Chapter 6
Interaction in advanced EFL pedagogy: a comparison of form-focused activities

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Abstract

Recent research on grammar pedagogy advocates the use of form-focused activities which require learners to produce output collaboratively. This paper reports on the results of a study carried out with 14 high-intermediate/advanced adult English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who completed five form-focused activities collaboratively. The learners’ interaction was codified and language-related episodes (LREs) identified. The data were analyzed for the quantity and nature of attention to form each activity generated. Results indicate that both learners’ attention to form and the nature of their reflection on grammatical choices were dependent on the activity. Furthermore, the grammatical features of concern to the learners were not always those targeted by the activity and most of the times these learners did not provide any justification for the grammatical decisions made. These results are considered in the light of current claims about the need for classroom teachers and researchers to carefully consider the choice of activity and how learners interpret and complete it.

Keywords: Grammar pedagogy; Form-focused instruction; Interaction; Collaborative activities

1. Introduction

The advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1970s and 1980s saw the decline of formal grammar pedagogy. As Mitchell (2000, p. 285) points out “explicit grammar study was seen as pedantic, lacking in intrinsic value [...] and inefficient as a means of developing practical communication skills, specially oral skills”. In CLT the learner is placed center-stage: s/he should have the opportunity to take part in meaningful interaction in order to respond to genuine communicative
needs (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1991). The learners’ grammar needs would be determined on the basis of their performance on fluency activities (Brumfit, 1979).

Overall, CLT has been successful: the types of fluency activities designed for classroom use (Nunan, 1989) had a positive effect on learners’ motivation and language use. However, there is still one important concern among teachers and researchers alike regarding the grammatical competence of second/foreign language learners. Research carried out on classroom second language (L2) learning in Canadian immersion programs has shown that mere exposure to the L2 is not enough for the development of learners’ productive L2 skills (Harley & Swain, 1984; Spada & Lightbown, 1989). The overall finding of this research is that meaning-centered instruction led to low levels of linguistic accuracy (non-target like morphology and syntax): by focusing exclusively in the negotiation of meaning (Pica, 1994) and successful communication, the issue of form was overlooked.

Recent studies consider the need to include some degree of attention to form (Long, 1991) in the CLT classroom. That is, the learners’ attention should be drawn to language as an object but in context (Long, 1996, p. 429). This position is currently supported by both laboratory research (de Graaff, 1997; DeKeyser, 1995; Mackey & Philp, 1998) and classroom-based studies (Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, Inagaki, & Ortega, 1998; Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Murano, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Williams, 2001; Williams & Evans, 1998) and has been systematically evaluated by Norris and Ortega (2000).

There is no clear agreement on definitions and procedures to implement this attention to form, though (Ellis, 2001). Thus, definitions go from the narrow one provided by Long and Robinson (1998, p. 23), stated in (1) and interpreted as meaning a reactive, unplanned approach used to draw the learners’ attention to form, to broader definitions, such as the one provided by Spada (1997, p. 73), stated in (2), which allows for planning of the elements to be focused on in order to attract the learners’ attention:

1. **Focus on form** refers to how focal attentional resources are allocated [...] during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features—by the teacher and/or one or more students—triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 23)

2. […] form-focused instruction will mean any pedagogical effort which is used to draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly. This can include the direct teaching of grammar language (e.g. through grammatical rules) and/or reaction to learners’ errors (e.g. corrective feedback) (Spada, 1997, p. 73)

In this article we will adopt the broader definition of form-focused instruction, that is, it is a form-focused approach that addresses the students’ need to attend to form.

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1 For a different view see Krashen (1999) and Sheen (2000).
As far as implementation is concerned, recent research has suggested the potential usefulness of form-focused activities which require learners to produce output collaboratively, the assumption being that through interaction the learners’ attention may become focused on those parts of their interlanguage that deviate from the target language or on forms that are not yet in the learners’ interlanguage repertoire (Doughty, 2001; Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain, 1997, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, 2001). Swain and Lapkin (2001, p. 100) point out that “Experimentation with several different types of classroom activity [...] suggested that, when completed collaboratively, they led to a focus on form as students engaged in constructing the meaning required by the task”.

In this paper we report on a study in which five form-focused activities were used with high-intermediate/advanced university EFL learners. Our purpose was to analyze learner performance on the five different activities and determine which ones seem to be more effective for this group of learners as to the amount and nature of attention to form generated.

2. The study

2.1. Background

This study responds to a double call for research on the nature of participants’ interaction promoted by different types of grammar activity (Fotos & Ellis, 1991), and the need for descriptive studies which provide evidence about how learners interpret and complete them (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Storch, 1998a, b). Previous research within the same EFL context (Alcón, 2002; García Mayo, 2001a; García Mayo, & Gavela González, 2001; García Mayo, & Pica, 2000a, b) supported the EFL environment as a learning environment in the sense that it promoted input, feedback and the production of output for L2 learning. However, that same research pointed to the need for more targeted, grammar-oriented approaches in view of the linguistic inaccuracies on learners’ part.

2.2. Subjects

The participants in this study were 14 adult learners (10 females and four males) who were in their third year of studies in the 4-year English Philology degree program at the University of the Basque Country. Their mean age was 20.8 years and the mean length of exposure to the English language in a classroom setting was 9.8 years. These learners receive instruction exclusively in English in all their degree-related subjects (phonetics, morphology, syntax, history of the English language, English and North American literature, etc.) and they are required to write term papers, present reports orally and take their exams in English as well. The program they follow in their English language classes is communicative (Savignon, 1991), with learner-centered activities but also including traditional grammar activities, as the
goal of the overwhelming majority of these learners is to become high school teachers of English.

2.3. The activities

The study is partially modeled on Storch (1998a) with the purpose of establishing comparisons whenever relevant and possible. Storch carried out her research in an ESL setting, with adult learners of intermediate to advanced proficiency. She used four activities which were chosen as they “represented a continuum in terms of overt focus on grammar: multiple choice, rational deletion (cloze), text reconstruction and short composition.” (p. 177). In our study we used five activities: cloze, multiple choice, dictogloss, text reconstruction and text editing (see the appendix). All of them are meaningful in our EFL context because learners are used to working in dyads, on their own, so the laboratory setting in which the study was carried out (see Section 2.4 below) was not really a laboratory but, rather, an opportunity for quiet work with few distractions. Besides, all had a communicative objective: the learners had to talk about the choices they made and apply their answers to the different demands of the activity. In what follows, we briefly describe the activities and the rationale for their use.

Cloze and multiple choice are traditional, structured activities with an overt focus on form but, in this case, they were designed in such a way that the two learners in the dyad had to interact in order to arrive at the appropriate answer. The cloze was a text adapted from the advanced section of Grammar Dictation (Wajnryb, 1990, p. 106) and the multiple choice was made up of two activities (one focused on articles, the other on prepositions) taken from Grammar Troublespots (Raimes, 1992). The dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990) is an activity which has been claimed to encourage learners to reflect on their own output (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 1994, 2001) and has shown its effectiveness in other contexts. In dictogloss a short text is read (twice) at normal speed to the learners, while the text is read the second time, students jot down familiar words. Then, the dyad pools its resources together to reconstruct the final version of the text. The text chosen was taken from the advanced section of Grammar Dictation (1990, p. 96) and it was a 124-word passage entitled ‘Women’s intuition’. Text reconstruction has also been claimed to be an effective activity for conscious attention to grammatical accuracy as learners work collaboratively and peer feedback is available (García Mayo, 2002; Storch, 1998a). The text used was adapted from the advanced section of Grammar Dictation (Wajnryb, 1990, p. 87) and it was a 76-word passage entitled ‘Phobia poll’. The editing passage has been used by Storch (1997) with intermediate ESL learners and it proved to be appropriate in that it drew learners’ attention to a wide range of grammatical items. The editing passage we used was adapted from Proficiency Testbuilder (Harrison, 1994, p. 47) and contained typical mistakes made by the group of learners participating in the study.

\(^2\)Activities from the intermediate section of this book had been used in a pilot study and they turned out to be too easy for the learners’ proficiency level.
The research questions guiding our work were the following:

1. Which activity allowed for more attention to form? \textit{(amount of attention to form)}
2. If learners pay attention to form, are the grammatical features of their concern related to the activity or not? \textit{(nature of focus on form)}
3. If learners pay attention to form and they have a problem with the linguistic item being discussed, how do they solve it? What knowledge sources do they fall back on? \textit{(nature of focus on form)}

2.4. Procedure

The study was carried out in a laboratory setting.\textsuperscript{3} The learners had previously filled in a questionnaire which contained information as to years of exposure to English in classroom settings, stays in English-speaking countries and subjective assessment of their competence in English (four skills). They worked in seven self-selected dyads (five female–female and two male–male dyads). The recordings were made in a period of one and a half months when the members of the dyads were available. The learners were familiar with all the activities except for dictogloss. That is why the whole group was given a training session in which the reconstruction stage was emphasized over the other three (preparation, dictation and analysis and correction). The instructions of all activities emphasized the idea of producing a correct paragraph and the need for learners to explain any changes they made in the form of the items inserted or corrected. Except for the dictogloss, in which the learners did not have access to the text until they had submitted their reconstructed version, only one piece of paper with instructions and activities was given to the dyads in order to encourage joint production (\textit{Storch, 1998a}, p. 178). The time given for each task was between 10 and 15 min.

The five activities were randomized according to Table 1.

2.5. Data analysis

The audio-taped interaction of the seven dyads in the five form-focused activities was transcribed by the researcher (total number of words: 13,078). In order to quantify the \textit{amount of attention to form} each of the activities generated, the unit of analysis used to code the data was the language-related episode (LRE). An LRE is defined as “any part of a dialogue in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct” (\textit{Swain, 1998}, p. 70).

\textsuperscript{3}This setting was chosen because of the special characteristics of classrooms in Spain. Language classes at the university level are characterized by a considerable number of students (50–70) whose erratic class attendance makes it quite difficult to implement any study. Class arrangement itself (bolted desks) is not the most appropriate for dyadic work either. In an experimental context like the one in the laboratory, learners are more likely to be focused on the activity and its completion.
The following example illustrates an LRE dealing with the use of articles, one of the grammatical aspects targeted by the multiple choice:

(3) S1

[... and well, the last sentence is nickels don’t grow on trees replied Mrs Bridge irritated by her manner ... well, we don’t have to put anything in this sentence because it is general ... the expression is general ... and it doesn’t need any article ...]

S2

[Yes ... it is in general ...]

[Dyad 1, multiple choice]

In the interaction above, both student 1 (S1) and student 2 (S2) agree that no article needs to be inserted before trees because we are making a generalization.

Both the researcher and a trained graduate student coded for all LREs and other aspects that will be considered in more detail in the following section. In our coding, each LRE dealt with one linguistic item, although it was possible for one episode to be embedded in another (Storch, 1998a; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). The coding between the two raters resulted in an agreement of 97%.

In this study we were not only interested in the amount of attention to form each activity generated, operationalized in terms of LREs, but also in the nature of the learners’ interaction, more specifically, in determining how learners justified their grammatical choices and the sources of knowledge they fell back on in order to resolve their grammatical problems (see also Storch, 1998a). A taxonomy of those knowledge sources was established based on the information in our data, that is to say, the taxonomy was not pre-established but, rather, data dependent and it mainly coincides with that proposed by Storch (Storch, 1998a, p. 180). The taxonomy was made up of seven categories, which are defined and illustrated in each of the examples below:

Table 1
Randomization of form-focused activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Dyad 1</th>
<th>Dyad 2</th>
<th>Dyad 3</th>
<th>Dyad 4</th>
<th>Dyad 5</th>
<th>Dyad 6</th>
<th>Dyad 7</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 = cloze, 2 = multiple choice, 3 = dictogloss, 4 = text reconstruction, 5 = text editing.

4 In the examples pauses are indicated by three dots. Italics are used to indicate that the learner(s) is/are reading the text provided.
Grammar: episodes in which the learners refer to a grammatical rule explicitly or implicitly:

(4) S1 S2

[...] *men are less inclined* ... it has to be an adjective. .. inclined to confess, you are inclined to do something ... to confession to confess ...
but after a preposition ... to confess ... what?
to is a preposition ... yeah ...
so it should be followed inclined to confessing ...
by ing ...
yeah ...
no, because to is part of the second verb ... inclined to confess .. yeah..
ok, I trust you

Intuition: episodes in which learners base their decision on what seems or sounds right. In these examples learners explicitly utter expressions such as “it sounds right” or they reread words and/or sentences a few times before making a decision:

(5) S1 S2

*after running up the stairs I was quite* ...
*breath* ... out of breath? ... 
I think it is out of breath because without
breath sounds weird, and .... yeah, out of breath sounds better

Context/discourse: episodes in which the learners pay attention to the text that precedes or follows the target item or in which they establish parallelisms with other items which, in their opinion, look the same:

(6) S1 S2

[...] *the poll* ... no, they excluded things like snakes and spiders ...

... because what we are talking about now reveals ... no, revealed, in the past because we have said everything in the past until now ...

Meaning: episodes (very rare in number) in which learners base their decisions on the knowledge of the word or topic they are dealing with:
and if your kidney does not work and your life... yeah, but I think it must be if your kidneys do not work because if one kidney does not work it doesn’t matter... you can live without one kidney...

if your kidneys don’t work, ok.

**Analogy:** episodes in which learners base their decision on similarities (potential or real) they find between items being considered:

(8) S1 S2

 [...] it was very good... you to help Dave with his homework mmm...
... it was very good of you?

it was very good of you that Dave did his homework.. to it was very kind of be good of...

yeah, with of because we know it is very kind of you... it is the same structure

**Combination of reasons:** extremely rare episodes in which learners combine two sources of knowledge (intuition + previous knowledge; intuition + analogy ... etc)

(9) S1 S2

nothing... the ordinary.. well, nothing out of the ordinary but nothing from...
I think so because of an analogy with Spanish nada the ordinary? fuera de lo común...

no, it doesn’t sound right...

ok, nothing out of the ordinary

**No explanation:** episodes in which learners made actual changes in specific grammatical items but no explanation is provided:

(10) S1 S2

 [...] in some countries the donor shortage problems... can be...
be...
alleviated now that people can pledge their organs after by, by...
death with signing...

by signing their consent on...

on their driver’s license

[Dyad 7, Text editing]

[Dyad 7, Multiple choice]

[Dyad 5, Multiple choice]

[Dyad 2, Cloze]
3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Quantitative comparison across activities

Tables 2 and 3 feature the quantitative comparison established across activities regarding several aspects.

As far as time taken to complete each activity, there are significant differences between the multiple choice/dictogloss tasks ($p$-value = 0.0083) and multiple choice/text editing tasks ($p$-value = 0.04070). The multiple choice task took longer than the others because it had a double focus on articles and prepositions, presented independently. That is also the reason why the number of turns there is also the highest (33–101 versus the other four activities whose range goes from 11–60 turns) and there are significant differences between multiple choice and all the other activities except for text-reconstruction.6 The multiple choice presents a similar range of turns in Storch (1998a) [22–116] but there is a strong contrast between the number of turns in the cloze and text reconstruction activities, much higher in her study (cloze: 63–151; text reconstruction: 96–247).

As for the percentage of LRE turns (in which turns dealing with language form, vocabulary and punctuation were computed) with respect to the total number of turns, we found that text editing (59%), text reconstruction (45%) and multiple choice (42%) were the activities that generated the highest number of LREs. Although the percentages are not as high as those reported on by Storch (1998a, p. 184), the finding is similar in the sense that text reconstruction and multiple choice are also the activities that generated the highest number of LREs (Storch did not use text editing). However, talk on LREs was not very frequent in the cloze (35%) and, to our surprise, not even in the dictogloss (14%)—both significantly different from the multiple choice.7 The finding is striking especially for the dictogloss because of the claims made about its efficacy in other settings. The dictogloss contrasted with the other four activities in that the stimulus the learners received was oral, so the expectation was that the learners would focus their attention on linguistic form (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). However, considering research based on the difference in modality of stimulus presentation (Leow, 1995; Murphy, 1997), one could anticipate that the activities which provided a written stimulus (cloze, multiple choice, text reconstruction and text editing) would elicit more attention to form because learners have a written version, whereas with the dictogloss they first had to understand the

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5 All tests were carried out at the 5% significance level. I will also like to clarify that the number of items considered for the binomial test was not the number of dyads but, rather, the number of LRE turns or LREs the seven dyads produced. As for the significance of the Mann–Whitney–Wilcoxon test, the number was, indeed, seven but due to the fact that this is a non-parametric test and, thus, no strong assumptions are required, the test is robust for small sample sizes. In any case, and as suggested by a reviewer, standard deviations are now provided.

6 Multiple choice/cloze ($p$-value = 0.0407); multiple choice/dictogloss ($p$-value = 0.0123); multiple choice/text-editing ($p$-value = 0.0150).

7 Multiple choice/cloze ($p$-value = 0.00481021); multiple choice/dictogloss ($p$-value = 0.00). In fact, when establishing comparisons between all activities, the only pair that did not turn out to be significantly different was multiple choice/text reconstruction ($p$-value = 0.632424).
Table 2
Descriptive statistics across activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Multiple choice</th>
<th>Cloze</th>
<th>Text reconstruction</th>
<th>Dictogloss</th>
<th>Text editing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time taken to complete activity (average, range and standard deviation)</td>
<td>8.1' 8–10 0.64</td>
<td>7.2' 5–8 1.03</td>
<td>7.8' 8–10 2.05</td>
<td>5.7' 3–8 1.58</td>
<td>6.8' 5–8 1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LRE turns as % of number of turns (standard deviation)</td>
<td>42% 0.028</td>
<td>35% 0.031</td>
<td>45% 0.030</td>
<td>14% 0.030</td>
<td>59% 0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LREs dealing with form as % of total LREs (standard deviation)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>96% 0.013</td>
<td>96% 0.012</td>
<td>75% 0.038</td>
<td>97% 0.012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
text provided as an aural stimulus and then reconstruct it on the basis of the key words they had chosen to write down (García Mayo, 2002).

In terms of LREs dealing directly with language form, Table 2 shows that all the activities generated a large amount of attention to form: all talk was devoted to grammatical choices and accuracy in the multiple choice task, and a very high amount was also generated in text editing (97%), text reconstruction (96%) and cloze (96%). The lowest amount goes again to the dictogloss task: 75% of grammatical LREs and the 25% remaining consisted of asking for meaning of words and expressions.

Therefore, and as far as our first research question (which activity allowed for more attention to form?) is concerned the answer is that text editing, multiple choice and text reconstruction are the activities in which there is more attention to language form (grammar, vocabulary and punctuation). Out of the turns devoted to LREs, all activities devoted a very high percentage to discussion of grammatical choices and accuracy issues, with the lowest percentage (75%) going to the dictogloss.

At this point we need to clarify that we do not want to establish any implication here in the sense that the more LREs an activity generates, the better the activity would be with respect to learner attention to form. In fact, a form-focused activity can generate a large number of LREs but they may be of a similar kind. Let us consider, then, not only the quantitative analysis but also the qualitative one (the nature of that focus on form).

3.2. Qualitative comparison across activities

In this section we will provide answers to our two remaining research questions. Table 4 provides information as to the grammatical features targeted by each activity and what learners focused on when interacting to solve them. That is, it answers research question 2: If learners pay attention to form, are the grammatical features of concern related to the activity or not?

As we can see, the only activity in which learners focused exactly on the grammatical features targeted was multiple choice, because of the very nature of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Cloze</th>
<th>Text reconstruction</th>
<th>Dictogloss</th>
<th>Text editing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple choice</td>
<td>a,b</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>c,a,b</td>
<td>c,a</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cloze</td>
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<td>Text reconstruction</td>
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<td>Dictogloss</td>
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<td>Text editing</td>
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NS: statistically non-significant.

a Statistically significant difference—number of turns (Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test).
b Statistically significant difference—LRE turns (two-sample binomial test).
c Statistically significant difference—time (Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test).
activity. In text reconstruction, text editing and cloze, learners focused to a varying degree on the features targeted by the activities but on other features as well. Dictogloss turned out to be the activity which generated fewer grammatical LREs (the text reconstruction generated eight times more—see García Mayo, 2002)—and those were not related to the activity. In general, learners pay attention to form but they do not negotiate the forms that are the focus of the activity exclusively: some times they focus on those forms and some times they just focus on those they consider important.

We have seen then that all activities chosen generated a great amount of attention to form, but not all that attention focused on the items targeted by each activity. We still have to provide an answer to the third research question, that is, if learners find a problem while discussing the linguistic item of their concern: how do they solve it? What knowledge sources do they fall back on? Research by Swain and Lapkin (1995) claims that it is important to study and analyze the reasoning learners engage in as they move from encountering a problem in the L2 to developing a solution to it. Some of the mental processes learners reflect in the changes made to their output (reasoning about linguistic choices, comparing cross-linguistic equivalents ...) seem to be potentially involved in second language learning. Table 5 provides information about the knowledge sources learners used.

Probably, the feature that calls our attention is the high percentage found in the ‘no explanation’ category across activities. That is, learners make specific changes in the linguistic items being discussed but they do not provide any explanation for those changes. Dictogloss features the highest percentage of no explanations (88%), followed by the text reconstruction (59%). This high percentage across activities is striking because of two reasons: (i) the instructions emphasized the need to provide an explanation for all changes made and (ii) as high-intermediate/advanced level learners they should have had the resources to verbalize grammar rules more easily (Green & Hecht, 1992). In other words, learners could have used cross-linguistic
comparisons or extend their first language knowledge to second language contexts. The same findings are reported by Storch (1998a) for her intermediate to advanced ESL learners.

Table 5 also shows the important role intuition\(^8\) plays as a knowledge source for these learners. Intuition is used 42% of the times to resolve doubts about grammatical LREs both in text editing and cloze, and 23% of the times in multiple choice. It is worth mentioning that intuition led to a correct resolution in 80% of the cases in text editing and cloze and in 72% of the cases in multiple choice.

Unlike the learners in the study by Storch (1998a), who used a combination of knowledge sources to resolve grammatical episodes, our learners used that strategy only in the multiple choice activity and in very few occasions (8%). However, they do fall back on grammar explanations across activities, although not as much as expected at this level of proficiency.

### 4. Conclusion

Current interest in grammar pedagogy has led to the use of form-focused activities which require learners to produce output collaboratively (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) because of the potential facilitating effect of such a pedagogical approach in terms of learning a second language. This paper has examined how seven dyads of high-intermediate/advanced adult EFL learners completed five form-focused activities. Our purpose was to analyze learner performance and determine which activity seemed to be more effective for this group of learners as to the amount and nature of attention to form each activity generated.

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\(^8\)As rightly pointed out by one reviewer, intuition should be understood here as procedural knowledge (not internalized grammar) whose expression is hampered by inadequate metalanguage. In Anderson’s (1983) Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) Model, the transition from declarative to procedural knowledge takes place in three stages, namely, declarative, associative, and autonomous. In the autonomous stage procedures become increasingly automated and the ability to verbalize knowledge can disappear entirely.
As far as the quantitative analysis of the data, we found that, except for dictogloss, all the remaining activities generated a high amount of attention to form among those LREs identified. They all elicited discussion and reflection on the use of language and they seemed to push learners to reflect on their language choices by means of hypothesis testing strategies which have been claimed to be important for the process of language development (Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

With regard to the qualitative analysis, we observed that not all the talk focused on the linguistic items targeted by the activities, which seems to indicate that learners have their own agenda, so to speak, when dealing with language problems (Storch, 1997). Besides, it was striking to find ‘no explanation’ for an answer to the question of the knowledge sources learners fall back on when trying to solve formal problems. It was striking because we expected these learners to have a wider range of resources to verbalize grammar rules that would help to resolve their grammatical problems.

Another surprising finding, considering research being done to date in other settings (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Lapierre, 1994; Swain, 1998; Swain & Lapkin, 2000, 2001), was the very few LREs generated by the dictogloss (cf. García Mayo, 2001c, 2002). One reason could be the different stimulus (oral) received and the lack of familiarity of the learners with the dictogloss procedure. Definitely, much more research is needed on this activity at this and other proficiency levels (see Kuiken & Vedder, 2002).

The limitations of our study should be pointed out as well: further research comparing activities should be carried out using a post-test (Lapierre, 1994; Swain, 1998; Williams, 2001) with tailor-made items to analyze whether those elements that are the focus of the LREs are used in a targetlike manner in subsequent production. Only in that way could we measure learners’ development.

Much more research is needed on the two issues mentioned by Kowal & Swain (1994, p. 73): the choice of activities and how participants themselves interpret and complete them. Studies should be carried out with different activities for populations with different proficiency levels and different age groups (Oliver, 2000; Williams, 1999). Descriptive accounts of how learners interact while performing these activities are extremely necessary so that researchers can consider whether and to what extent they are effective for the different levels they are designed for (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000).

Acknowledgements

This research has been possible thanks to the financial support of research grant 103.130-HA011/99 from the University of the Basque Country. I would also like to thank Professor Teresa Pica for her supervision in the design of the activities and for her continuous encouragement. Thanks also go to Professor Vicente Núñez Antón (Department of Econometrics and Statistics—University of the Basque Country) for the statistical analysis of the data, to José Antonio Espinosa who helped with the identification and classification of LREs and to the students who volunteered for the study, who even confessed to have had fun with the activities! All errors remain my own.
Appendix. Activities

Cloze

Complete the following text. You will find that important words are missing. Work with your partner to insert the missing words and make whatever other changes you think would be necessary to produce a meaningful and grammatically correct paragraph. Explain why you would make each change.

Transplant surgery, once only ___ futuristic notion, is fast becoming ___ daily event. For many, ___, the bitter reality is a long waiting list, and in ___ case of heart-lung candidates, most ___ before a donor appears. In some countries, the donor shortage problems ___ be alleviated now that people can pledge their organs after death ___ signing their consent ___ their driver’s license. ___ the signed consent gives legal permission ___ the use of organs, the transplant team ___ to relatives wherever possible before going ahead. However, the pledge does not mean that if relatives cannot be ___ or do not exist, a person wishing to donate organs can do so legally without depending ___ others’ permission.

Multiple choice

A. Insert _a/an/the_ where necessary in the blanks following the passage. Explain the reason(s) for your choices:

Mrs. Bridge, emptying several wastebaskets, discovered ___ dirty comb in Ruth’s basket. “What’s this doing here” Ruth inquired late that afternoon when she got home and found ___ comb on her dresser. “I found it in ___ wastebasket. What was it doing there?” Ruth said she had thrown it away. “Do you think we’re made of ___ money?” Mrs. Bridge demanded. “When ___ comb gets dirty you don’t throw it away, you wash it, young lady.” “It cost ___ nickel, “Ruth said angrily. She flung her books onto ___ bed and stripped off her sweater. “___ nickels don’t grow on ___ trees,” replied Mrs. Bridge, irritated by her manner. (Even S. Connell Mrs. Bridge. Excerpt taken from Grammar Troublespots (1992, p. 90) by A. Raimes. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, Inc.)

B. Read the following sentences. Work with your partner to choose the word that you think helps to convey the meaning of each sentence and explain the reason for your choice:

1. It was very good ___ you to help Dave with his homework.
   (A) for    (B) to    (C) with    (D) of

2. Nothing ___ the ordinary ever happens here.
   (A) from    (B) out of    (C) about    (D) within

3. After running up the stairs I was quite ___ breath.
   (A) out of    (B) from    (C) without    (D) beyond
4. We are ____ no obligation to change goods which were not purchased here.
(A) with (B) to (C) under (D) at

5. It seems to be your boss who is ____ fault in this case.
(A) at (B) under (C) with (D) for

6. Tina is an authority ____ Byzantine architecture.
(A) for (B) on (C) with (D) in

7. Diane showed a complete disregard ____ her own safety.
(A) with (B) for (C) to (D) of

8. For Romeo and Juliet it was love ____ first sight.
(A) at (B) with (C) by (D) to

9. I am surprised ____ you, forgetting your briefcase like that.
(A) by (B) with (C) to (D) at

10. Our house has been ____ the market for months.
(A) on (B) in (C) at (D) of

Dictogloss

You will hear a text being read at normal speed. The text will be read twice. Your task will be to reproduce this text as faithfully as possible and in a grammatically accurate form. The first time you hear the text, just listen. Do not write anything. The second time your partner and you are allowed to write down any key words that you feel will help you to reproduce the original text.

1. The fact that women generally are more perceptive than men has given rise to what is commonly known as “women’s intuition”. 2. This quality is particularly evident in women who have brought up young children, for a mother who has a young child relies largely on non-verbal channels of communication. 3. Thus, many women develop an ability to pick up and decipher non-verbal signals, as well as an accurate eye for small detail. 4. This is why few husbands can lie to their wives and get away with it and why, conversely, many women can pull the wool over a man’s eyes without his realizing it. 5. It is also believed to be the reason why women often become more perceptive and skilled negotiators than men.

Text reconstruction

Work with your partner to insert the words missing in this text and make whatever other changes may be necessary to produce a meaningful and grammatically correct paragraph. Explain why you make each change:

Recent poll the subject fear ask people to respond a list of eight common fobias. Most include speed, heights, lifts, crowds, flying, confined spaces, open spaces, and dark. Exclude things like snakes and spiders.

Poll reveal that many more women than men admit experience fear. Before you jump conclusion that men are braver than women, you be warn that one explanation the numbers in poll may be that men less incline than women confess fear.
Editing passage

As you read the following text, you will probably find that the language could be improved: grammatical problems interfere with the way the message is conveyed. Your task is to edit the text so that the message is conveyed more clearly. As you do this, underline each change that you make and explain why in each case.

I am agree with the idea that many progresses have been made in technology. Nowadays doctors are able to cure diseases because of which people is worried about. By the help of technology, they even manage to eradicate those diseases.

If your heart does not work properly, surgeons implant you an other one, and if your kidney does not work and your life depends on a machine, you can get a new kidney. Life expectancy increased a lot and medical progress relieves our lifes.

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