# Inside Dictogloss - an investigation of a small-group writing task

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## 1. Introduction

Classroom interaction in which learners work together in small groups has played a major role in communicative second language teaching for well over fifteen years. A number of studies have demonstrated the potential pedagogical advantages of small group work over whole-class instruction (LONG & PORTER 1985). Among these are a greater quantity of learner practice opportunities, a more individualized pace of instruction, increased personal investment leading to higher motivation, and a positive affective climate, which reduces stress and enhances linguistic risk-taking. In addition, small group activities may cause learners' communicative competence to improve in terms of both fluency and communication strategies because much small-group verbal interaction closely resembles naturally occurring face-to-face interaction outside the classroom, where skills of conversation management and use of a wide range of language functions are both necessary and common.

A number of researchers (LONG & PORTER 1985; SWAIN 1985; DUFF 1986; PORTER 1986; PICA 1987) have also claimed that small group work is highly effective as a language acquisition activity because the interaction which it fosters among learners provides them with the comprehensible input and output opportunities needed to trigger further language acquisition. These claims are unfortunately difficult to operationalize for purposes of empirical investigation (ELLIS 1990; STOTZ 1991) and must remain for the moment a widely held belief.

The interaction in the small group is often centered around a task, which may be defined as

> a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focussed on meaning rather than form (NUNAN 1989:10).

Research on tasks has frequently been aimed at showing that particular forms of small group tasks are more effective in fostering certain types of

verbal interaction than others, but there are often definitional problems which render comparison difficult (GASS & VARONIS 1985). A great deal of this research has attempted to capture differences in the conversational interaction and interlanguage talk related to specific task types and task structures. For example, DUFF (1986) found that problem-solving tasks produced more conversational adjustments in the form of questions than a debate-type task. DOUGHTY and PICA (1984) found that two-way information gap tasks caused learners to engage in more interactive negotiation of meaning than one-way tasks, while GASS and VARONIS (1985) reported that the opposite was true for their one-way and two-way drawing tasks. It seems as if the features chosen to define task structure in many studies are perhaps not as crucial as they appear to be. Indeed, it has been argued that it is not task features themselves but rather learner interpretation of task features which determine interactional outcomes (BREEN 1987).

Up to this point we have been considering tasks aimed at the acquisition of **implicit** linguistic knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is intuitive and procedural. However, it has been convincingly argued that classroom-based second language (L2) learners also need to develop **explicit** linguistic knowledge if they are ever to learn certain non-obvious linguistic features.

> Explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that is analyzed (in the sense that it can be described and classified), abstract (in the sense that it takes the form of some underlying generalization of actual linguistic behavior), and explanatory (in the sense that it can provide a reasonably objective account of how grammar is used in actual communication). Explicit knowledge is available to the learner as a conscious representation ... [but the learner may not be able to articulate it]. ... Often, however, explicit knowledge is developed together with metalinguistic knowledge, [which] helps the learner to articulate it. (ELLIS 1993:93)

RUTHERFORD (1987) and ELLIS (1990) among others have proposed aiding and accelerating the development of learners' explicit L2 knowledge by means of activities that raise learners' consciousness of L2 grammatical features.

Most recently, writers such as WAJNRYB (1988) and ELLIS and FOTOS (1991) have suggested designing small-group tasks which aim at simultaneously developing both implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge: they advocate the use of tasks in which learners use the target language to discuss language use or solve linguistic problems. In other words, they

propose using task-based small group work, which fosters natural, content-focused L2 interaction, in order to raise learners' consciousness about formal features of the L2.

## 2. Dictogloss - a consciousness-raising task for small groups

The aim of the research reported here was to investigate one type of task, called dictogloss, which combines opportunities for realistic L2 interaction with linguistic consciousness-raising. Basically, dictogloss (hereafter DG) is a task which motivates language learners to interact cooperatively in small groups in order to construct a linguistically acceptable text similar in content and style to one they have previously heard and taken notes on. The learners' texts are therefore not exact replicas of the original text, but alternative versions constructed from the ideas and words they remember, their notes, and their knowledge of the L2, both implicit and explicit. Clearly, since learners need sufficient linguistic resources to contribute to conversations about language in texts, DG tasks are normally used at a relatively advanced level of language learning.

The procedure followed in DG tasks consists of the following steps or phases (WAJNRYB 1990):

a) *The preparatory phase*, in which the teacher initiates a 'warm up' discussion to elicit what learners already know about the topic, presents and explains unknown words in the text which she is about to read, and finally reads the text aloud twice at the speed of TV or radio news while learners take notes;

b) *The 'reconstruction phase'*, in which learners work together in small groups to produce a semantic approximation or "gloss" of the original text. It is expected that each group will use the target language in discussing proposals for its text.

c) *The feedback phase*, in which all texts produced are analyzed, compared and corrected by learners and the teacher together.

The reconstruction phase is therefore of central interest because it is in that phase that small-group discussion about language takes place, although, clearly, further discussion about language and further gains in explicit knowledge will also take place in the feedback phase.

While DG involves writing, it is unlike many writing activities in that it does not aim to practise the full range of skills involved in the production

of written texts (cf. WHITE & ARNDT 1991). For example, in DG tasks learners do not compose their own texts in the sense of selecting and sequencing ideas. On the other hand, DG tasks call upon the following writing subskills which are crucial to L2 writers: expressing ideas in words they can manage grammatically, linking propositions clearly, avoiding or clarifying grammatical and lexical pitfalls, improving style, revising, editing. In other words, DG involves learners first and foremost in metalinguistic decision making, which may incidentally help them with writing.

Like any language learning task, DG consists of a structure and features thought to promote certain types of interaction, which in turn are expected to lead to certain types of language acquisition. However, in view of the ephemeral nature of verbal interaction data, it is difficult for teachers to verify any claims made for the task by classroom observation alone. This is why an investigation involving data collection and analysis was undertaken.

## 3. Investigational setting and methods

This particular study of the nature and content of interactions occurring in small groups doing DG tasks was carried out in Swiss university EFL classes. Five groups of students, fourteen students in all, were audio-recorded while discussing the production of their own versions of the same DG text[1]. The students were all at intermediate to upper-intermediate level (TOEFL 530-630) and were attending non-specialist university courses to improve their English for study purposes. All students were familiar with the DG procedure insofar as they had previously been given similar tasks.

All groups used computers for the reconstruction phase, i.e., the small-group discussions occurred in front of computer monitors, with one of the learners acting as a scribe or typist. The rationale for this is that computers afford better text visibility for group work and greater flexibility when text changes are decided upon.

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[1] If we were looking solely at the nature of verbal interaction in DG, it would have been feasible to use a number of different DG texts in collecting data, but since our investigational interest also lies in discovering and comparing the linguistic **content** of each group's interaction, the same text was, of necessity, used for all groups. The text, taken from *Grammar Dictation* (WAJNRYB 1990), appears in the appendix.

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The five 30-40-minute recordings obtained were later transcribed. In the transcription, individual students are identified by means of their initials. For purposes of analysis each small-group conversation was divided into transactions, exchanges and moves following SINCLAIR and COULTHARD (1975) and STUBBS (1983). A transaction is defined as one or more exchanges on the same topic - usually a clause or phrase of the DG text. An exchange consists minimally of two moves, an initiation or opening and a response. Initiation of typing on the part of the scribe/typist counts as a response ('accept') move. Taking the following transaction between learners M, E and R as an example, we can see that it consists of six moves, which make up two exchanges.

Exchange 1:

| M: | *according to recent research* or something | (initiate) |
| E: | yeah I would say like- | (respond) |

Exchange 2:

| M: | *a recent study* or (?) why not- | (reinitiate/self-support) |
| E: | *according-* | (respond) |
| R: | (starts typing) | (respond)[2] |

## 4. Expected outcomes

Teachers choose to use tasks because they hold expectations about the learning outcomes associated with these tasks. According to WAJNRYB (1988, 1990), small-group interaction in the reconstruction phase of a DG task is expected to:

- promote verbal interaction in a realistic communicative setting;
- raise consciousness of specific aspects of language use in texts;
- encourage learners to learn from each other by pooling their knowledge;
- enable learners to find out what they do or do not know about English.

The object of the investigation was to examine the group interaction transcripts for evidence that would support or challenge these claims. Before proceeding to the findings, however, I would like to look at some of the claims made for DG in more detail.

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[2] Transcription conventions: *Italics* are used for text citations. Comments and inaudible sections are in round brackets. Vertical lines mark the beginning of overlaps.

### 4.1. DG promotes verbal interaction in a realistic communicative setting

Because the learners are compelled to communicate to produce a text, both the quantity and quality of talk are predicted to be greater than they would be with teacher-fronted interaction. In fact, the apparently subsidiary occurrence of L2 interaction in a genuinely communicative setting may be of potentially greater value than the production of the reconstructed text. It is claimed that learners will develop discourse competence (including negotiation of meaning, conversational repair, turn-taking, and the realisation of various speech acts ) by engaging in a situation very close to authentic face-to-face conversation (WAJNRYB 1990:17).

### 4.2. DG raises consciousness of specific aspects of language use in texts

The fact that learners discuss linguistic problems and decisions in the course of the task should activate explicit linguistic knowledge and may even raise implicit linguistic knowledge to consciousness. Learners are put in a position of having to voice their linguistic hypotheses, and "being voiced, these hypotheses become clearer and more conscious to the learner" (WAJNRYB 1990:16).

Language instruction is usually planned so that it focuses on only a few specific features of the L2 at a time. As a contribution to this focus, DG texts may be manipulated, i.e. written, so as to raise consciousness of particular linguistic features of the L2.

### 4.3. DG encourages learners to pool their knowledge and thus learn from each other

Learners use their productive knowledge of grammar, lexis and discourse in the creation of their own versions of the text. Creative text production poses a series of language problems, which causes learners to access related explicit linguistic knowledge. Through verbal interaction, they share this knowledge with the others in the group and create a text based on their combined knowledge. Responsibility for the text is borne by each member of the group, which becomes a small learning community for the duration of the text reconstruction.

> The creation of small learning communities means increased participation and learner co-operation. This injection of 'democracy' into the classroom allows learners to complement each others' strengths and weaknesses. (WAJNRYB, 1990:18)

## 4.4. DG enables learners to find out what they do or do not know about English

In the reconstruction phase, learners are constantly hammering out group decisions about the language in their text. In other words, they are solving an extensive series of varied but connected language problems in the course of small group discussion. Group interaction will consist of a chain of proposal, counter-proposal, argument and persuasion, question and answer, which will result in heightened awareness of the extent of their linguistic knowledge.

> Through active learner involvement students come to confront their own strengths and weaknesses in English language use. In so doing, they find out what they do not know, then they find out what they need to know. It is through this process that they improve their language skills (WAJNRYB, 1990:10).

## 5. Investigational outcomes

In this section the investigational outcomes are presented as they relate to the task claims discussed above.

## 5.1. Verbal interaction

Verbal interaction was assessed in terms of turn distribution, turn length, and speaker switch mechanisms. Analysis of the recording transcripts revealed turn-taking patterns typical of interaction in problem-solving tasks (DUFF 1986), i.e. relatively many short turns and speaker switches, with both managed turn-taking and competition for the conversational floor realized by means of turn completion, interruptions and overlaps. In the two groups of three and one group of four learners, turns were distributed as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Turn distribution in DG groups of three or more students*

| Group | Individual share of group turn total | | | |
|-------|------------|------------|--------|--------|
| $GM_1A$ | G-46% | $M_1$-44% | A-10% | |
| $M_2ER$ | $M_2$-34% | E-35% | R-32% | |
| $TM_3BW$ | T- 30% | $M_3$-27% | B-18% | W-25% |

The low proportion of total turns taken by A (10%) may reflect his low proficiency in English relative to the group.

The number of long turns (defined as four or more clauses per turn) taken showed a much greater degree of individual variation than turns in general. Long turns enabled speakers to dominate interaction in two ways: some speakers (E,W, G) took long turns in order to raise general questions about text propositions and language form, and thus used long turns to initiate major topic switches, while others (T,P,M$_2$,U) tended to use long turns to extend linguistic arguments into didactic explanations. These didactic long turns will be taken up again in section 5.3.

It was concluded that verbal interaction in DG tasks can be described as typical of communication between groups of individuals engaged in problem solving. For this reason, DG tasks would appear to further learners' communicative competence and fluency insofar as these can be extended by engaging in genuine communication.

## 5.2. Consciousness raising on specific points of language

The claim here was that, (a) learners' explicit language knowledge would be activated by the task, and, (b) that a particular DG text would focus learners' attention on and thereby raise their consciousness about specific features of language. To find out whether the claims were justified, all transactions were analyzed for metalinguistic content. While many exchanges consisted solely of text proposal and counterproposal with few or no additional words, more than 50% of total transactions consisted of metalinguistic information offered in support of suggestions, arguments, criticisms, objections, etc. The topics of these metalinguistic transactions ranged from orthography and punctuation through syntax and morphology to discourse organization and propositional meaning.

*Table 2: Topics of metalinguistic transactions occurring in DG discussions*[3]

| | Total | GM₁A | PJ | UA | M₂ER | TM₃BW |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| spelling | 20 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 4 | - |
| word meaning | 19 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 4 |
| morphology | 17 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| text structure | 14 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 6 | 1 |
| style | 14 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| punctuation | 10 | 1 | 4 | 4 | - | 1 |
| syntax | 10 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 1 | - |
| propositional meaning | 9 | 3 | - | 4 | 2 | - |
| rhetorical move | 9 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| word collocation | 7 | 2 | - | 2 | - | 3 |
| modality | 4 | - | 1 | - | 1 | 2 |
| genre | 1 | - | - | - | 1 | - |

Table 2 shows the number of times various metalinguistic topics occurred in each group of learners and in total. It shows that all groups discussed word meaning, morphology, style and discourse organization (text structure as well as rhetorical moves). Therefore, insofar as metalinguistic discussion, explanation and disagreement cause participants to reflect on their linguistic knowledge and articulate it, it could be claimed that DG raises learners' consciousness of a number of different linguistic features.

The fact that certain topics failed to be raised in one or more groups indicates that it may be difficult to predict topics that will occur with absolute certainty, and that the linguistic topics discussed will of necessity depend in some measure on the linguistic interests and knowledge of individuals in the group and, possibly, on the general level of the group as well as its interpersonal dynamics.

As mentioned earlier, the same text, *Middle Children*, was used with all groups in this study in order to test the claim that prominent linguistic features in the text would be noticed and discussed by all learners, which would result in raised consciousness of these features. *Middle Children* was written to focus on the following linguistic features:

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[3] The groups are the same three shown in Table 1, plus two groups of two (PJ and UA).

- present participles used (instead of relative finite clauses) to imply reason or cause
- present participles as adjectives
- the generic: e.g. middle children, the middle child, first-borns, second-borns, the first-born
- textual contrast: *while* in clauses of concession (contrast); some ... other (WAJNRYB, 1990:97)

Although the text contains seven instances of the present participle used either in non-finite clauses or as an adjective, the learners in this study did not once discuss using participles per se. Furthermore, although present participles did appear in the students' versions, they were used relatively rarely, appearing in only 11 out of 40 possible text slots. The generics *middle children* and *the middle child* arose only twice as discussion topics, but were used both frequently and correctly in the students' texts. As with the participles, they were not discussed as generics; for example, in one of the two cases the problem was framed as singular vs. plural: "we don't have to say *middle children* because we're only talking about one single family". On the other hand, the third highlighted linguistic feature, textual contrast, occurred as a topic of rather lengthy discussion, arising in three of the five groups, and several times in two of these groups.

One possible explanation for these findings is that participles and the generic had not been dealt with explicitly in the writing course the learners were attending, whereas the topic of contrast and comparison had been the basis of a previous lesson. In fact, one student specifically mentioned the contrast and comparison lesson in his contribution. This might mean that small group interaction does not raise consciousness of a particular language item unless at least one member of the group is already keyed in to it sufficiently to recognize it and mark it as a topic.[4] However it might also mean that a certain linguistic item is not discussed because everyone in the group assumes it is a matter of common knowledge.

### 5.3. *Learners learn from each other by pooling their linguistic knowledge*

All learners made linguistic contributions in the reconstruction phase, and therefore in one sense pooled their knowledge. However, what proved interesting was the fact that different learners pooled different kinds of

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[4] Of course the whole-group correction phase, which occurs when the group text have been completed, offers a further opportunity for grammatical consciousness raising.

knowledge. Some only contributed the information contained in their notes, i.e., DG text fragments; others volunteered opinions as to which of two versions they thought was correct; still others provided lengthy metalinguistic arguments and explanations. In fact, one student in each of the five groups contributed appreciably more metalinguistic information than the others. This was usually done in the course of a long turn such as P's in the following transaction, which is about whether to insert a comma (as is done in German) to mark a clause boundary after a reporting verb:

J:    *some think of adults* comma - you have to make a comma there I'm sure
P:    why would you put a comma there?
J:    ah of course you understand it
P:    yeah that's wrong - but that's not a Ger- that's not an English point of view. English people do not separate the sentences (=clauses) by commas you know that's just a reading help for Englishmen - if you would pause in a sentence you would make a comma but you don't separate two commas (=clauses). otherwise you were right - in German you were absolutely right
J:    but I think in this case you have to (?)
P:    it might be that there is a stop in a sentence that you read *some think of healthier adults* pause *others are fearing the loss of the middle - of the middle of the middle* (short laugh)...

P took sixteen of these long explanatory and didactic turns in the conversation while J, his partner, took only one. In a different group - this time a group of four, which may not be so easy to monopolize - T is the taker of long turns. She proposes using the word *tend* a second time to convey the notion that research results show averages and tendencies. Her groupmates (M₃, B and W) want to avoid using the same verb twice for reasons of style.

T:    why not *tend*
M3:   because we already had *tend*
T:    yeah but that's <u>why</u>. if you say *tend* it's not defined (=definite) but *are* - you say it <u>is</u> like that and <u>every</u> second-born and *tend* that's just -
B,W:  yeah, OK, yeah
T:    you can't say first-born are like that and second-borns-
M3::  do you know a synonym for *tend*
T:    - are like that but they tend to be. you always find first-borns who are more peer-oriented than second borns

B:     OK OK lOK

T:                  lbec- it's only a research and-

W:     OK it was just twice *tend to be*

It seems as if learners have different conceptualizations of the task and of their role in it. Some appear to regard cooperating on the text as an opportunity to provide or exchange metalinguistic knowledge and insights, while others seem to want to proceed towards a product with little discussion. The former expect to teach (and perhaps be taught), while the latter expect to arrive at acceptable solutions with as little fuss as possible. Moreover, the latter frequently appear to resent the long turns of those who are more interested in discussing metalinguistic matters, which means that they may not be receptive to the knowledge their peers are trying to pool.

The evidence from the five groups studied therefore suggests that all learners are motivated to pool their knowledge of the text, and that some learners also attempt to share metalinguistic knowledge, but that the willingness to give and receive this kind of knowledge varies enormously from learner to learner, possibly because of the way in which they interpret the task.

### 5.4. Learners find out what they know and do not know about language

As we have seen, some learners attempt to share linguistic knowledge with other members of their group. However the learners' awareness of the completeness and accuracy of their own and others' knowledge remains to be investigated. The transcripts show that many potential textual errors are averted or corrected as a result of information shared in the course of reconstruction phase interaction. When errors occur, they are frequently accepted without discussion or counterproposal, as is the case here, when G and M decide to write *there aren't any middle children anymore with their mediate influence.*

G:  um *as a - in the mediate* or what?

M:  *the mediate influence* as a matter of fact - *the mediate influence*

G:  (??) *anymore with their with their* - no - *children anymore with their mediate*

M:  yes I see mhm (types)

In other cases, acceptable solutions are defeated, either by means of argument or refusal. In the example that follows, P seems to be more sure of his incorrect solution than J is of his own correct knowledge of syntax.

| P: | (typing) *they often are peacemakers* |
| J: | you're sure that *often are* - not *are often*? |
| P: | uh yes |
| J: | *they often are* |

In other words, there is no guarantee that the correct solution to any linguistic problem raised will prevail or be arrived at by argument and discussion in the reconstruction phase. In fact, as every observer of political life knows, argument and discussion can be as effective in burying truth as in uncovering it, and this is what occasionally happens in DG tasks. As one student put it,

> The ... person with the best arguments and the best talent of convincing people always writes the biggest parts and not those who are shy and feel insecure about their English.

The problem, as we have seen, is that the people with 'the best talent of convincing' are not always right, which means that learners cannot always discover what they know and do not know about language in the reconstruction phase of a DG task. Of course in theory, the feedback phase should allow them to find this out, but in practice the focus in the feedback phase is on the texts actually produced, and learners may well find it difficult to recall the full range of solutions discussed in the reconstruction phase.

## 5.5. Learners' comments on DG

At the end of an intensive writing course in which both DG tasks and individual writing tasks with peer editing had been daily activities, I asked the eight students to comment on what they perceived as differences between the two types of written task. The four who preferred DG seemed to focus on the process of learning-while-writing in their feedback, which included these comments:

a) I learnt a lot more by writing a text together with somebody else than by writing a text on my own and then discussing it with somebody else.
b) Advantage of writing together: We often change the word order in the text and we think more about different ways of writing a sentence (grammar and synonyms). You can profit from other persons' different vocabulary. You can discuss your ideas just at this moment with other people.
c) I think one learns the most by doing it with someone else simultaneously because you're discussing a problem at once and this creates a bigger awareness of the problem.

> d) I like to work together with other people. Therefore I don't mind writing a text with another person. I think that this way there are more thoughts behind a sentence. There are more inputs and the text may have context, more different aspects, and might be more objective.

Comments (b) and (d) indicate that the students have perceived the knowledge sharing aspect of the task, while (c) shows that at least one learner noticed that DG is designed to lead to heightened awareness of linguistic problems.

The priorities of three of the four students who preferred writing texts individually to writing in a group are different. They do not seem to perceive DG primarily as a collaborative learning process, but as a means of producing a good text and as a means of obtaining feedback.

> e) Personally speaking, working alone first and afterwards in a group is more creative than working in a group from the beginning.
> f) I prefer writing on my own. ... Building sentences within a group leads to discussion which is mainly due to the level of your team. ... Teamwork is great to organize a specific topic (brainstorming) and to discuss paragraphs, but I still prefer formulating my own sentences.
> g) Group writing: I never understood the purpose of it. I don't think it really tells you anything about the English of the people who wrote it. The essay always turns out to be a compromise. The ... person with the best arguments and the best talent of convincing people always writes the biggest parts and not those who are shy and feel insecure about their English.

And finally, this student appears to regard DG as a linguistic problem-solving task, but has noticed the difficulty mentioned in section 5.4., namely that, during the reconstruction of the text, learners have no way of deciding which of two proposed linguistic solutions is correct, and that linguistic information offered in the post-reconstruction (feedback) phase may come too late for some learners.

> h) During the last week I have been working together with almost all of my classmates. We sometimes produced texts together. I didn't like this way so much because in situations when I was not sure I sometimes had to adopt my partners' solutions, which didn't seem to be right to me and which were really wrong, so that I could not check whether my proposal was right or not.

## 6. Discussion of findings and conclusion

This investigation tested a number of claims made for DG tasks and found that some were supported by what learners actually did when working together in small groups. It seems fairly clear that DG promotes oral

fluency by motivating learners to engage in lively and realistic verbal interaction, realize a wide range of language functions, and develop effective communication strategies in competing for the conversational floor. DG tasks also appear to be a means of raising learners' awareness of formal and semantic features of language in that they give learners the opportunity to articulate their understandings of meaning and form in a specific context.

The data did not show, however, that a DG text can be relied on to focus learners' attention on specific features of language. A more serious flaw appeared to be that, during the reconstruction phase at least, learners have no way of knowing which linguistic solutions to the problems they are trying to solve are correct. Therefore, the claim that learners explore the accuracy and extent of their own linguistic knowledge in a DG task was not supported. In addition, this flaw would appear to have a high frustration potential, since learners have no means of evaluating the accuracy or acceptability of solutions **at the moment when they are involved in decision making** and thus most highly motivated to know. Finally, although cooperation in the form of sharing text information and linguistic knowledge was the prevalent working mode, conflict over perceived roles, task aims, and the feasibility of solutions also seemed to be inevitable. Despite the fact that all learners had been given the same instructions, the way in which the task was carried out varied from group to group, particularly with respect to learner roles.

At least one discrepancy between what was claimed would happen and what actually happened in the observed groups may be due to DG task structure. There appears to be an inbuilt conflict between wanting to win arguments, maintain face or gain prestige through effective verbal interaction on the one hand, and wanting to be linguistically correct on the other. What this means is that learners may advocate a particular linguistic solution for reasons of group status, rather than because they are absolutely certain the solution is correct. And even if they are certain, the solution may in fact not be right. In other words, because argument and discussion in DG tasks are about facts and rules rather than about opinions, the development of communicative competence may work at cross-purposes to an increase in linguistic knowledge. The feedback phase is designed to clear up linguistic misunderstandings and inaccuracies, but it seems to come too late in the task, in the sense that learners' interest in language, which is at its highest in the reconstruction phase has already peaked. A

possible solution to this problem would be to make more linguistic information available to learners during the reconstruction phase so that they would be less inclined to argue about facts they were not sure of. For example, dictionaries and grammar books could be made more readily available, or the teacher could run an 'information desk', answering any language questions formally submitted by a group.

Other discrepancies between DG aims and outcomes are probably better explained as instances of varying task interpretations. BREEN (1987) explains discrepancies between idealized and actual task outcomes as products of differing perceptions of the task at hand based on differing conceptualizations of language learning needs and abilities, and differing perceptions of appropriate roles for learners. For example, some learners seemed to perceive the DG task as a process by which the group would talk and learn about language, while others appeared to think it was principally about producing a text that would be evaluated by the teacher. Some learners felt that the task allowed them to explain language to their peers, while others rejected the teacher role both for themselves and for others.

One solution here might be to make tacit interpretations explicit. Breen suggests that all tasks need customizing, i.e.they need conscious alteration on the part of all participants - both learners and teacher. In the case of DG, one way of customizing the task for a particular class would be to present varying learner interpretations of the task for general discussion. The teacher might then explain the aims of the task and ask learners for suggestions as to how the task structure or setting might be changed to accommodate their interpretations, resolving conflicts and negotiating new roles at the same time.

This study was motivated by interest in dictogloss as a task type combining code-focused and communication-driven small group work in an apparently extremely effective way. It has shown, I think, that investigating tasks from the inside, i.e. by looking carefully at what learners actually say and do, is well worthwhile. It has also shown that teachers need to develop non-tedious ways of monitoring and negotiating tasks with learners, so that tasks can be fine-tuned to fit the needs and expectations of different groups of learners. Finally, it has shown that we must never assume that task outcome is determined by task design alone.

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# Appendix

## Middle Children text

Middle children, being neither the oldest nor the youngest in the family, tend to feel neglected and insecure. However, being sandwiched between siblings, they are often the family peace-makers, and so they learn to be flexible and realistic. Research has shown that while first-borns tend to be high-achievers, second-borns tend to be more peer-oriented, having more friends and socializing more easily. These days, with more people choosing small families, the middle child is disappearing. Opinion is divided on the merits of this, with some psychologists predicting healthier adults and others fearing the loss of the middle child's mediating influence. (WAJNRYB 1990:97)[5]

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[5] One change was made to WAJNRYB'S original text: *however* (line 2) was substituted for *yet* in the original.