e procuraram soluções em conjunto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: diálogo colaborativo, tarefas, inglês como língua estrangeira.

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Introduction

The data reported here and their discussion could be well applied to the learning of English for general educational purposes or English for special purposes with emphasis on oral or written practice, taking into account that collaborative tasks can stimulate learning and language awareness leading to linguistic development in any learning situation.

The contribution of this paper lies in the discussion of how learner-learner interaction can stimulate negotiation and feedback leading to the potential learning of a foreign language. The study focuses on the processes and effects of the collaborative dialogue (SWAIN, 2000) between dyads of Brazilian students learning English as a foreign language at university level, taking into account the occasions when the learners reflect upon the target language by testing hypotheses and reformulating their output. I also refer to the concept of *languaging* (SWAIN, 2006, p. 89) as "the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language". Languaging takes place when one is doing something with language such as giving explanations to a partner, self-correcting or correcting someone else, or whispering to oneself. Swain *et al.* (2009) state that languaging is a form of verbalization that can be used to mediate the solutions to complex problems or tasks as part of the process of learning. They further remark that

> (…) as Vygotsky (1987) argued, language is one of the most important mediating tools of the mind. Language completes our thoughts/cognition/ideas and transforms them into artifacts that allow for further contemplation, which, in turn, transforms thought. (…) Languaging is an important part of the learning process, as it transforms inner thoughts to external knowing (externalization), and, conversely, it transforms external knowing into internal cognitive activity (internalization) (p.5).

From a theoretical point of view, this paper follows sociocultural principles, especially including Vygotsky (1978, 1986, 1987), Hall (2001), and Swain (2000, 2001, 2006). The role of collaborative tasks in language learning is also considered in view of their relevance in promoting interaction which is central to language learning from a sociocultural perspective.

The main questions of the study – which reflect the research questions of the main project[1] – are: (1) What are the characteristics of the collaborative dialogue between learners in the process of task development?; (2) Is there negotiation of meaning and form?; (3) Is there evidence of language learning? and (4) How do the learners feel about task performance and peer interaction?

Theoretical issues: Sociocultural principles

The study follows the sociocultural principles (VYGOTSKY, 1978, 1986; LANTOLF, 2000) which conceive of language as social action. Lantolf (2000) states that

> The central and distinguishing concept of sociocultural theory is that higher forms of human mental activity are *mediated*. Vygotsky (1987) argued that just as humans do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labour activity, we also use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves. […] Included among symbolic tools are numbers and arithmetic systems, music, art, and above all, language. As with physical tools, humans use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect, or mediated, relationship between ourselves and the world. (p. 80)

Language is then seen as a means of mediation in mental activity. From this perspective, we can say that learning is also a mediated process, which depends on shared processes (such as face-to-face interaction) and which may involve joint problem solving and negotiation.

In their review of concepts that are central to the study reported here, Mitchell and Myles (2004) refer to self-regulation, which characterizes the individual who is mature and capable of autonomous functioning. Children or unskilled individuals initially go through a process of other-regulation mediated through language. The authors add that the learner becomes

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autonomous through shared understanding and collaborative talk in social interaction and, eventually, they appropriate new knowledge, going from a stage of collaborative inter-mental activity to autonomous intra-mental activity.

Central to this study is the concept of scaffolding (WOOD; BRUNER; ROSS, 1976), which is the process of supportive dialogue that helps the learner notice the key features of the environment, or task to be performed, leading them through the successive steps of the problem to be solved.

Another important concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is a metaphor representing the domain of knowledge or skill where the learner still needs support as he is not yet capable of autonomous functioning. In case he is provided with scaffolding, independent functioning will come as a result. In the classroom setting, the ZPD consists of a dynamic site of learning between the students, constructed in interaction with their peers (HALL, 2001). Taking all these concepts into account, learning mediation is the process resulting from cooperative activities through which learners can make use of culturally constructed artifacts in such a way as to regulate mental and social activities developed by individuals (LANTOLF; THORNE, 2006).

Finally, I adopt Hall's (2001) idea that the ability to participate as a competent member of a community of practice is learned through the constant engagement in activities with competent members of this group. Learning and development take place as the individuals take part in sociocultural activities in their communities. From this perspective, classroom tasks, like those reported here, are also seen as activities that promote social engagement.

Collaborative tasks and language learning

Task-based teaching implies that the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom (WILLIS; WILLIS, 2007). Skehan (1994) proposes that learners tend to be more motivated in classroom activity when they are involved in meaningful tasks. Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001) understand tasks as contextualized activities that require the learners to use the language meaningfully and that have a connection to the real world.

The concept of task adopted in this study is defined by Willis (1996), according to whom the purpose of a communicative task is to stimulate communication in the target language, creating a real purpose for language use.

Collaborative tasks are then seen as activities designed with a communicative purpose to reach a specific goal. The role of the teacher in the process is to select interesting topics and tasks that will challenge their students from a social and linguistic perspective. Language will be a tool to accomplish the tasks with emphasis on meaning and communication. Learners need to test their hypotheses about how a language works to confirm they are understood by their interlocutors. In this respect, collaborative tasks provide opportunities for language experimentation.

Swain (2000) refers to the ability a learner must develop to notice there is a gap between what he produces and the target language rule. When speaking or writing, the learner tests hypotheses about the language he is using and receives feedback from his interlocutor. Whenever the learner is given a chance to reflect upon the use of language from a metalinguistic point of view, he is provided with the opportunity to realize his own mistakes and correct his own production. Metatalk – the ability to reflect upon one's linguistic output – is fundamental to language learning. From a sociocultural point of view,

> Metatalk is the kind of language used for such reflection, and it mediates second language learning (LANTOLF 2000; SWAIN 2000) because it supports the process of appropriation. When speaking, we are usually involved socially with others. Speech is initially an exterior action which regulates others and is regulated by others. Over time, however, what takes place socially becomes part of the self as the individual appropriates the regulatory actions s/he participated in. That is, what happens and/or is said in the social domain moves inward to become part of the individual's cognitive processes and knowledge. (TOCALLI-BELLER; SWAIN, 2005, p. 8).

The studies by Swain and Lapkin (1994, 2001) and Swain (2000) are central to the present research. The Canadian researchers investigated learner oral and written output to find out whether they noticed gaps in their linguistic knowledge, analyzed input and searched for resources to fill in the gaps. They also examined their collaborative dialogues, the process of hypothesis formulation about meaning and form in second language and their ability to promote mutual understanding in the cooperative process. For generating data, they developed the jigsaw task (SWAIN; LAPKIN, 2001), adapted to this study. In the original study, they observed the production of adolescents learning French as a second language in Canada. They concluded that the participants focused on both meaning and form. Swain and Lapkin (2001)

are convinced that communicative tasks are beneficial to learners and interactional exchanges generate the negotiation for meaning, which facilitates language learning. Collaborative tasks can also promote focus on form while the interactants are trying to express the intended meaning accurately and coherently (SWAIN; LAPKIN, 1994).

The notion of collaborative dialogue is also fundamental to this paper. I follow the definition by Swain (2000) who sees it as dialogue during which the participants are engaged in problem solution and knowledge construction, establishing a dialogical relation in which meanings are co-constructed.

The study in the Brazilian setting

University learners studying English with the purpose of becoming foreign language teachers were invited to take part in the research. They were attending their second or third academic semester and had been classified as pre-intermediate students by their teachers. Six pairs of learners volunteered for the research with the purpose of having additional practice in English. Their first language was Brazilian Portuguese and none of them spoke any other language at home. Their age ranged between 19 and 25 years, eight were female and four were male students.

The collaborative tasks performed by each dyad were audio and video-recorded before or after regular class time in the university. After the dialogues they were asked to jointly write a short text. The participants were informed they were expected to rely only on their own knowledge, that is to say, they would not have any help from the teacher or researcher and could not use dictionaries or any reference material.

The students were interviewed immediately after completing the tasks with the purpose of gaining insights into their task experience. Approximately a month later they had the opportunity to watch their own performance in a viewing session, check their errors and propose corrections. The dialogues were transcribed and the moments in which negotiation of meaning and form arose were analyzed.

Three tasks were performed involving the production of oral and written language. One was a narrative prompted by cartoons, which had been previously published by Swain and Lapkin (2001), called *Jigsaw* (Task 1). In this story there is only one character, a young girl waking up in the morning and getting ready to go to school. In our adaptation the learners had to re-organize the pictures together while verbalizing their actions and explaining

the reasons why they proposed a specific order for the pictures. Then they told the story together orally and, finally, created a written version for it.

The second task, called *Let's Go Camping* (Task 2), involved the negotiation between the learners to decide who each of them would invite to go camping and choose seven out of twenty objects on a chart. All their decisions and choices had to be justified to their peers. After doing the task orally, the dyads had to write a short text to the camping coordinator explaining their choices and reasons for them.

Task 3 was called *Mary and Max.* The learners were invited to watch a video in English with no subtitles. The video, which was an animation production, focused on the friendship between a sad and lonely old man (Max) living in New York and Mary, a young girl living in Australia. After a while the film was interrupted and the learners had to continue the story and create an end to it.

Each session was followed by semi-structured interviews (BURNS, 1999) with the participants talking about their performance, preferences, difficulties and opinions about the task completion and the interaction promoted. The entire sessions lasted approximately 50 minutes each.

In this paper I will limit the analysis and discussion of learner interaction to the production of tasks by three dyads: Amanda and Pedro, Vitor and Alice and Barbara and Denise.[2]

The data generated: Learner negotiation in task construction

The data were analyzed following the language-related episodes (LREs) found in the students' output. According to Swain (2001), these episodes refer to any part of a dialogue in which the learners talk about the language they are producing, discuss its use, self-correct and correct their peers. The data in this research revealed that 60% of the LREs focused on the lexical search of specific items, whereas 40% of the LREs were about grammatical decisions such as verb tenses, word order and prepositions.

Data analysis reveals that the dyads created the texts jointly, discussing controversial ideas to reach some level of agreement. They accepted and appropriated the ideas that came about and, on several occasions, completed or corrected each other's utterances. Collaboration also included conversational

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[2] Fictitious names.

tactics such as comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests (LONG, 1983). During task development, invitation for participation clearly appears in the data especially in the interaction established by Amanda and Pedro, during the performance of Task 1, as we can see in excerpts (1) and (2).

(1) Task 1 (Jigsaw)

Amanda: **Are you agree that the first picture is after the sun rising is the girl sleeping?**

Pedro: Yes, yes. I think so.

(2) Task 1 (Jigsaw)

Pedro: Furiously or something like that. **Do you know what what do I mean?**

Amanda: No.

Pedro: When you are sleeping very, very, very deep. Very, very deep.

The students constantly asked for their partner's opinions and expected to discuss solutions together. This cooperative behaviour is demonstrated in their dialogue. Similarly, in Task 3, Vitor and Alice also show their need to involve their partner in the process

(3) Task 3 (Mary and Max)

Alice: Okay. So I think that wasn't Mary that was her mother. I think, but I'm not sure because I didn't understand this end. So, but we have to agree with the story to make an end to the story. **So what do you think**?

Vitor: There's no problem but now we gonna imagine what happened and put in paper because we don't REALLY understand what happened.

Alice: Yes.

Vitor: (laugh)

Alice: Okay .So, **we have to write first? Or we have to speak about it first**?

Vitor: Okay. We understood that a man have a Australian friend. (Looks at his partner expecting confirmation).

Alice: (Alice nods her head).

Excerpt 3 also illustrates their negotiation process to organize themselves to do the task appropriately, as one can read in Alice's last utterance.

Nassaji and Swain (2000) suggest that the expert role is shared between the participants. When one of them does not have enough competence, help will be provided through language reformulation generated as feedback, as in (4), in which Alice corrects the verb form uttered by Vitor, who accepts the repair.

(4) Task 3 (Mary and Max)

Vitor: And he wrote a letter and send for his friend.

Alice: Yes, he **sent** for his friend.

Vitor: **Sent**, yes.

According to Swain and Lapkin (2001), language production leads the learners to notice what they cannot express accurately. This perception is an important step towards language learning. Collaborative dialogue is fundamental to this process. In (5), Amanda and Pedro are negotiating in an attempt to decide the accurate word for *toe* in English.

(5) Task 1 (Jigsaw)

Amanda: She pressed

Pedro: Uh

Amanda: with her **fing**, no? Com with with her **finger**.

Pedro: Uh

Amanda: No.

Pedro: With **the finger of her foot**.

Amanda: **Does does it have a name for the finger of her foot**? **There is a different name, no?**

Pedro: A different name.

Amanda: **Thumb. Não é? Is not thumb?**

Pedro: Yes, yes. I think so. But, não, no, no, no. I think thumb is that showing his right thumb). Is the finger of the <u>hand</u> and not he finger of the <u>foot</u>.

Amanda: Tá, okay.

The excerpt reveals the moment in which Amanda realizes the existence of a specific word for the body part she wants to refer to. Then, she tests the word *thumb* and gets feedback from Pedro who provides her with negative feedback to her hypothesis, although he cannot find the right word himself. Their conversation reflects a joint effort to solve a problem. Solutions jointly found in the construction of the oral text were reproduced in the written text by the end of the task:

(6) Task 1 (Jigsaw)

Lazy girl

In a fine morning, the sun was rising. It was six o'clock. Patty was sleeping and having beautiful dreams. Then, the alarm o'clock started ringing. She didn't want to wake up anyway. She pressed the bottom of the clock with **the finger of**

her foot and it stopped working. She kept sleeping during two more minutes until the clock started bothering her with a feather on your foot. She got up and ran to the bathroom. There Patty brushed her teeth and curly hair. Finally, she took her backpack and went to school. Oh, Patty is a very lazy girl!

In (7), the dialogue between the participants Vitor and Alice reveals their perception of the lack of a lexical item in their language to communicate the intended meaning, while performing Task 3. There are attempts to produce a structure in the target language to express what they actually mean. As they told the researcher in the interview session after the task, they tried different words in the attempt to express *write down*.

(7) Task 3 (Mary and Max)

Alice: So I think the word is **out**. She was writing **out.** To take notes, you know?

Vitor: Take notes is writing **out?**

Alice: Write **out**.

Vitor: She is walking and writing **out**?

Alice: Write **out** or write **on**? I can't remember but there's a phrasal verb.

Vitor: Write **on**. I think is write **on** because **out** is **out** (pointing his right hand to the door) something like that or another thing.

Alice: Write **on**, yes, because there is a phrasal verb that they use to say with the meaning in Portuguese is anotar. I think is write **on**.

The dyad formulates hypotheses, trying out different possibilities in search for the intended meaning. As such, the new linguistic forms are hypotheses that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by peer feedback. Meaning is jointly constructed from the various forms tested by the learners in the interactive process. Despite their awareness that there is a lack of precision in the linguistic items that represent the intended meaning, their collaborative dialogue mediates potential learning. This comes as a consequence of the interactants' awareness of their linguistic limitations. As a result, hypothesis formulation in search of solutions to communicate provides evidence to the researcher (or teacher) of the learners' linguistic difficulties. In the viewing session after task performance, Vitor and Alice reaffirmed the difficulty they had searching for the accurate item.

The interaction stimulated by the collaborative task is essential to enhance foreign language learning as a result of the cooperation practice triggered off in the learning context. The metalinguistic function of learner language in speaking as well as in writing contributes to learning. Peer

correction as scaffolding can further develop collaboration, leading to the appropriation of the corrected item. In (8), Denise corrects the inappropriate preposition (*with*) produced by Barbara, who accepts the suggestion (*for*) as part of the negotiation process. They were in the process of deciding who each of them was inviting to go camping.

> (8) Task 2 (Let's go camping)
>
>> Denise: Who you want to take with you?
>>
>> Bárbara: I want to take with me my mother because my mother is a perfect person and my mother will will be will be cooking **with** me?
>>
>> Denise**:** No, **for** me. As **a favor** <u>for</u> the person.
>>
>> Bárbara: Yes, **for** me.
>>
>> Denise: Only **for** you.
>>
>> Bárbara: I don't live without my mother. Okay? And you ? Who you want to take with you?
>>
>> Denise: My boyfriend because he is my boyfriend and he is so funny and cute.

Denise provides the preposition and adds an explanation why *for* is more appropriate, stating that it means 'a favor for the person'. This interactional act encourages Bárbara to notice the difference between her output and the target language and this awareness may lead to language learning (SWAIN, 2001)

The students' doubts reflect their cognitive processes and sometimes reveal their awareness of the linguistic gaps in their output. During several occasions they discussed possible solutions by taking into account their previous knowledge, although they hesitated in some situations.

Learner interaction included gestures and looks as part of their interactional behavior as observed in the video recordings during the interactional sessions. As learners collaborate, they select specific types of information and action patterns to test hypotheses about the meanings they want to communicate, also testing whether their goals have been achieved (HALL, 2009).

In the interviews that immediately followed the tasks, when the researcher talked to the learners about their experience, they stressed their difficulty in employing the precise vocabulary of the stories and they also referred to the importance of the collaborative process to promote joint solutions. One of the students, however, revealed she would like to have had an expert (teacher) available during the task to answer her questions or confirm her choices, that is, she would have felt safer being scaffolded by the teacher.

In (9), the learners talk[3] to the researcher about their feelings and difficulties experienced during task performance.

> (9) Task 1 (Jigsaw)
>
> > • Amanda: Gostei de tentar me comunicar usando as palavras que conheço. A tarefa foi muito interessante. Nós formamos uma boa dupla. Pedro me ajudou todo o tempo. Mas, às vezes, eu queria que a professora pudesse nos ajudar. Ou talvez se a gente pudesse usar o dicionário, teria sido mais fácil.
> >
> > [I enjoyed the effort to try to communicate using the words I know. The task was very interesting. We were a good dyad. Pedro helped me all the time. But, sometimes I wished the teacher could help us out. Or maybe if we could use the dictionary it would have been easier.]
> >
> > • Pedro: No começo ficar em frente da câmera me incomodou um pouco. Depois eu esqueci. Sempre que um não sabia uma coisa, o outro sabia. Quando nenhum de nós sabia, a gente dava um jeito. Trabalhar com a Amanda é legal. Ela tem muita paciência.
> >
> > [In the beginning being in front of the camera annoyed me a little. Later on I forgot it. Whenever one didn't know something, the other one did. When none of us knew it, we somehow managed. Working with Amanda is cool. She is very patient.]

The three dyads in the study reported their feelings about the learning process, referring to the occasions when they learned something while doing the task. Amanda and Pedro comment on these learning occasions:

> (10) Task 1 (Jigsaw)
>
> > • Amanda: Aprendi vocabulário novo com o Pedro. Por exemplo, 'pena' eu não sabia. É 'feather'.
> >
> > [I learned new vocabulary with Pedro. For example, I didn't know 'pena'. It's 'feather'.]
> >
> > • Pedro: E eu não sabia. Eu até sabia, mas não me lembrava desse 'curly hair'.
> >
> > [And I didn't know, I actually knew but I didn't remember this 'curly hair'.]
> >
> > • Amanda: É que eu tenho 'curly hair'. É mais fácil quando é sobre a gente.
> >
> > [The fact is that I have curly hair. It is easier when it is about ourselves.]

During the viewing sessions when the learners had the opportunity to see their

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[3] The informal conversations with one of the researchers during the protocol sessions were conducted in Portuguese.

performance, analyze and or/correct their oral and written production, they brought evidence of language learning and linguistic awareness, as illustrated in (11):

(11) Task 1 (Jigsaw)

• Amanda (referring to the text reproduced in (6)): Por que a gente escreveu 'o'clock' aqui? É apenas pra hora. One o'clock, two o'clock.]

[Why did we write 'o' clock' here? It refers to time: one o'clock, two o'clock.]

• Pedro: Sim, é verdade.

[Yeah. Right.]

• Amanda: E o dedo do pé! A palavra é 'toe' e não 'dedo do pé'.]

[What about 'toe'? The word is 'toe' not 'finger of the foot'.]

• Pedro: Pois é, eu olhei no dicionário depois da tarefa. Era isso que a gente tava procurando aquele dia. 'Toe'.]

[Right. I looked it up in the dictionary after the task. That's what we were looking for that day. 'Toe']

• Pedro: Pelo amor de Deus. Olha pra esse 'your' aqui. É 'her'. Será que a gente nunca vai aprender isso? Que vergonha.]

[My Goodness. Look at this 'your' here. It should be 'her'. Will we ever learn to use it? Shame on us.]

Two learners complained about the equipment used during task performance. In fact, according to Burns (1999), the presence of cameras and recorders can be seen as intrusive and cause embarrassment and some distraction. However, they are fundamental to generate precise information about learner interaction in that gestures and looks are essential to understand the interaction in process.

The findings suggest that, while negotiating for mutual comprehension, the participants focused on the language form, noticed their limitations and helped each other to perform the task. The target language was used as an instrument to analyze their own linguistic output, potentially leading the learners to stretch their own knowledge of the foreign language.

Concluding remarks

Going back to the main questions of this research, it was clear that the participants, whose interactions were reported in this paper, initiated and maintained most interactions by using some conversational tactics, such as clarification requests, comprehension checks, confirmation checks (LONG, 1983) and invitation to participate. In response to these initiatives, there was negotiation for meaning and form, repetitions and incorporation of the negotiated ideas by the dyads.

In the interview sessions immediately after the tasks and in the viewing sessions approximately a month after task performance, the participants declared they enjoyed participating in the project, mentioned they learned new vocabulary, confirmed hypotheses about linguistic rules, and found peer interaction rewarding.

Peer feedback can generate episodes of cognitive conflict (TOCALLI-BELLER; SWAIN, 2005) that enhance the opportunities for rule internalization. These episodes are moments in which there is some sort of intellectual conflict triggered by peer ideas, beliefs or contradictory theories potentially leading to language learning. These episodes can also promote learner transition from an initial stage of knowledge to a more advanced stage in the target language. From a pedagogical perspective, collaborative tasks can serve the purpose of stimulating the students to interact and reflect upon the foreign language when they reformulate their production, self-correct and correct their peers, negotiating to achieve their goal (LIMA; COSTA, 2010).

Languaging (SWAIN, 2006) was a key component that helped the students understand, remember, produce and learn linguistic concepts and forms. Through languaging they discovered meanings and connections which stimulated the learning process.

As evidenced by previous studies (SWAIN; LAPKIN, 2001; SWAIN *et al.*, 2009, TOCALLI-BELLER; SWAIN, 2005), the present research findings also suggest that collaborative tasks promote learner cognitive and social engagement that potentially favor learner autonomy. The promotion of collaborative tasks in language classrooms can stimulate learner participation.

The teacher can play a mediating role in this process, allowing the students to interact more actively, taking initiative and experimenting with language. The teacher may select or develop meaningful tasks through which the learners can have control over their own learning process and bring their own knowledge of the world, including values and opinions, to task development.

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