# FLOW

## Foreign Language Opportunities *in* Writing

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# TEXT RECONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES AND TEACHING LANGUAGE FORMS

## Abstract

Even though there is a broad consensus that teaching language forms is facilitative or even necessary in some contexts, there are still disagreements concerning, among other things, how formal aspects of the target language should be taught. One important area of controversy is whether pedagogic intervention should be input-oriented, emphasizing comprehension of the form-meaning mappings represented by specific linguistic features or output-based, requiring learners to produce these features accurately in gradually more communicative activities. The present paper focuses on the latter of these two options and, basing on the claims of Swain's (1985, 1995) output hypothesis, it aims to demonstrates how text-reconstruction activities in which learners collaboratively produce written output trigger noticing, hypothesis-testing and metalinguistic reflection on language use. It presents a psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic rationale for the use of such tasks, discusses the types of such activities, provides an overview of research projects investigating their application and, finally, offers a set of implications for classroom use as well as suggestions for further research in this area.

## 1. Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed much theorizing, research and pedagogic innovation, the aim of which has been to propose new techniques and procedures that can be employed in teaching formal aspects of language, particularly such that encourage learners to attend to the structural dimension of the messages they are attempting to comprehend or express during the performance of communicative tasks (cf. Ellis, 2001a; Williams, 2005; Pawlak, 2006; Nassaji and Fotos, 2007; Pawlak, 2007a; Ellis, 2008). The rationale behind such endeavours can be linked to the findings of studies of French immersion education and intensive communicative ESL instruction in Canada, which have shown that although learners in these programs reach levels of communicative

ability comparable to those of native speakers, their productive skills lag far behind receptive ones, with their output being fraught with grammar errors even after many years of being exposed to abundant meaning-focused input and having copious output opportunities (cf. Harley and Swain 1984; Hammerly 1987; Lightbown 1992). The drawbacks of such purely communicative approaches are elucidated by Pica who writes that "(…) when attention is focused solely on communication of message meaning, learners are drawn almost exclusively to the meaning and comprehensibility of input, and only secondarily to the structures, sounds and forms that shape the input" (2000: 6), a claim that provides clear support for pedagogic intervention. Another impetus for the search for more effective ways of implementing form-focused instruction came from Long's (1991) influential distinction between a *focus on forms*, where linguistic features are preselected and taught one by one in a decontextualized manner, and a *focus on form*, where learners' attention is directed to aspects of the language code in the process of meaning and message conveyance. It is the latter that is viewed as optimal as it avoids the shortfalls of both entirely analytic (i.e. structure-based) and experiential (i.e. meaning-oriented) approaches in that it promotes communication but at the same time ensures that problematic grammatical, lexical, phonological, pragmatic as well as discoursal features are attended to, noticed and processed.

The assumption that formal instruction is sometimes necessary and the recommendation that it should most profitably involve a dual focus on form and meaning clearly do not obviate the need to determine how such pedagogic intervention should best be accomplished in the classroom, and this area has been the source of considerable controversy (cf. Williams, 2005; Ellis, 2006; Pawlak, 2007a). Apart from disagreements as to whether focus on form should be *isolated* or *integrated* (i.e. separate from communicative activities vs. embedded within them), *planned* or *incidental* (i.e. directed at a preselected form in specifically designed tasks vs. occurring spontaneously in response to a number of features), and *implicit* or *explicit* (i.e. perceived as a contribution to meaning-focused communication vs. interpreted as a didactic tool), another crucial issue pertains to whether such instruction should be *input-based*, where emphasis is placed on enhancing the quantity and quality of exposure (e.g. increasing the salience of the target structure by means of highlighting) or *output-oriented*, in which case the main aim is to elicit accurate production of linguistic features (e.g. designing communicative tasks which require the use of the target structure for their successful completion). The present paper is concerned with the latter approach, drawing upon the claims of Swain's (1985, 1995, 2000, 2005) Output Hypothesis and focusing in particular on how noticing, hypothesis-testing and conscious reflection can be fostered by means of

various types of text reconstruction activities in which students are engaged in collaborative production of written output. At the very outset, theoretical justifications for the role of text reconstruction tasks will be presented, which will be followed by the description of different kinds of such activities, the discussion of the methodology, aims and findings of studies in which they are employed, and, finally, pedagogical implications and guidelines for future research in this area.

## 2. Theoretical bases for using text reconstruction tasks in form-focused instruction

The case for using collaborative text reconstruction activities in teaching language forms can be made both from a psycholinguistic and a social-psychological standpoint, with recent research attempting to reconcile the two perspectives (cf. Swain, 2000, 2005, 2006; Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009). When it comes to the former, the insufficiency of comprehensible input as a necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985) was challenged in the early and especially modified versions of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983, 1996), according to which participation in negotiated interaction results in the provision of better quality *positive evidence* (i.e. more salient form-function mappings and segmentation of the input), *negative evidence* (i.e. direct or indirect corrective feedback) and opportunities for *modified output* (i.e. adjustments made to erroneous utterances). Nevertheless, it is the Output Hypothesis proposed by Swain (1985, 1995) which recognizes that producing utterances in the target language can directly contribute to acquisition, positing that such production allows *syntactic processing* and making the claim that learners should be encouraged to produce *pushed output*, or such that not only gets the message across but does so accurately, precisely and appropriately as well. Swain (1995, 1998) also argues that apart from the rather obvious role of production as a means of language practice which enhances fluency, output performs other crucial roles in language learning which, however, mainly pertain to accuracy. These are (1) *the noticing/triggering function*, since engaging in speaking or writing may bring learners' attention to the problems they experience in formulating messages and enable them to notice gaps and holes in their target language knowledge, (2) *the hypothesis testing function*, which is related to the fact that production may provide learners with opportunities to experiment with the target language by formulating, confirming and disconfirming hypotheses about how to express their intent, with subsequent feedback sometimes leading to modified output which "(…) can be considered

the leading edge of a learner's interlanguage" (Swain, 1998: 68), and (3) *the metalinguistic/reflective function*, where the language produced by others and the self provides a stimulus for conscious reflection on the linguistic forms used, thus raising learners' awareness of the relationships between such forms and the meanings and functions expressed, and in this way triggering language learning (cf. Swain, 1998, 2005). As regards more socially oriented perspectives representing what Sfard (1998) labels the *participation metaphor* for learning, the crucial role of output in language learning is postulated by Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), according to which higher-level cognitive skills, including the ability to use language, first appear on an interpsychological level, in the course of interaction with others, and only later, through the process of internalization, do they develop on the intrapsychological level and become part of an individual's mental capacity. On account of the fact that language is a powerful semantic tool that mediates the emergence of self-regulation, crucial to this process is interaction in the *zone of proximal development*, understood as the area in which learning is possible only in collaboration with the *more knowledgeable other* (i.e. someone with greater knowledge and skills in a particular domain). When applied to foreign language learning, this theoretical perspective provides a rationale for designing activities in which learners are encouraged to cooperate with their peers in order to solve the problems they encounter and jointly construct target language knowledge.

Despite voices claiming that the psycholinguistic and sociocultural approaches are incommensurable due to their disparate foci (e.g. Zuengler and Miller, 2006), the last decade has witnessed attempts to reconcile the two orientations and empirical investigations of the contributions of output in second language acquisition represent the prime area in which it has been recognized that they are enriching and complementary, and such reconciliation has quite successfully been attained, mainly through the work of Swain, her collaborators and followers (e.g. Swain, 1998; Swain and Lapkin, 2002; Swain, 2006; Swain and Lapkin, 2007; Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009). With a view to promoting integration of this kind, Swain (2000) first elected to abandon the term *output*, which is firmly grounded in the *acquisition metaphor* (Sfard, 1998), in favour of more neutral and less value-laden labels such as *speaking, writing, utterance*, *verbalization* and *collaborative dialogue*. It was the latter of these that came to be employed on a regular basis in subsequent studies (Tocalli-Beller and Swain, 2007; Watanabe and Swain 2007, etc.) to describe, in the words of Swain (2005: 478), "(…) dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building – in the case of second language learners, solving *linguistic* problems and building knowledge *about language*" [emphasis original]. The most recent development in this respect is the emergence of the concept of

*languaging*, which Swain (2006: 96) defines as "(…) a dynamic, never-ending process of using language to make meaning", which comprises not only collaborative, problem-oriented interactions between learners but also *private speech*, or "the intentional use of overt self-directed speech to explain concepts to the self" (Negueruela and Lantolf, 2006: 86), as one more possibility of using verbalization to mediate second language learning. Although this line of inquiry is still in its infancy, the available evidence demonstrates that languaging can contribute to better understanding of grammatical concepts and transfer of new knowledge to other contexts, but also that its type is a function of the proficiency level and affects language learning (cf. Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009; Swain et al., 2009). Obviously, attempts to integrate the two perspectives are still relatively rare, with numerous studies still being conducted within the framework of both the psycholinguistic (e.g. Reinders 2009) and sociocultural orientation (e.g. Negueruela, 2008). What matters though is that there is a growing tendency to view their findings as different but complimentary perspectives on the same phenomenon rather than products of totally disparate worlds (cf. Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

Irrespective of what theoretical position is adopted and whether language production is conceptualized as output, collaborative dialogue or languaging, there is copious empirical evidence for its important role in triggering noticing, aiding hypothesis testing and stimulating reflection on language use. Much of this evidence derives from empirical investigations into the contributions of spoken interaction, usually operationalized as negotiation of meaning and form with its potential to generate modified output, which have in recent years been closely related to research into form-focused instruction and dealt with such issues as the occurrence, distribution and effects of incidental focus on form (e.g. Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen, 2001; Pawlak, 2003; Zyzik and Polio, 2008), the value of different types of corrective feedback (e.g. Mackey, 2006; McDonough, 2007; Ellis, 2007; Pawlak, 2008), or the utility of communication tasks (e.g. Muranoi, 2000a; Park, 2010). There are grounds to assume, however, that facilitative effects of output production may be even more pronounced in the course of completing written activities, not least because the act of composing gives learners the opportunity to pay more attention to the language forms they use, which is often not possible in spontaneous speech where limited attentional resources are primarily allocated to meaning and message conveyance (cf. VanPatten, 1996). As Polio and Williams explain, "the modality provides learners with a record of their language that they can look at and monitor, which, in speaking, would result in reduced fluency" (2009: 487). Cumming, in turn, makes the the point that "Composition writing elicits an attention to form-meaning relations that may prompt learners to refine their linguistic expression –

and hence their control over linguistic knowledge – so that it is more accurately representative of their thoughts and of standard usage" (1990: 483). These assumptions have been corroborated in a number of studies, such as those conducted by Swain and Lapkin (1995) and Wong (2001). The former identified by means of think-aloud protocols many occasions on which learners grappled with linguistic problems in the process of composing an essay, categorizing the strategies they applied into noticing, generating and testing alternatives, applying existing knowledge to known or new contexts, and applying new knowledge, whereas the latter demonstrated that learners are capable of attending to form and meaning in the written, but not oral modality. Following Izumi (2002), who argues that output increases the depth of language processing and leads to the emergence of stronger and more durable memory traces, it can also be hypothesized that writing is more beneficial in this respect than speaking thanks to ample planning time, permanence of the text being produced, and greater control over the allocation of attentional resources. Equally important is the fact that the process of writing and the conversational interaction that is an integral part of text reconstruction activities contribute to the development of explicit knowledge, in that they help learners discover patterns and generalizations, as well as implicit knowledge, since they can lead to considerable negotiation of form and meaning, on condition that learners choose to draw upon the target language for their metatalk (cf. Pawlak, 2006). All of this indicates that activities involving collaborative text reconstruction are likely to be a useful tool in teaching formal aspects of the target language and therefore it should come as no surprise that so much research has been conducted with the purpose of appraising their value.

## 3. Types of text reconstruction activities

Although this issue is approached in different ways in the relevant literature, for the purposes of the present paper text reconstruction tasks are understood as activities in which learners are requested to collaboratively compose or modify a written text, engaging during this process in interactions about the linguistic features necessary to attain this goal. One of the best known tasks of this kind whose potential has been thoroughly investigated over the last two decades is the *dictogloss*, also known as *grammar dictation*, a procedure devised by Wajnryb (1990) as an improvement on traditional dictation. It involves reconstructing a short, continuous text, an authentic, modified or contrived one, which contains many tokens of a specific linguistic feature in a meaningful context, with the following four stages being followed: (1) learners are familiarized with the topic,

text type and relevant vocabulary, (2) they listen to the teacher reading the text twice at normal speed and are requested to write down familiar words and phrases, such as key content words or temporal reference devices, (3) students are instructed to work in pairs or small groups to collaboratively reconstruct the original on the basis of their shared resources, with the caveat that, rather than produce an exact copy of the original, their task is to create a coherent, cohesive and accurate piece of writing which reflects as closely as possible the content of the model, and (4) they compare their reconstructions with the original text and analyze with the help of the teacher the potential differences in meaning and form. Some variations on this procedure are possible as well, the most important of which include *dictogloss negotiation* (i.e. the teacher divides the text into sections and students discuss them one by one), *student-controlled dictation* (i.e. learners ask the teacher to stop and repeat part of the text), *student-student dictation* (i.e. students take turns reading the text to each other), *dictogloss summaries* (i.e. only the key points are included in the reconstruction), *scrambled sentence dictogloss* (i.e. the text is jumbled, which considerably increases the difficulty level), *elaboration dictogloss* (i.e. learners try to extend and improve on the original text), *dictogloss opinion* (i.e. learners include in their reconstructions comments on the ideas expressed by the author), and *picture dictogloss* (i.e. students make drawings which represent what they hear) (cf. Jacobs and Small, 2003). Irrespective of which version of the dictogloss is used, its value is connected with the fact that the task "(…) allows learners to try out the language, that is, to try out their hypotheses and subsequently receive more data about language (…) Through active learner involvement, students come to confront their own strengths and weaknesses" (Wajnryb, 1990: 10). What is more, according to Jacobs and Small (2003), conscientious implementation of the procedure ensures that it embodies the key principles of contemporary foreign language education, such as learner autonomy, cooperation among learners, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment and the concept of teacher as co-learners.

Given the perceived benefits of the dictogloss procedure which, as will be demonstrated below, have been corroborated empirically in numerous studies, it should come as no surprise that it has provided an impulse for designing other types of collaborative writing activities which are likely to promote comprehensible output, noticing, hypothesis testing and conscious reflection on language use. For one thing, it is possible to alter the way in which the linguistic data for text reconstruction is provided by replacing oral input with written input, as Storch (1998) did by using a modified version of Rutherford's (1987) *propositional cluster task*. In this activity, after brief explanation and demonstration, learners are supplied with a set of content words and requested to

work in pairs or small groups to produce a meaningful, accurate and appropriate text by inserting the necessary function words, linking devices and grammatical morphemes, as well as changing the word order, with the final versions being compared, analyzed and discussed. Yet another possibility of using written input as a stimulus for collaborative dialogue that was utilized in a study conducted by Izumi and Bigelow (2000) is to have learners read a short passage seeded with examples of a specific linguistic feature, ask them to underline the parts which they view as crucial for subsequent reconstruction, and, after the passage has been collected, instruct them to produce a version of it that is true to the original but also accurate. An interesting option is also exposing students to a combination of written and spoken data, a procedure that was invented by Muranoi (2000b) which is known as *focus on form through guided summarizing* (FFGS). In this case, (1) learners read a text which has many instances of a particular structure with the aim of comprehending its content, (2) they listen to the same text, (3) they are asked to reconstruct it on the basis of a *concept map* which contains a schematic representation of the key words or phrases and aims to indirectly induce students to use the targeted form, and (4) they are provided with the original texts once again, which enables them to compare the two versions and make the necessary revisions. There have also been attempts to modify the dictogloss procedure in such a way that it becomes more meaning-focused and generates more authentic communication, uses learner-generated language, and ensures greater attention to grammatical features and not mainly the lexicon. An example of such an activity is the *dictowatch*, where students work in pairs, narrate to each other one half of a video scene, take notes of what they hear, reconstruct the complete story individually from the part they have seen as well as their notes, and, finally, attempt to create one version of the narrative by comparing their texts orally, reconciling differences and resolving language problems (cf. Sullivan and Caplan, 2004).

An activity that is quite distinct from the dictogloss procedure, its subsequent variations and extensions but also satisfies the criteria of text reconstruction tasks delineated above and has been employed in a number of recent empirical investigations (e.g. Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Lapkin, Swain and Smith, 2002; Swain and Lapkin, 2002; Sachs and Polio, 2007; Watanabe and Swain, 2007) is a *text reformulation task*. In activities of this kind, reformulation is usually defined as "having a native writer of the target language rewrite the learner's essay, preserving all the learner's ideas, making it sound as native-like as possible" (Cohen 1983: 4), with alterations being made at all levels, affecting not only the choice and use of language forms, but also issues related to appropriacy, style and organization (cf. Allwright, Woodley and Allwright, 1988). As far as the procedure as such is concerned, learners are first asked to write a text

individually or in pairs, often in response to a picture prompt, the texts are then collected and revised by a native speaker whose task is to improve on them so that they reflect target-language usage while preserving their original meaning, the initial and reformulated versions are given back to learners, who are requested to discuss the differences, either alone or in collaboration with their peers, and, in the last stage, they are provided with their first drafts and asked to revise them as they see fit (e.g. Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Watanabe and Swain, 2007). This sequence may be subject to variation, as evidenced by the study conducted by Hanaoka (2007), in which, instead of having their picture-based narratives revised, learners received two models written by native speakers on the basis of the same pictures and were asked to spot the differences between these texts and the story they had produced. Irrespective of slight differences in their design, reformulation tasks are considered to hold much promise since, in the words of Cohen (1989: 9), they provide learners with the opportunity to "obtain deeper feedback than in the simple correction of surface errors, which is often what learners receive as feedback on their essays". In addition, the revisions or models enable learners to attend to and notice the features needed to express their intended meanings, they are provided with language which is appropriate for a specific context, and the feedback supplied is usually balanced between form and meaning (cf. Thornbury, 1997; Qi and Lapkin, 2001).

## 4. Research into the contributions of text reconstruction activities

Before examining the aims and findings of research investigating the value of various types of text reconstruction activities, a few comments are in order on the methodology of such studies which has evolved considerably over the last two decades. From the inception of this line of inquiry, it has been a standard procedure to audio- or video-record the interactions between learners, transcribe the recordings and code the transcripts for *language-related episodes* (LRE), understood as "(…) any part of dialogue in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or other- or self-correct" (Swain, 1998: 70). Such stretches of discourse are subsequently subjected to a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses which involve, among other things, counting the frequency of occurrence of LREs, tabulating the ratio of turns per the number of LREs, assigning LREs to different categories, depending on their focus (grammar, lexis, orthography, content, discourse, other, etc.) or outcome (e.g. correctly resolved, incorrectly resolved or unresolved), and computing the percentages of each, examining their nature, as well as investigating dominant patterns of interaction (e.g. Kim and

McDonough, 2008). What should be pointed out, however, is that some researchers exclude self-corrections on grounds that they are not manifestations of collaborative activity (e.g. Fortune, 2007), others code LREs based on L1 and L2 separately (e.g. Fortune, 2005; Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009), and there are attempts to use units of analysis other than LREs, the concept of *problematic features noticed* (PFN) employed by Hanaoka (2007) being a good case in point.

Since the occurrence of noticing, hypothesis-testing or even identification of correct solutions to language problems occurring within LREs is not tantamount to acquiring the language features which are their focus, major improvement in research on text reconstruction tasks was marked by the inclusion of *tailor-made post-tests* dealing with the language items that learners discuss, as was the case in a study conducted by LaPierre (1994). In fact, in more recent research, not only the construction of tailor-made tests (e.g. McDonough and Sunitham, 2009) but also the use of the pretest-posttest design has become the norm, with learners either being requested to write a text and then rewrite it after engaging in individual or collaborative reflection (e.g. Watanabe and Swain, 2007), or, in cases where a specific grammatical feature is preselected, being instructed to complete a variety of productive and receptive assessment measures (e.g. Qin, 2008). Another significant advance in research design is the tendency to supplement recordings, transcripts, pieces of writing or test results with other data, collected by means of questionnaires (e.g. Kim and McDonough, 2008; Shak and Gardner, 2008), interviews (e.g. Watanabe and Swain, 2007), think aloud protocols (e.g. Sachs and Polio, 2007), stimulated recall (e.g. Lapkin, Swain and Smith, 2002) or learner-made notes (e.g. Hanaoka, 2007), with a view to tapping the subjects' perceptions and preferences, gaining insight into the scope and nature of noticing, gauging the occurrence of output modifications, as well as exploring learners' attitudes towards the task and the interactions it generates. Indeed, much present-day research into the contributions of text reconstruction is extremely sophisticated and demanding in terms of time and effort, a trend that is illustrated in the study undertaken by Watanabe and Swain (2007) which consisted of six consecutive stages, namely pre-task interviews, pre-tests and reformulations, collaborative dialogue and noticing sessions, post-tests, stimulated recall sessions and, finally, post-task interviews. Another interesting development is that the effects of collaborative dialogue have started to be explored within the context of computer-assisted language learning, as is illustrated, for example, in the research project carried out by McDonough and Sunitham (2009) who utilized self-access computer activities for this purpose.

Considerable evolution has also taken place in the aims of such empirical investigations as well as the specific questions posed, with researchers moving beyond mere identification, description and evaluation of the LREs produced.

The earliest line of inquiry that is still being vigorously pursued is concerned with determining the occurrence of different types of LREs as evidence of noticing, hypothesis testing, conscious reflection on target language use and collaborative knowledge building, as well as exploring the immediate contribution of such sequences in terms of problem-solving. The findings of these studies have demonstrated quite convincingly that learners attend to and produce the target linguistic features, engage in metatalk concerning their accurate use, and are capable of resolving most of the problems they encounter through collaborative dialogue (e.g. Kowal and Swain, 1994; Swain, 1998; Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Swain and Lapkin, 2002; Pawlak, 2003; Watanabe and Swain, 2007; Kim and McDonough, 2008; McDonough and Sunitham, 2009), with the caveat that students may not necessarily focus on the language forms that are meant to be highlighted by the task (cf. Nabei, 1994; Swain 1998). Evidence has also accumulated that learners tend to remember the grammatical, lexical, discoursal or orthographic features discussed in the course of their interactions, particularly those that were the outcome of successful problem-solving, which is reflected in their performance on tailor-made, dyad-specific written or oral tests (e.g. LaPierre, 1994; Swain, 1998; Williams, 2001; Tocalli-Beller and Swain, 2007; Kim, 2008; McDonough and Sunitham, 2009) or progress in their ability to compose different kinds of texts following the opportunity to individually or collaboratively reflect upon reformulations or models, as measured by means of pre-tests, immediate or delayed post-tests (e.g. Qi and Lapkin, 2001; Lapkin, Swain and Smith, 2002; Hanaoka, 2007; Watanabe and Swain, 2007).

Apart from examining the nature of effects of collaborative dialogue between learners, researchers have also examined variables which may affect the incidence of different types of LREs and their impact on language development, compared the value of text reconstruction tasks with other types of form-focused activities and investigated learners' perceptions of grammar-oriented tasks. As regards the first of these areas, the studies conducted to date have primarily focused on participants' proficiency level, patterns of interaction and the character of the tasks they are requested to complete. It has been consistently found, for instance, that learners who represent higher levels of proficiency produce more LREs than those at lower levels, they are more likely to focus on grammatical items due to the fact that they do not have to allocate much attention to processing meaning-bearing elements and they manifest psycholinguistic readiness to attend to such features, and they are more successful in reaching correct solutions (e.g. Williams, 2001; Leeser, 2004; Kim and McDonough, 2008; Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009). On the other hand, however, Watanabe and Swain (2007) demonstrated that high proficiency learners benefit

more from participating in collaborative dialogue with lower proficiency partners than learners at their level, since in such situations they achieve better scores on post-tests. There is also evidence for the impact of pair dynamics, with dyads representing a collaborative orientation, either in the form of the collaborative or expert/novice pattern (cf. Storch, 2002), producing more LREs than those characterized by a non-collaborative orientation, both in the dominant/passive and expert/passive pattern (cf. Storch, 2002), and the former outperforming the latter on post-tests (cf. Watanabe and Swain, 2007). When it comes to the task type variable, the findings indicate that the dictogloss limits and focuses the number and variety of language forms used by learners when compared with a jigsaw task (cf. Lapkin, Swain and Smith, 2002), collaborative reconstruction results in greater uptake than individual reconstruction but is comparable to dictation in this respect (cf. Reinders, 2009), and comprehension-oriented grammar exercises produce more grammar-oriented languaging than production-based ones (cf. Suzuki and Itagaki, 2009). Of particular interest are studies gauging the effectiveness of text reconstruction tasks in comparison with other activities, such as that conducted by Qin (200), who found that in the long run the dictogloss was as effective as processing instruction in promoting acquisition of the English passive voice. Finally, researchers have also sought to tap learners' views on activities they are requested to perform and, although such measures are now included in most studies in the form of interviews or questionnaires (e.g. Kim and McDonough, 2008), particularly interesting insights can be gleaned from empirical investigations of perceptions of various types of tasks. This research agenda was pursued by Shak and Gardner (2008) who involved children in the completion of dictogloss, interpretation, consciousness-raising and grammaring tasks, and found that collaborative text reconstruction activities together with interpretation tasks were rated highest with respect to perceived enjoyment, ease, performance, and motivation, a result which they explained in terms of their being cognitively stimulating, encouraging production and providing opportunities for cooperation with peers.

## 5. Pedagogical implications and directions for future research

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, text reconstruction tasks are a useful pedagogic tool which can be effectively employed in teaching a wide range of target language forms, not only grammatical items but also lexical, discoursal and orthographic features. Their benefits can mainly be ascribed to the fact that, by providing learners with opportunities to engage in interactions about the formal aspects of language they have to use to reconstruct, reformulate

or create a piece of writing, they trigger noticing, hypothesis testing and metatalk, and such collaborative dialogue or languaging results in joint problem-solving and construction of new knowledge, which is in line with the tenets of the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985 and 1995) and Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf, 2006). What is also of considerable significance is the fact that these activities can serve the dual purpose of developing both explicit and implicit language knowledge, which means that that can be applied with an eye to helping learners discern rules and patterns underlying the use of new linguistic features and enabling them to gain greater control of the features they already know by using them in meaningful communication. These merits notwithstanding, it has to be stressed that most research on different types of dictogloss tasks, variations thereof and text reformulation activities has been conducted in second rather than foreign language contexts, which has vital implications for why, when and how they should be utilized and brings with it a number of serious problems. In the first place, the underlying assumption of numerous studies has been that such output-based, grammar-oriented activities are meant to allow students in meaning-focused immersion, communicative or content classes to attend to language forms that might otherwise escape their attention, thus representing an attempt to put into practice Long's (1996) concept of *focus on form*. By contrast, in foreign language classrooms, including the Polish educational context, the main rationale behind such tasks is, as Fotos (1998) so aptly put it, to shift the focus from forms to form or, to be more precise, add a communicative dimension to grammar-dominated language pedagogy. This indicates that more often than not text reconstruction tasks will have to be incorporated into the PPP sequence, either to raise learners' awareness of the targeted feature at the presentation stage, or to allow them to practice it in a meaningful context in the last stage of this procedure (i.e. production) or in the course of review classes.

As regards the shortcomings of text reconstruction tasks, some learners can be averse to talking about grammar which is given so much weight in language classes anyway and, in view of the fact that monolingual classrooms are the norm in the foreign language context, there is a very real danger of excessive reliance on the L1, an issue that is usually glossed over in research reports (see the paper by Scott and De la Fuente 2008 for a notable exception). A fitting comment on the latter problem comes from McDonough and Sunitham (2009: 249) who write: "Although use of the L1 certainly supports L2 learning, many of the beneficial functions of language production, such as hypothesis testing, noticing, automatic retrieval of linguistic forms, and syntactic processing, may not arise if learners speak the L1 exclusively". In addition to such context-specific weaknesses, tasks stimulating collaborative dialogue also pose several

more general difficulties, such as poor quality of interlanguage talk, a problem that is inevitably afflicting any instantiation of pair and group work activity performed by lower-proficiency learners, uneven distribution of speaking turns, the presence of conflicting interpretations of the aims to be attained through text reconstruction, learners' inability to immediately verify the correctness of their solutions within LREs, the likelihood that students will choose to focus on other features than the target form, or the danger that such tasks will lose their communicative potential and turn into traditional, mundane exercises devoted to grammar. Clearly, these problems are not insurmountable and can be to some extent alleviated by reviewing the language forms meant to be the focus of the activity before it is initiated, modelling it in order to familiarize learners with task procedures, negotiating the goals and format of such activities to cater to the needs of particular student groupings or to avoid potential misunderstandings, and ensuring that the teacher is available to assist students in reaching correct solutions to the problems they tackle. While these steps cannot guarantee the success of text reconstruction tasks, they are bound to considerably contribute to enhancing their effectiveness.

Even though major advances have been made in recent years with respect to the scope and methodology of research into the value of text reconstruction activities, with the outcome that we currently know much more about such tasks than at the time when the first empirical studies were conducted (e.g. Kowal and Swain, 1994 and LaPierre, 1994), much still remains to be done in this area. Apart from further pursuing the present lines of inquiry, it would be without doubt interesting to extend the research agenda by, for instance, looking into their potential in teaching pragmatic and pronunciation features or investigating the impact of other individual and contextual variables such as aptitude, learning styles, the use of learning strategies, beliefs, motivations, anxiety, provision of explanations prior to the task, opportunities for planning or different task demands. It might also make sense to undertake more comparisons of the contributions of different types of text reconstruction tasks (cf. Reinders, 2009), compare such tasks with other techniques and procedures in form-focused instruction (cf. Qin, 2009), and determine whether their effectiveness is a function of teachers' and learners' views and perceptions. When it comes to methodology, it is important to search for innovative ways of conceptualizing, describing and categorizing stretches of interaction which revolve around language forms (i.e. LREs), use multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data, employ longitudinal designs by tracing learners' performance in a sequence of tasks (e.g. Fortune, 2007), routinely include at least one delayed post-test, and employ a range of comprehension and production measures with a view to obtaining a more accurate picture of the learning of the targeted forms together

with tailor-made tests to investigate retention of linguistic items that subjects themselves elect to focus upon. By following such guidelines, it will be possible to gain further insights into the nature of text reconstruction activities and the variables which affect their potential, which in turn is likely to contribute to their more effective application in helping learners better understand and use the target language forms taught in the classroom.

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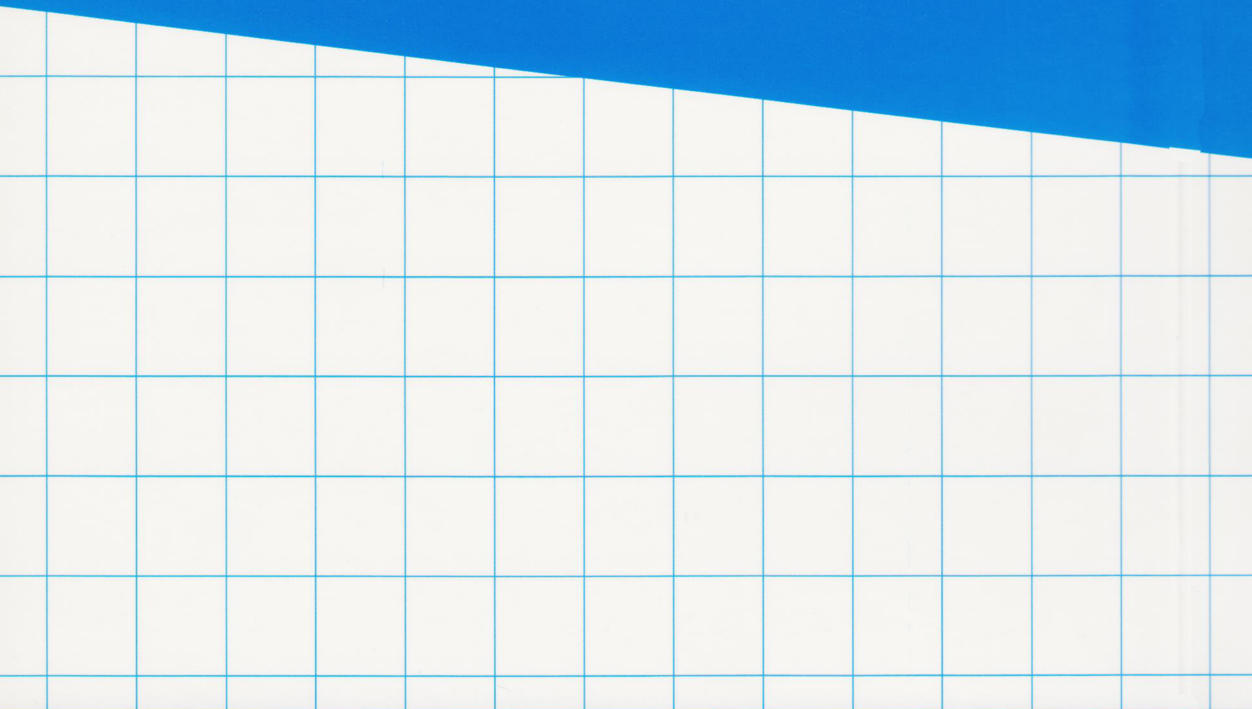

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