The effectiveness of two form-focused tasks in advanced EFL pedagogy

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Recent research on second language pedagogy advocates the use of form-focused tasks which require learners to produce output collaboratively. This article reports on the results of a study carried out with high-intermediate/advanced EFL learners who completed two form-focused tasks (a dictogloss and a text reconstruction) collaboratively. The learners' interaction in both tasks was codified and language-related episodes (LREs) identified. Results indicate that (i) learners' attention to form was task-dependent; (ii) the linguistic features of concern were those targeted by the tasks in the case of text-reconstruction, and (iii) high-intermediate/advanced learners provide no justification for most of the decisions concerning LREs. The results are considered in the light of current claims about the need for classroom teachers and researchers to carefully consider the choice of task and how learners interpret and complete it.

Introduction

Current interest in task-based methodology (Bygate, Skehan & Swain 2001; Crookes & Gass 1993a,b; Skehan 1998) finds support in both second language acquisition (SLA) studies and in communicative language teaching (CLT) (Skehan 1996). SLA studies provide the theoretical rationale within the perspective that language is best learned and taught through *interaction*. Research has shown that when interaction is modified through the triggers, signals and responses of negotiation, the learners' needs to access L2 input and produce output are enhanced considerably. Thus, negotiation is claimed to play an important role in setting up conditions for L2 learning. These include:

i)   input conditions, whereby learners can access positive, comprehensible input that supplies lexical and morphosyntactic data for their learning (Pica 1991; Pica, Doughty & Young 1986; Pica, Young & Doughty 1987);

ii) negative input and feedback that draw learners' attention to form–meaning relationships and toward noticing a gap between their own output and target input they need to access (Lightbown & Spada 1990; Mackey, Gass & McDonough 2000; White et al. 1992);

iii) output conditions through which learners can produce meaningful L2 output and modify it toward greater comprehensibility (Swain 1995).

These features are illustrated in the following example (Pica 2002: 4):

1) L2 learner: the boys arrive at station (*trigger*)
   native speaker: what did you say about the boys? (*signal*)
   L2 learner: they arrive at station (*response*)
   native speaker: oh, really? (*follow-up*)

As shown, the native speaker's signal provided the learner with negative input as to the overall comprehensibility of the message and also with positive input about noun phrase grammar. By segmenting *the boys* from the learner's trigger and placing it after the preposition *about*, the native speaker showed the learner that *the boys* could appear both as the subject of the statement and as the object of a preposition. Modified output was also shown through pronoun substitution by the learner in the utterance labelled as *response*.

The types of tasks advocated by SLA researchers – tasks encouraging learner interaction – converge neatly with the sort of activities that are central to CLT – classroom activities devised with the goal of providing learners with opportunities for authentic communication. The widespread justification for their use was that those activities encourage fluent and creative use of language resources (Allright 1984; Brumfit 1984; DiPietro 1987; Nunan 1989; Prabhu 1987).

However, findings from immersion acquisition studies (Harley 1998; Lightbown 1998; Spada & Lightbown 1989) suggest that emphasis on communicative success is insufficient for the development of targetlike proficiency. Learners in immersion programs are able to convey meaning in their second language but they normally do so with non-targetlike morphology and syntax (Swain 1985) in spite of years of exposure to comprehensible input and opportunities for interaction.

Considering the results of empirical studies, some researchers advocate a pedagogical approach that addresses the learner's need to attend to form on the basis of its potential facilitating effect in second language learning (Doughty & Williams 1998; Harley 1998; Lightbown 1991; Long 1991; Long & Robinson 1998). There is no clear agreement on *definitions* and *procedures* to implement this attention to form (Ellis 2001). Thus, definitions go from the narrow one provided by Long and Robinson and interpreted as meaning a reactive, unplanned approach used to draw learners' attention to form, to broader definitions such as the one provided by Spada which allows for planning of the elements to be focused on in order to attract the learner's attention:

> 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: 23)

> . . . 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 reactions to learners' errors (e.g. corrective feedback). (Spada 1997: 73)

The degree of explicitness of form-focused approaches, ranging from an "occasional shift of attention to linguistic features" to a provision of explicit positive and negative evidence, is a matter of discussion in the literature (Doughty & Williams 1998). In this article we will adopt the broader definition of form-focused instruction; that is, it is a form-focused approach that addresses the student's need to attend to form.

As far as implementation is concerned, recent studies in second language pedagogy advocate the use of tasks which require learners to *produce output collaboratively*. Swain (1995) suggests that it is possible to design tasks that get learners to produce language and then reflect upon its form; that is to say, if the task is devised so that learners have to talk about the language they are producing, their talk may serve their awareness of language form. Swain (1985, 1995) proposes three potential roles of output (i.e. saying or writing something in the target language) in second language learning:

i)   **noticing:** producing output is an opportunity for language learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and notice that they do not know how to convey the meaning they need;
ii) **hypothesis formulation and testing**: the learners may use their output as a way to try out hypotheses about the structure of the second language;
iii) **metalinguistic function**: learners may reflect on their own target language use, and their output serves a metalinguistic function enabling them to control and internalise linguistic knowledge. (Swain 1997: 118–9)

Kowal and Swain (1994), Swain (1998) and Swain and Lapkin (1995, 1998, 2000, 2001) argue for the use of collaborative tasks in which learners work in pairs or small groups. Their claim is that through talk in collaborative tasks, learners notice linguistic problems; through their dialogue in those tasks learners engage in making meaning clearer by debating language form. Consider the following example by Donato (1994), mentioned in Swain (1997: 123–4):

2) S1   . . . and then I'll say . . . *tu as souvenu notre anniversaire de marriage* . . . or should I say *mon anniversaire?*
   S2   *Tu as . . .*
   S3   *Tu as . . .*
   S1   *Tu as souvenu . . .* 'you remembered?'

S3   Yea, but isn't that reflexive? *Tu t'as . . .*
S1   Ah, *tu t'as souvenu*
S2   Oh, it's *tu es*
S1   *Tu es*
S3   *tu es, tu es, tu . . .*
S1   *t'es, tu t'es*
S3   *tu t'es*
S1   *Tu t'es souvenu*

As Swain points out, no student appeared to have the ability to construct the compound past tense of the reflexive verb 'to remember' alone, but *together* these learners succeeded. They have produced language and reflected on it. *Collaborative dialogue* is thus defined as "the joint construction of language – or knowledge about language – by two or more individuals; it is what allows performance to outstrip competence; it's where language use and language learning can co-occur" (Swain 1997: 115).

Foster (1998) also suggests the implementation of tasks that require students to negotiate the form of their output, in light of the results obtained in her classroom-based study. Foster observed the language produced by intermediate EFL students engaged in different types of tasks (required vs. optional information exchange) in both dyads and small groups with regard to questions in the areas of language production, comprehensible input and modified output. Although the general results showed no clear overall effect for task type or grouping, in general "the dyad setting, coupled with the obligation to exchange information, was the 'best' for language production, negotiation and modified output" (Foster 1998: 18). Specifically, as for the issue of learners' attention to form, in this study the learners who produced the most modified output were the ones in a dyad carrying out a task on the structure of interrogatives, that is, those who were clearly focusing on language form.

The purpose of the present article is to analyze the interlanguage of high-intermediate/advanced EFL learners when completing two form-focused tasks (dictogloss and text reconstruction) collaboratively in dyads. The study should be understood in the light of the need for descriptive accounts of how learners interpret and complete these tasks (Kowal & Swain 1994; Storch 1998a,b) with the ultimate goal of assessing their suitability and improving on their design. Our research questions were as follows:

i)   To what extent do dictogloss and text-reconstruction tasks result in the learner paying attention to form? That is, how much talk was there on language-related issues?
ii)   (a) If learners pay attention to form, are the features of their concern task-related (i.e. the features targeted by the task) or not?
      (b) If learners pay attention to form and they have a problem with the linguistic item being discussed, how do they solve it? That is, what knowledge sources do they fall back on?

These questions were concerned, therefore, not only with the *amount* of attention to form that the tasks might generate (research question i) but also with the *nature* of that attention to form (research question ii). As we will see in more detail in the section on data analysis, learner attention to form was operationalized through the identification of language-related episodes (LREs).[1]

Methodology

SUBJECTS

The participants were fourteen adult EFL learners (ten females and four males) who were in their third year of studies in the four-year English Philology degree program of a major Spanish university. 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.

PROCEDURE

The study was carried out in a laboratory setting.[2] The recordings were made over a period of one and a half months when the members of the self-selected dyads (five female–female pairs and two male–male pairs) were available.[3] The data presented here are part of a larger study which consisted of five form-focused tasks given at random to the seven dyads and which was designed to gain an understanding of which types of form-focused task would generate a higher amount of learners' attention to form in an EFL setting.[4]

The two tasks reported on here, namely the dictogloss and text reconstruction, were selected from the five that comprise the larger study for the following reasons:

i)   Both have been shown to be effective as far as encouraging learners to reflect on their output; both have learners explain their choices and work together to reconstruct a text, which may deepen their awareness of language form (for dictogloss see Kowal & Swain 1994; Lapierre 1994; Swain 1998; Swain & Lapkin 2000, 2001; for text reconstruction see Storch 1998a,b).

ii) The input characteristics provided by each task were different. Unlike the text-reconstruction task, the dictogloss provides learners with an auditory stimulus, a text in their L2 which they have to understand before they can get on with its reconstruction. In the text-reconstruction task, the learners are presented with a written stimulus and they can reconstruct the paragraph as they go along. Taking into consideration research based on the difference in modality of stimulus presentation (Leow 1995; Murphy 1997), we anticipated that the two tasks would generate attention to form differently. Specifically, we anticipated that the text-reconstruction task would elicit more attention to form because learners had the written version of the task they had to reconstruct, whereas with the dictogloss they first had to

understand the text provided as an aural stimulus and then reconstruct it on the basis of the key words they had chosen to write down. We hypothesized that learners in the dictogloss task would be more concerned with producing a coherent paragraph than with paying attention to particular form-related issues.

Dictogloss task

A *dictogloss* (Wajnryb 1990: 5) is a procedure which encourages students to reflect on their own output. A short text is read (twice) at normal speed to the learners; the first time they just listen, and when the text is read the second time, they jot down some key words that they feel will help to reproduce the original text. Then the dyad pools its resources to reconstruct their version of the text. In the final stage, the version produced by the students is subjected to closer analysis and comparison. Wajnryb claims that through both the task of reconstruction and the following error analysis, students refine their understanding of the language being used.

The dictogloss is designed to draw the learners' attention to language form. It is claimed that during the co-construction of the passage, the students come to notice their grammatical strengths and weaknesses and then try to overcome these weaknesses when attempting to co-produce the text (Nassaji 2000: 247). The text chosen was taken from the advanced section[5] of *Grammar Dictation* (Wajnryb 1990: 96); it was a 124-word passage entitled "Women's intuition", and its focal structures were clausal connectors, defining relative clauses, articles (definite, indefinite and zero) and adverbs (see Appendix 1). The choice of these items was based on previous research with students with a similar proficiency level at the same institutional setting (García Mayo 2001; García Mayo & Pica 2000a,b).

As the learners were not familiar with the dictogloss procedure, 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). In the dictogloss which was used for this study the instructions emphasized the need to reproduce the text the learners had listened to as faithfully as possible and to explain the different choices they had to make while reconstructing it. This was done in order to make the task more challenging, considering the students' proficiency level. The researcher read the instructions – although the students had a copy with them as well – and then the task proceeded as outlined above. The time given to complete the task was 15 minutes, and the learners' interaction was audio-taped.

Text-reconstruction task

The second task, *text reconstruction*, has also been claimed to be an effective form-focused task, as learners work collaboratively and peer feedback is available (Storch 1998a,b). The text used was adapted from the advanced section of *Grammar Dictation* (Wajnryb 1990: 87); it was a 76-word passage entitled "Phobia poll" in which learners had to insert appropriate function words (e.g.

articles, prepositions), linking words and inflectional morphemes (tense and aspect markers) to produce an appropriate text (see Appendix 2). The rationale for the choice of these items was the same mentioned above for the items targeted by the dictogloss, that is, they had been identified in previous research with a similar group of learners as items in need of a form-focused approach. In order to encourage joint production, only one copy of the text was provided to the two members of the dyad (Storch 1997: 222). The time given to complete the task was 15 minutes, and the learners' interaction was also audio-taped.

DATA ANALYSIS

The audio-taped interaction of the seven dyads in the dictogloss and the text-reconstruction tasks was transcribed. The average time to complete the dictogloss task was 5.7 minutes, and it took the learners an average of 7.8 minutes to complete the text-reconstruction task. The average number of turns was 26.5 for the dictogloss and 39.1 for the text-reconstruction task[6] (see Table 1).

As the purpose of this research was to investigate the amount and nature of attention to form that the two tasks generated, the unit of analysis used to code data for such instances was the *language-related episode (LRE)*. A language-related episode 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 (Swain 1998: 70). As Ellis (2000: 201) has put it, LREs are:

> occasions where linguistic form is explicitly discussed by the learners. Such episodes arise when learners temporarily attend to form in the context of performing a task. They involve what might be called the 'negotiation of form' – an attempt to determine collaboratively which form to use in order to express meaning accurately and coherently.

The following example illustrates an LRE[7]:

3) **S1**   **S2**
                                             the poll reveals that many more
                                             women . . . I'll just put more . . .
   ok, that's fine . . .   or much more?
   much more . . .   but women is countable . . .
   yeah . . .
   I think is better with many . . .   ok . . .
   (Dyad 5, text-reconstruction task, lines 30–35)

In the above exchange, speaker 2 (S2) brings up the issue of whether to use *much* or *more* with a noun like *women*. Speaker 1 (S1) repeats *much more* to check how it sounds, but S2 immediately remembers that *women* is a countable noun. S1 agrees and the two learners decide to leave the sentence as provided in the original text. In our coding, each LRE dealt with only one linguistic item, although it was possible for one episode to be embedded in another (Storch 1998a; Swain & Lapkin 1995).

Table 1. *Quantitative comparison between the two tasks*

	Dictogloss	Text reconstruction
Time taken to complete task		
average	5.7 min.	7.8 min.
range	3–8 min.	8–10 min.
Number of turns taken		
average	26.5	39.1
range	12–52	29–60
LRE turns as % of total number of turns	14.4%**	44.8%**

** Statistically significant difference ($p < 0.00005$)
test statistic: $z = -6.4555$ using a two-sample binomial test

Once all the data were coded for LREs, each task was analyzed for the distribution of turns, that is, the number of turns allocated to discussing LREs compared to other types of turns (for example, task-management episodes in which learners discussed what the task was about and what needed to be done). Table 1 features the quantitative comparison between the two tasks.

In a second stage of the coding, the features of concern for these learners were identified and the transcripts were analyzed for the explanations, if any, learners provided to resolve those concerns. A four-way taxonomy was established based on the their justifications – the categories in the taxonomy were not pre-established but rather were data-dependent and mainly coincide with those of Storch (1998b). Examples from the transcripts in our database illustrate the categories in the taxonomy:

Grammar – justifications with articulated or non-articulated grammatical rules:

4) **S1**   **S2**
           we put rather most people because . . .
           we think that this sentence . . .
 refers to the people. . . .   to the people. . . .
 who are doing the poll . . . yes, and the sentence needs
           a subject and that's all
 (Dyad 1, text-reconstruction task, lines 26–30)

Discourse – justifications based on references beyond the sentence level:

5) **S1**   **S2**
           so a recent poll about the
           subject fear *ask people*
           to respond a list of eight
           common fobias . . . most

of them, yeah, we could write
two points [learner refers to
semicolon] to make an
enumeration . . .   yeah . . .
(Dyad 2, text-reconstruction task, lines 6–13)

Intuition – justifications which reflect a subjective sense of what sounds/seems right and what does not:

6) **S1**   **S2**
                                               before you jump conclusion that
                                               men are braver than women . . . (. . .)
                                               before jumping . . .
into the conclusion . . .   or before you jump into the
                                               conclusion . . .
yeah, the preposition sounds
right . . .
(Dyad 6, text-reconstruction, lines 47–53)

No explanation – examples in which modifications are made but no explanation is provided:

7) **S1**   **S2**
before you jump to the
conclusion that men are
braver than women . . . you have to
be warned that an explanation . . . to
the numbers . . .   warned about?
you have to be warned that the numbers . . .   in poll or in the poll?
in the poll   comma maybe?
no, I don't think it needs a comma . . .
(Dyad 3, text-reconstruction, lines 50–57)

In the above exchange, the two learners make decisions about the use of pre-positions, the use of the definite article and punctuation, but no explanation is given for those decisions.

Results and discussion

AMOUNT OF ATTENTION TO FORM

With regard to our first research question (*To what extent do dictogloss and text-reconstruction tasks result in the learner paying attention to form?*), Table 1 provides information about the percentage of turns devoted to LREs and shows that there is a significant difference between the two tasks ($p < 0.00005$), with

Table 2. *Language-related episodes (LREs) generated by each task*

	Dictogloss	Text reconstruction
Grammatical features		
verb tense/aspect/form	1	20
prepositions	0	18
determiners	0	16
sentence structure	2	14
word form	5	11
subject/verb agreement	0	6
linking nouns in noun phrases	0	3
linking ideas	0	2
passive	1	1
word order	0	1
Vocabulary		
asking for meaning of word/ expression	3	1
asking for English equivalent	0	1
Punctuation	0	2
Total LREs	12	96

the text reconstruction generating three times more LRE turns than the dictogloss. No significant differences were found with respect to time taken to complete each task or the number of turns in each of them (Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon test).

Table 2 features the number and type of LREs each task generated. The LREs found in our database dealt with grammatical features, vocabulary and punctuation, a distinction also established in previous research by Storch (1998b: 296).

Table 2 shows a striking difference in the number of LREs generated by the two tasks. Specifically, the results show that the text-reconstruction task generated eight times more LREs than the dictogloss task (96 vs. 12). Thus, the descriptive account of the learners' interaction when engaged in the two form-focused tasks shows that, as anticipated, there are differences in the *amount* of attention to form the two tasks generated. As mentioned above, when reconstructing the original text they had listened to twice in the dictogloss, learners needed first to have understood the text and then to reconstruct it. In the text-reconstruction task, the written input seems to have allowed them to talk about form-related issues while completing the activity. In no way do we want to imply that the more LREs a task generates, the better that task would be with respect to learner attention to form – it may be the case that a form-focused task generates a large number of LREs that are all of a very similar type.[8] That is the reason why we have not only looked at the *number* of LREs but also at the *nature* of those LREs.

NATURE OF ATTENTION TO FORM

Our second research question addressed the issue of the *nature* of the LREs with respect to (a) whether those LREs were task-related or not, that is, whether the features targeted by the task were of concern in the interaction learners had, and (b) the knowledge sources learners used when trying to solve a problem with a linguistic item.

Task-related features

As far as *task-related features*, there is again a considerable difference between dictogloss and text reconstruction. In the dictogloss, four out of the seven dyads in our study reconstructed the text from the very few words they had taken as notes and with no discussion of any of the features targeted by the task (namely, clausal connectors, defining relative clauses, articles and adverbs) or any other formal features.[9] In the remaining dyads, two instances of clause connectors (sentence structure) were the only task-related features found (cf. Table 2). The highest number of LREs in the dictogloss task concentrated on issues regarding word form (5) or asking for the meaning of words or expressions (3). When completing the dictogloss, learners seemed to be more concerned about the form and meaning of words and expressions than about the features targeted by the task. A possible explanation could be that when the dyads pooled their resources to reconstruct their version of the text that had been read to them, the learners could just fall back on discourse/composition strategies. For example, learners used simple sentences when writing, thus avoiding the use of connectors.

This concern for the meaning of lexical items or expressions is similar to that found in Foster (1998) and Williams (1999). In the context of a classroom study in which learners completed both required and optional information exchange tasks in dyads and small groups, Foster found that very few students produced any modified utterance. Out of 87 negotiation moves, only 20 (23%) prompted modified responses, and out of those 20, 11 (55%) were semantic in nature, that is, episodes in which learners paraphrased problem utterances or substituted a different word. Williams (1999) carried out a small-scale study with eight participants in four communicative learner-centered ESL classrooms; she found that, overwhelmingly, the focus of learners' LREs was on lexical meaning rather than morphosyntactic features.

Conversely, in the text-reconstruction task, the learners focused precisely on three out of the four features the task had targeted (tense-aspect morphemes, determiners and prepositions). This is an interesting finding because it shows a parallelism with previous work by Storch (1998b) in an ESL setting with intermediate-to-advanced learners. Those features were found to be problematic in previous research within an EFL setting (García Mayo 2001; García Mayo & Pica 2000a,b). One possible explanation for the emphasis on those features in the text-reconstruction task could be that the learners were required to insert precisely those function words; on the other hand, research has shown that those features are persistent areas of concern for advanced learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Boffman 1989). Besides those features, attention was also paid to

sentence structure (14 LREs), word form (11 LREs) and subject/verb agree-
ment (6 LREs). In what follows we provide several examples illustrating some of
the form-focused features discussed by the different dyads:

8) **S1**   **S2**
   oh, ok . . . I thought this
   referred to . . . because these
   may be recent polls . . .   all right, you are right . . .it
                                                    could be like that . . . recent
                                                    polls concerning the subject of
                                                    fear asked . . . have asked, yeah,
                                                    because it is a recent event . . .
   (Dyad 4, text-reconstruction task, lines 13–18)

In the above exchange, speaker 2 offers an explanation of the use of *have asked*
instead of *asked* based on her knowledge of grammar.

9) **S1**   **S2**
   recent poll subject fear . . . a recent
   poll about the subject of fear . . .   yes
   'a' recent because you need an
   indefinite article . . . because we don't
   know which is the poll it refers to . . .   yeah . . . and we have
                                                    put the preposition 'about'
                                                    because it fits very well . . .

   and the preposition 'of' because we
   have to link those words . . . 'subject'
   and 'fear' . . .
   (Dyad 1, text-reconstruction task, lines 1–10)

This exchange takes place at the beginning of the text-reconstruction task. We
can see here that the learners provide an explanation for the use of the indefinite
article; as for the use of the prepositions, one (*about*) is used following intuition
("it fits well") and the other (*of*) based on the need to link two nouns.

10) **S1**   **S2**
                                                    and here we have to put
                                                    something . . . a connector . . .
    a connector and a subject . . .
    we have to change the third
    sentence because it hasn't got
    a subject . . .   yeah . . .
    (Dyad 3, text-reconstruction task, lines 18–23)

In the above excerpt, both learners agree that they need to link ideas using a con-
nector and they need to modify the structure of the sentence by adding a subject.

Table 3. *Knowledge sources used to resolve LREs in each task*

	Dictogloss	Text reconstruction
grammar	6%	29%
discourse	–	6%
intuition	6%	6%
no explanation	88%	59%

Knowledge sources

The second aspect of the learners' nature of attention to form had to do with the *knowledge sources* they fell back on when they were paying attention to form and had a problem with the linguistic item being discussed. That is, how did learners solve the LREs identified? 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 equivalent etc.) seem to be potentially involved in second language learning.

As mentioned earlier, a four-way taxonomy was drawn up based on learners' justifications (overtly stated or inferred from their interaction). Table 3 shows the distribution of those justifications over the two tasks.

Table 3 shows that there is a high percentage in both tasks of LREs in which no explanation was provided for their resolution. The following example illustrates this point (underlined items were inserted by the learners):

11) **S1**   **S2**
    before you jump . . .   to the conclusion . . .
    to the conclusion   that men . . .
    are braver than women . . .   you should be warned
    that an explanation about the
    numbers in the poll . . .   in the poll . . .
    (Dyad 2, text reconstruction, lines 36–40)

In the above excerpt, learners insert prepositions, determiners and a modal with no engagement in the reasoning that has led them to those decisions, although the instructions of both form-focused tasks were precise about the inclusion of justifications for any change made.

Explanations based on the learners' knowledge of grammar were mainly provided in the text-reconstruction task for determiners, sentence structure, verb tense/form/aspect and word order. Discourse clues were only used in the text-reconstruction task. Learners relied very little on intuition in both tasks, although that intuition proved correct in 60% of the cases.

These results seem striking because of the proficiency level of the subjects (high-intermediate/advanced) and because of the type of methodology they have

been exposed to. As for the former, previous research has established an association between high proficiency level and the capability to verbalize knowledge sources (Green & Hecht 1992; Hawkins & Towell 1992; Hulstijn & Hulstijn 1984). With respect to methodology, although these learners follow a communicative language-teaching program, explicit linguistic explanations still figure heavily in their curriculum. We would have expected, then, a greater verbalization of knowledge sources on the learners' part, a greater involvement in the interaction to solve LRE problems when they arose. For example, learners could have used cross-linguistic comparisons or extended their first language knowledge to second language contexts. Out of the two tasks in this study, it is the text reconstruction in which learners seem to have been more involved, although not to the extent expected.

Conclusion

Research carried out in immersion settings points to the potential facilitating effect of a pedagogical approach addressing the learner's need to attend to form when learning a second language. One of the ways to implement this form-focused approach is the use of *collaborative tasks* requiring learners to get involved in cooperative comprehension and production of language. But, as Kowal and Swain (1994: 73) point out, for this type of task to be used effectively in the second language classroom "researchers and teachers need to pay careful consideration to the *choice of task* and to pay close attention to how participants themselves *interpret and complete it*" [my italics].

This study has described how two form-focused tasks, dictogloss and text reconstruction, were interpreted and completed by seven dyads of high-intermediate/advanced EFL learners. These two tasks had been claimed to be effective as far as encouraging learners to produce language and reflect on its form (Kowal & Swain 1994; Storch 1998a,b; Swain 1998; Swain & Lapkin 1995, 2000, 2001). We had two main concerns regarding the dictogloss and text-reconstruction tasks at the outset of the study: the *amount* of attention to form, operationalized in LREs, each task would generate and the *nature* of that attention to form (task-related features and knowledge sources tapped to resolve LREs). The *quantitative* analysis of the data showed that the text-reconstruction task generated eight times more LREs than the dictogloss task, and there was also a significant difference between the two tasks regarding LRE turns calculated as a percentage of the total number of turns in dyadic interaction. The *qualitative analysis* of the data showed that:

i) Learners focused on the language features targeted by the task in text reconstruction, but not in the dictogloss, in which they seemed to be more concerned with producing a coherent paragraph than with discussing LREs. Previous research (Kowal & Swain 1994; Storch 1997) has also attested that it is difficult to predict which language areas will draw learners' attention while completing a form-focused task.

ii) Verbalization of knowledge sources was not as frequent as expected for the proficiency level of the learners – there were many LREs solved with no explanation provided, although the instructions clearly emphasized that they should be given for any changes made. It would have been helpful to have held retrospective sessions, with the members of the dyads listening to their production and providing feedback on their interaction.

Findings from this study indicate that the text-reconstruction task was a suitable form-focused task for this group of learners, not only because of the number of LREs it generated but also because of the nature of those LREs (focused on task-related features). The dictogloss was not so successful in encouraging talk on language-related issues due, perhaps, to the difference in input modality, which led learners to focus on producing a coherent paragraph and not on discussing and reflecting on their language choices. Neither of the two tasks seems to have encouraged learners to use a range of knowledge sources to explain LREs.

Definitely, much more research is needed on the issue of the effectiveness of different form-focused tasks for different student populations and different age groups (Oliver 2000; Williams 1999). Descriptive accounts of how learners interact while performing these tasks are extremely necessary so that researchers can consider whether and to what extent they are effective for the different proficiency levels for which they are intended and also the different learning potentials each task stimulates (García Mayo 2002; Izumi & Bigelow 2000).

Notes

1. More direct measures of attention in a classroom-based study could be the learners' requests for assistance, learner–learner negotiation and feedback on error (see Williams 2001).
2. 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 attendance is not compulsory at the undergraduate level). 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 task and its completion.
3. The fourteen students who volunteered to participate in this study had a similar proficiency level. Assignment to dyads was made by students themselves based on their availability, which was quite constrained because of different class schedules.

4. The larger study is partially modeled on Storch (1998a). Whereas in the present study we want to establish a comparison between form-focused tasks which provide auditory vs. written stimuli (dictogloss vs. text reconstruction) and examine both the *amount* and *nature* of attention to form in each task, the main focus of the larger study is to compare learner performance on five form-focused tasks (cloze, multiple choice, text editing, text reconstruction and dictogloss) by examining only the *amount* of attention to form each task generated, with the further goal of designing a post-test to examine developmental success.
5. A dictogloss from the intermediate section of the book had been used in a previous pilot study, and it turned out to be too easy for students at this level of proficiency.
6. In her study with intermediate-to-advanced level students in an ESL setting, Storch (1998a) found a range of 96–247 turns in a 61-word text-reconstruction task.
7. In the example, pauses are indicated by . . . , and *italics* are used to indicate that the learner is reading the text.
8. As rightly pointed out by one of the reviewers, measurement of success should be developmental. A future study should develop a tailor-made test (Swain 1998; Williams 2001) for each LRE focus to see whether the learners use those items in a target-like manner in subsequent production.
9. It is interesting to note that in their writing samples learners included articles and adverbs, although no discussion about them followed.

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Appendix 1

DICTOGLOSS

You will be listening to a text that will be read twice at normal speed. Your task will be to reproduce the original text **as faithfully as possible and in a grammatically accurate form**. The first time you listen to the text you should not write down anything; the second time your partner and you are allowed to write down some key words that you feel will help you to reproduce the original text. Together, you have to reproduce the original text and one of you will write the final version, which the researcher will collect once you finish. Please, make

sure you **explain** your choices. [Note: these instructions were given to the students, who could only see the text once they finished the task.]

Time for task: 15 minutes. Please, record your interaction and turn the tape recorder off once you have finished.

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.

[124 words. Text taken from Wajnryb (1990: 96).]

Appendix 2

TEXT RECONSTRUCTION
Read the following text. You will probably find that it is missing important words such as articles, prepositions, sentence connectors . . . etc. Work with your partner to insert the missing words and make whatever other changes are necessary to produce a meaningful and grammatically correct paragraph. **Explain** why you make those changes.

> 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 be less incline than women confess fear.

Time for task: 15 minutes. Please, record your interaction and turn the tape recorder off once you have finished.

[Text adapted from Wajnryb (1990: 87).]