

Evaluating the effectiveness of task- based instruction on students' output

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1. ABSTRACT

The communicative approach is rapidly gaining ground in second language teaching as the need to communicate in the target language becomes greater. However it is still unclear which tasks and types of pairing are more effective. This study was undertaken in an attempt to clarify which types of communicative task (open or closed) better promoted production and in addition if the type of pairing had any effect on student interaction.

The results obtained throw some light on the subject as there is evidence that different pairing level is a key factor to task outcome. In addition to this, task types were also shown to be an important variable.

Findings may inspire Primary Schools teachers to carefully evaluate the tasks and type of pairings they use in order to help students to obtain higher oral fluency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of worldwide web and the social media the importance of being able to communicate in English as a second language (ESL) has grown exponentially. To cope with these ever increasing needs to be communicatively competent in the language, different methods have been developed in an attempt to make the teaching of ESL more effective.

Current ESL methodology is largely based on Communicative language teaching. The communicative approach is based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate in real and meaningful situations. When learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, as they are exposed to comprehensible input (Krashen 1982) and have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning (Long 1983) which will allow them to learn the language.

Despite the relevance of this approach Primary School English classes are often still instructed following a traditional approach based on a grammatical syllabus, which does not provide students with enough opportunities to use the target language. In addition to this, a traditional class is likely to be teacher-led rather than student-led. As Byrne (1989) says it is impossible to give enough space for communication if the teacher is doing a whole class work. In contrast, the Communicative approach aims at getting learners to use L2 as much as possible, by engaging them in communicative tasks completed via pairwork and groupwork, which allow us to increase student talking time and provide more opportunities to negotiate of meaning (Long 1983) .

The Cognitive perspective to SLA suggests that exposure to input and opportunities to use the L2 may not be sufficient to secure SLA. While traditional classes only focused on form, strong communicative approaches focus on conveying meaning through communicative interaction, assigning grammar instruction at best a secondary role. Cognitive theory (Swain 1985) contends that human beings have limited processing capacity and attention, which means that when engaged in communication, especially unplanned spontaneous oral interaction, L2 learners will tend to focus on understanding

and conveying meaning and will not have sufficient processing capacity to notice and process form. Krashen refers to this as “semantic processing”. Following this view, communicative practice will help the learners to develop their fluency but it may not help them to develop their interlanguage. Due to this, students may fossilize and get to a point where no more L2 can be learned, even if they continue having frequent opportunities to practice the language. This means that for communicative tasks to be effective they need to promote attention to form.

In order to prevent early fossilization focus on form needs to be promoted, which can be done in different ways. One option is to draw the learner’s attention to the grammatical form of linguistic features they are using in context by means of what have been called focus on form (FonF) activities. This approach is in contrast to focus on forms (FonFs), which is limited to a more explicit attention to linguistic features, often isolated from context and language use. Following Swain (1985) another way of drawing attention to form and also promoting noticing during communicative interaction is to push learners to produce what he termed comprehensible output, in other words producing a message that is comprehensible (meaningful), grammatically correct, coherent and appropriate and which stretches their linguistic resources, therefore promoting SLA.

Traditionally, a communicative task was evaluated in terms of how successfully they promoted L2 use among learners. If we follow Swain’s and Lapkin’s (1995) account, to measure the efficacy of a communicative task we also need to study whether it promotes sufficient pushed output. The aim of this study is to investigate which types of tasks promote both more comprehensible output and more L2 use.

Other important features that can promote the use of L2 and also comprehensible output is the way students perform tasks. It has been shown, for instance, that the way students are paired during communicative performance may affect the amount of negotiation of meaning (Pica et al 1989) as well as the learners’ use of the L1 (Storch and Aldosari 2010). Consequently, in this study I will investigate whether different types of pairing promotes more comprehensible output and also more L2 use.

The objective of this paper is to respond to the following questions:

- How does the type of pairing and the type of communicative task affect the amount of L2 or L1 that is used in a communicative approach classroom? Which type of pairing, if any, promotes more L2 use? Which type of task, if any, promotes more L2 use?
- How does the type of communicative task and the type of pairing affect the amount of comprehensible output produced by students? Which type of pairing, if any, promotes the use of longer length sentences? Which type of communicative task, if any, promotes more complex and elaborated output?

In order to answer these research questions, first I will go over the key theoretical notions I used in my study. Then, I will describe the methodology I used. Following this, I will present and discuss the results derived from my experiment. Finally, I will outline the main findings and limitations of my study, and establish some areas for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Communicative language teaching (CLT) rose to prominence in the 1980's and its primary goal is to help learners to achieve communicative competence. A key underlying principle of this approach was that second language learners need to be actively involved in the production of the target language if they wish to obtain communicative competence (Canale and Swain 1980). Communicative competence refers to a learner's ability to communicate successfully, Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence as composing competence in four areas: words and rules, appropriacy, cohesion and coherence; and the use of communication strategies. However, successful communication does not necessarily mean accuracy as present day foreign language teaching is becoming increasingly more concerned with fluency.

Bhardwaj (2008) explains how successful communication is dependent on four skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing. Listening and reading are receptive skills and are often defined as input. Speaking and writing are productive skills, and are often defined as output.

2.2 Basic principles of SLA

In the 1980's Stephen Krashen introduced his second language acquisition theory, the "Monitor Model" (1981), which is composed of five hypotheses: The Acquisition-Learning hypothesis, The Monitor hypothesis, The Natural Order hypothesis, The Input hypothesis and The Affective Filter. The Input Hypothesis (1981) is the central part of this overall theory and is considered to be one of the basic theoretical bases of communicative language teaching.. Krashen (1982) summarizes his own theory implying

that "language acquisition, first or second, only occurs when comprehension of a real message occurs, and when the acquirer is not on the defensive" (1982:6). In other words, according to his affective filter hypothesis affective variables may affect the acquisition of a second language, preventing information from reaching the language areas of the mind. In addition Krashen contends that language is acquired when the input received is one step beyond the learner's current stage of competence. Krashen (1981: 21) called this level of input "i +1" where "i" is the language input and " +1" is the next stage of language acquisition, this is known as "comprehensible input". To clarify, 'Comprehensible input' is the target language which learners are able to comprehend. Regardless of the essential role of input in L2 acquisition, the view that input alone is sufficient for SLA has been frequently rejected (Swain, 1995).

Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1982-1983) was introduced after observing how non-native speakers of English overcame communication difficulties, while engaging in face to face oral tasks .The pairs would "negotiate meaning" in order to make the conversation more comprehensible. The strategies used for negotiating meaning included: repetition of words, confirmation checks, comprehension checks and clarification requests. Long (1996) explains that these interactional modifications led to increased comprehension. Not only do negotiated interactions provide speakers with an opportunity to receive input, which are previously made comprehensible through negotiation, they also provide speakers with an opportunity to modify speech thus making output more comprehensible (Long 1983; Varonis and Gass 1994; Doughty 1988).

Another essential underpinning of the communicative approach is Swain's theory of comprehensible output (1985, 1993, 1995).This hypothesis is an elongation of Krashen's theory of comprehensible input (1982, 1985), and is considered to be the one of the core contributors to SLA. The comprehensible output hypothesis was developed in the 1990's and consists of three main ideas: The noticing, The hypothesis -testing function and The metalinguistic. The comprehensible output hypothesis is based on the fact that

language is acquired when learners are "pushed to use alternative means to get across ... the message....precisely, coherently, and appropriately"(Swain,1985:248). In other words Swain's hypothesis (1985: 248-249) explains how language is acquired when a learner tries to convey a message and fails. Finally the learner gets the message across to his or her conversational partner and the learner acquires a new form (Krashen 1998). Swain (2000: 99) also contends that output "pushes students to process language more deeply with more mental effort than input does" and that it "pushes" learners from "semantic processing" needed to comprehend input to the" syntactic processing" needed for encoding meaning. In addition Swain (1985, p.249) claims that the target language produced serve as "the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed to successfully convey intended meaning" .Furthermore Swain (1995, 2005) claims that output produces 'noticing', when learners become aware of a gap between their linguistics resources and the target language, therefore pushing learners to try out new forms or modify existing output to make it more comprehensible and accurate. What is more Swain (1985, p.99) explains that" with output the learner is in control, and the learner can 'stretch' his or her interlanguage to meet communicative goals".

The cognition hypothesis also has an important place in language acquisition. Present day cognitive approaches stress that learning is dependent on the mental activities of the learner. Ellis (2003: 7) claims that "tasks involve cognitive processes such as selecting, reasoning, classifying, sequencing information and transforming information from one form of representation to another". To clarify, different kinds of tasks will require the learner to develop this cognitive processes to a greater or a lesser extent depending on the task type. Swain (1985, 1985) also has a cognitive vision of second language learning. He explains that we are unable to concentrate on all the features of a language at one single time due to our limited processing capacity.

2.3 The task based approach to FL teaching

There are many definitions of communicative task in the literature. Nunan (1989: 10) explains that a communicative task is a "piece of classroom work" in which learners will be expected to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language, thus the learner's attention is focused on meaning, and form will take second place. According to Nunan, a task should have a "sense of completeness" (1989: 10), which means that it should constitute a communicative act in its own right. Long's (1985: 89) definition of a task is "a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward". He also gives examples of tasks, such as: "filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone cross the road" (Long, 1985: 89). In other words a task is closely related to things we might come across in our daily lives at one point or another. Skehan (1998, p.95) explains that a task will have a primary meaning; learners will not be expected to "regurgitate other people's words"; meaning the learner will decide on which linguistic resources he or she will need to use. Besides there will be some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities and the priority of a task is the completion of a clearly defined outcome.

Although task-based language teaching (TBLT) tends to focus more on the outcome rather than accuracy, Van Den Braden (2006) explains that TBLT has proved to be effective in a variety of language settings. Littlewood (1999) notes that one of the concerning features of TBL is the lack of grammar teaching. Obviously this lack of grammar content can be worrying to a teacher. Grammatical accuracy will improve as the learner's ability to communicate also improves. The second language acquisition should have two important goals communicative and linguistic. Needless to say the need to communicate in the target language is highly important but we cannot forget the linguistic goals. Unless we focus on form our utterances may be difficult to understand, or may lead to confusion. Ellis (1992) clarifies that a task can also be a valuable source

of presenting a precise grammar structure. In this case Ellis (1992) explains that the task will need to contain two main goals, firstly to develop explicit knowledge of a grammatical feature and secondly to offer students a task where negotiation will be required. In addition, Swain (1995) explains how tasks can be designed in a way which will not only encourage students to provide language it will also provide them with an opportunity to focus on form.

A task-based lesson (Ellis 2004) has three main phases. All the phases are essential to task completion and the desired outcome. Firstly the 'pre-task' which is the first phase and includes activities which are undertaken before starting the task, such as brainstorming , recalling useful language and generally framing the activity, or even providing a model. Secondly, the 'during task' phase which is the only compulsory step in a task-based lesson and it consists of the participants completing the task. Thirdly the 'post-task' phase and involves analyzing the task. In this third stage the students may report back to the rest of the class and the teacher may highlight some important parts. As previously mentioned the pre-task is not obligatory. However, Dornyei (2001) explains that it is important to present the task in a suitable way in order to awaken the students' interest. The post-task phase is also an optional part of a task - based lesson although Ellis (2003: 9) claims that it is beneficial and "has three mayor pedagogic goals, firstly "to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task" secondly "to encourage reflection on how the task was performed, and" thirdly to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to learners when they performed the tasks.

Tasks are 'tools' which help learners to obtain higher language proficiency through L2 use. However the outcome may be affected by the type of task. Ellis (2003) explains that open tasks have no determined solution therefore learners may produce different outcomes. The purpose of an open task is for learners to converse relevantly on the topic however no specific outcome is expected therefore these activities do not seem to support negotiation, so neither do they promote communication. However Ellis (2003)

points out that when doing closed tasks, learners are expected to reach specific a single correct solution or set of solutions.

Research has shows that the open-closed variable can have important implications for language use and, as a consequence, for language acquisition. Long(1989) argues that closed tasks need more negotiation of meaning in order to be completed and students are less likely to give up due to the fact that learners find them more challenging. In turn, perseverance leads to greater precision and more language recycling. Therefore it would seem that closed tasks are superior to open tasks as they are more liable to facilitate comprehension and promote output (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993).

Research suggests that closed tasks promote more negotiation, and therefore possibly more comprehensible output, while doing this type of task. Following Swain's hypotheses (1995) this comprehensible output plays an important role in SLA, as it helps learners notice a gap in their L2 linguistic knowledge. As Swain (1995) explains, we can therefore hypothesize that closed tasks may be more effective in promoting SLA in so far as they successfully push students to produce comprehensible output and to notice form.

To sum up, we can conclude that the purpose of this research is to establish if task characteristics (open versus closed) affect the L2 use during task-based activities.

3. THE METHOD

In this part of the study, I will explain the steps which were taken in order to carry out the investigation. In the first place, I would describe the participants that were selected for the investigation and which criteria was followed to choose them. Secondly, I will explain why these specific types of tasks were selected and their characteristics. Finally, I will describe how the task was conducted, how the information was collected and how the conclusions were drawn.

The study took place in a small private centre in a local village in Zaragoza, Spain. The participants' ages range between eleven and twelve years old, so all of them are attending fifth or sixth grade of Primary Education. For all of them, English has been compulsory at school since they were three years old. They have also been taking private lessons since they were six years old at the private center where this study took place. The participants chosen have passed either Trinity College grade 4 (low) or Trinity College grade 5 (high), so they have a pre-intermediate level of English. In addition, all of them will be sitting the Trinity College exams in June so as to be accredited a higher level. The students' language ability was measured by taking into account the language requirements needed to sit the Trinity College of London GESE exams, level 5 & 6 which correspond to a B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference.

As the students reported prior to the interview, the English instruction received in their Primary schools is mostly based on grammar and vocabulary learning without much space for anything else, as classes are conducted in L1 and conversation is practically non-existent. In contrast, the methodology followed in the private centre is eminently communicative. In the private centre topics of general interest are chosen with the aim of engaging students into lively interaction. As mentioned before a communicative approach is followed and therefore there is no specific grammar instruction. Doubts are clarified as they arise and authentic language is used. Although the candidates do not usually do pair work in the private centre they have very occasionally done some peer

interaction in their primary schools. It is important to note that they are used to communicating in the target language in a teacher-centered setting, therefore they should have the necessary linguistic knowledge to be able to complete the task successfully.

3.1 Materials

For the present study I used two different oral communicative tasks: an open task and a closed task. The two tasks were chosen due to their slightly different expected outcome. As discussed above, closed task may need more interaction for completion and therefore longer structures may be expected to be produced. Open tasks give the students more opportunity to complete the task using their own resources, therefore the structures might be expected to be shorter, as there are no set goals to be achieved.

The tasks were chosen taking into account the students' language ability and interests so as to create a genuine need for peer communication.

Furthermore task completion in pairs also promotes each of the two aspects that are being studied, fluency and complexity.

	Means	Outcome
Task 1:	Oral	Closed
Task 2:	Oral	Open

Table 1. Characteristics of the two different tasks based on the means and the outcome.

Task number one is a close-ended task which primarily focuses on meaning rather than form. The task is a role-play where the two participants (Mark and Tom) have to exchange information in order to complete the table. The two participants possess

different information, i.e. there is an information gap, which requires interaction and L2 production to complete the task successfully. As Ellis (2003) claims in this type of tasks learners are expected to reach specific outcomes, as the requirements are to reach a set of solutions which will be necessary for task completion.

I would like to point out that this closed-ended task was not taken out of a book. I could not find a task which was suitable; at least this was my impression. Therefore I decided to develop my own collaborative task based on similar type tasks. The task that I was looking for had to be related to the participants' age, interests and linguistic resources. The participants as previously explained are in their last year of Primary School education. The subject of the role-play I developed is highly relevant as it refers to two students of a similar age to our participants who will also be attending Primary School the following year, therefore the information provided, for task completion was clearly of general interest to students who belong to that age group.

Task two is an open-ended oral task. The task was chosen based on the students' linguistic possibilities and likely interests; it requires L2 production for completion .The vocabulary required for task completion is not complex, although the higher proficiency students can use more descriptive vocabulary if they wish. Completion of this task depends greatly on the participants. Consequently when a participant does not have enough means to convey certain ideas he or she can change to another area of the picture to continue the description. The students will be able to choose their own linguistic resources for task completion. As Ellis (2003) explains an open-ended task does not have a single correct solution, therefore participants are free to decide on the outcome. To perform the task each participant is given a different picture and they are expected to describe the picture to each other. The picture chosen for the tasks show people performing different activities in the park. One of the participants cannot see the picture. He or she needs to pay attention to the details in order to memorize them so as to imagine what the picture is like. Afterwards the picture will be shown to the participant who has only been listening to the description, next comments will be made

to see if they have seen things the same way. This open-ended oral task was taken from the book (Pair work 1, Peter Watcyn-Jones and Deirdre Howard -William).

For this study twelve students were selected, from a fifth and sixth grade class. The investigation took place during the third trimester of Primary Education. The English teacher explained in Spanish (L1) that the aim of the study is to investigate the different interactions that learners produce while undergoing communicative tasks.

3.2 Participants

For this study twelve students were selected, from a fifth and sixth grade class. The participants were chosen according to their L2 proficiency level; which was estimated based on the Trinity College Level of the students (4 or 5). The students were picked and paired up taking into account their L2 competence (see table 2 below). For the study three different groupings were formed: the first two pairs were formed by students with high L2 proficiency (High-High); two other pairs were formed combining one student with high L2 proficiency and one student with low proficiency (High-Low) and the last two pairs were formed by low proficiency students (Low-Low). As table 2 shows, students in each of the two pairs for each grouping were given a different task.

	H-H pairing	H-L pairing	L-L pairing
Task 1	Nolan & Ana (Pair A.)	Pilar & Hugo (Pair B.)	Juan & Laura (Pair C.)
Tasks 2	Mark & Nazaret (Pair D.)	Maria & Diego (Pair E.)	Pablo & Marco (Pair F.)

Table 2. Participants and how they were paired up and the type of task they performed during the study.

3.3 Procedure

Before implementing the tasks, students were given oral instructions on how to complete them, and any doubts were resolved beforehand in English. The participants were told that there was a time limit for completion, eight minutes. The students were recorded while completing the task. Then, the conversations were transcribed in order to facilitate comparison and evaluation of the data. Next, the data collected was analysed and the results were summarized in tables, thus allowing us to compare the different aspects and find patterns in the results. Finally the results obtained were interpreted in order to address the research questions of the present study and to draw conclusions which can be of use to FL teachers and practitioners.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results obtained from the implementation of the two communicative tasks will be examined. The presentation and discussion of the results will be done in the following order. Firstly, we will consider the percentage of use of the L1 and L2 used will be analysed and discussed. Secondly, we will examine the length of the structures will be investigated in order to determine which type of pairing and task produces more complex and longer sentences.

4.1 Use of L1 vs. L2

Teachers are often uncertain as to whether their students will take full advantage of pair work and whether they will use the L2 when carrying out a task or they will simply choose the L1, which offers less complication for them. By measuring the amount of L1 used during the study, a conclusion about the efficiency of the characteristics of each type of task (open/closed) can be drawn.

The following two tables (table three and table four) present the results collected of the use of L1 and L2 during the performance of the two tasks. Each of the tables are formed by seven columns. The first column indicates which pair is being studied. The second column, presents the three different types of pairing used for each type of task. The third column shows the total number of words produced during the task by each pair. The fourth column gives information about the total amount of L1 used to complete the tasks. The fifth column also collects data about how many L2 words were used by each pairing. The last two columns show the percentage of L1 and L2 used by the pairs, respectively. Finally, the last row, named “Total”, provides the summation of all the information gathered.

Task 1 (Closed)

	Pairing	Total words	L1 words	L2 words	Percentage of L1	Percentage of L2
Pair A	H-H	189	3	186	1.5%	98.4%
Pair B	H-L	171	3	168	1.7%	98.2%
Pair C	L-L	120	14	106	11.6%	88.3%
TOTAL		480	20	460	4.1%	95.8%

Table 3. Absolute and relative use (%) of L1 and L2 during the implementation of task 1 (closed-ended).

As we can see in table 3, there is a noticeable difference of total words used by the high-high level pairing (189 words) and the low-low level pairing (120 words). In contrast, there is not such a remarkable difference between pair A (high-high) (189 words) and pair B (high-low), (171 words).

There is also a remarkable difference between the number of L1 words produced during performance. While the high-high level pairing and the high-low level pairing have used practically no L1 words the low-low level pairing used 14 L1 words, this is due to their lower linguistic resources which leads them to use more L1 words in order to complete the task. This part of the study proves that low-low level pairings in a closed task based are not beneficial for the participants. However, the high-high level pairings and the high-low level pairings should be promoted.

Task 2 (Open)

	Pairing	Total words	L1 words	L2 words	Percentage of L1	Percentage of L2
Pair D	H-H	204	6	198	2.9%	97%
Pair E	H-L	206	3	203	1.4%	98.5%
Pair F	L-L	148	7	141	4.7%	95.2%
TOTAL		558	16	542	2.8%	97.1%

Table 4. Absolute and relative use (%) of L1 and L2 during the implementation of task 2 (open-ended).

As we can see in table 4, while the high-high (204) and the high-low (206) level pairings produced a similar total number of words , only 148 total words were produced by the low-low level pairing. It is worth noting, however, there were no significant differences among the three pairs in the amount of L1 words used. In fact the high-high level pairing has used more L1 words than the high-low level pairing, which is an unexpected finding, as the two higher proficiency students would have been expected to use fewer L1 words than the two other pairings. The open task table shows that the high-high level pairings and high-low level pairings should be promoted because they have proven to be beneficial and to complement each other.

Table 5, summarises the results presented in tables 3 and 4, thus, serving as a useful tool to compare the percentages of L1 and L2 words performed during the two different tasks.

Close vs Open

	Total words	L1 words	L2 words	Percentage of L1	Percentage of L2
Closed task	480	20	460	4.1%	95.8%
Open task	558	16	542	2.8%	97.1%

Table 5. Absolute and relative use (%) of L1 and L2 during the implementation of task 1 and task 2

The results show that the L1 was used slightly more frequently during the implementation of the closed task (4.1%) than the open task (2.8%). In other words the open task has proved to be more effective than the closed task, as it pushed students to produce more L2 words. The total number of words used in the open task is higher, therefore this might suggest that the participants felt less restricted and were able to use more language.

These results are not in agreement with previous studies on communicative tasks. Following Long (1989) closed tasks are expected to promote more target language use (and conversely less L1 use) and more negotiation of meaning as learners need to reach a set goal and therefore interaction will be needed to transfer information which is necessary for the completion of the task.

As discussed before, the type of pairing used may also affect the amount of L2 production. The table below (table 6) presents and analyses the different pairings and their influence on the task performance. By studying the pair types we hope to find out the most favourable way to pair students up. By saying favourable we are referring to the most adequate pairing which will lead to a greater amount of L2 use.

Pairing

	Task	Total words	L1 words	L2 words	Percentage of L1	Percentage of L2
H-H	1	189	3	186	1.5%	98.4%
	2	204	6	198	2.9%	97%
TOTAL		393	9	384	2.2%	97.7%
H-L	1	171	3	168	1.7%	98.2%
	2	206	3	203	1.4%	98.5%
TOTAL		377	6	371	1.5%	98.4%
L-L	1	120	14	106	11.6%	88.3%
	2	148	7	141	4.7%	95.2%
TOTAL		268	21	247	7.8%	92.1%

Table 6. Absolute and relative use (%) of L1 and L2 across the three type of pairings.

According to the table 6 the most suitable pairing is the high- low pairing, as the percentage of L1 words (1.5%) used is slightly less and the percentage of L2 words (98,4%) used is slightly higher. The difference in the number of L2 words between the high-high level pairing and the high-low pairing is insignificant. As, the high-high level pairing uses 384 L2 words which are more words than used by the high-low level pairing (371). On the other hand the high-low level pairing uses 6 L1 words and the high-high level pairing uses three more (9). Therefore, although the high-high level pairing used a few more L1 words and also produced a few more L2 words than the high-low level pairing, the table percentages indicate that the high-low level pairing is more effective. However, the high-high level pairing is also a suitable pairing to complete a task. This result was unpredictable, as the high-high pairing would have been expected to use not only less L1 but also to promote more L2 outcome, which was not the case. As we can observe that when pairing up students for task performance the high-low level students

pairing is slightly more efficient; therefore, the high-high level pairing could also be an option but indisputably the low-low level pairing should not be considered.

To sum up, some relevant and unexpected results have been presented in this first part of the study. Results show that the participants did not use much of their L1. This may be due to the effect of the pairing, as a suitable level paring may create an environment where students are willing to interact and to take advantage of using the L2. By studying these two variables, findings, which might be useful when pairing students up and choosing a type of task, have been presented. Based on this findings, pairing should be taken into consideration by EFL practitioners, so the participants can benefit from the task as much as possible.

4.2 Production and complexity

This second section will explore the effectiveness of different tasks (closed and open) and different level pairing by measuring the complexity of the structures produced by the participants. This part of the investigation has been carried out by calculating the number of words per sentence. It was assumed that sentence length is a valid indication of the complexity of the structures used by the speaker and, by extension, a good way to measure how this output will promote attention to form.

The two tables below (tables 7 and table 8) present the different results collected while performing the two tasks (closed and open) used in this study. Each of the tables are formed by five columns. The first column indicates which pair is being studied. The second column presents the level of the pairings. The third column shows the total number of words that each pair produced during the performance of each task. The fourth column presents the number of sentences that each pairing produced to complete the tasks. The last column indicates the average length of the sentences used by each paring. To calculate the average, the total number of words were divided by the total number of sentences. The last row, named “Total”, presents the final results.

Task 1 (Closed)

	Pairing	Total words	Total number of sentences	Average length of the sentences
Pair A	H-H	189	36	5.3
Pair B	H-L	171	36	4.8
Pair C	L-L	120	30	4
TOTAL		480	102	4.7

Table 7. Total and average sentence length during the implementation of task 1 (closed-ended).

As we can see in table 7, there is a slight difference between the complexity of the structures used by the different pairings to complete the task. Whereas pair A (H-H) produces sentences with an average length of 5.3; pair B (H-L) produces sentences slightly shorter (4.8) and by comparing them to pair C (L-L), we can observe that pair C produces slightly shorter sentences (4) than the two other pairings. These results show that the high-high level pairing has a higher average length of sentences, as expected.

Task 2 (Open)

	Pairs	Total words	Total number of sentences	Average length of the sentences
Pair D	H-H	204	29	7
Pair E	H-L	206	19	10.8
Pair F	L-L	148	25	5.9
TOTAL		558	73	7.9

Table 8. Total and average sentence length during the implementation of task 1 (open-ended).

The observation of the above table (table 8) leads us to the following interpretations. In this task (open) the difference between the average length of the sentences taking into account the different pairings is slightly bigger than in the open task. The Pair E (H-L) has made long length sentences with an average of 10.8. The second pair which has

produced longer sentences is the pair D (H-H) with an average of 7 words per sentence. The pair F (L-L) has not used very long sentences, with an average of only 5.9. In addition, by observing the table we can see that the Pair E (H-L) has benefited greatly, due to the fact that the participants of this pairing have produced the highest number of words during the performance and the lowest total number of sentences, in other words the high-low level pairing has produced more complex structures than the rest so far.

In the following table (table 9) the closed task and the open task will be compared in order to discuss which of them promote more complex structures.

Closed vs. Open

	Total words	Total number of sentences	Average length of the sentences
CLOSED TASK	480	102	4.7
OPEN TASK	558	73	7.9

Table 9. Total and average sentence length during the implementation of task 1 and task 2.

In the above table (table 9) we can observe that, as said before, the open task would seem to constitute a better alternative as it encourages participants to produce a higher number of words (558). In addition the difference between the total number of words is noticeable. Besides the closed task participants have produced a higher number of sentences (102) with a lower total of words (480), as a result the length of the sentences are shorter (4.6).

To conclude the investigation suggests that an open task promotes more complex structures (7.9) and therefore this type of task gives the students more opportunities to produce more output and to practice the target language more.

Table 10 analysis how the type of pairing affect the complexity of the structures produced by the participants.

Pairing

Pairing	Task	Total words	Total number of sentences	Average length of the sentences
H-H	1	189	36	5.3
	2	204	19	7
	TOTAL	393	55	6.1
H-L	1	171	36	4.8
	2	206	19	10.8
	TOTAL	377	55	7.8
L-L	1	120	30	4
	2	148	25	5.9
	TOTAL	268	55	5

Table 10. Total and average sentence length across the three different types of pairing.

As table 10 shows, the high-low level pairing produced sentences which were longer on average (7.8 words) than those of both the high-high (6.1 words) and the low-low (5) pairs . It is interesting to note that while all the level pairings produced the same total number of sentences, the length of these sentences were different. This is due to the amount of L2 used in each sentence. The longer the sentences are the more L2 is being used. Therefore, the participants are producing more complex structures to complete the task. A possible explanation for this results is that a high level participant will tend to use more complex structures than a lower level participant. The reason why the high-low level pairing has produced longer sentences (7.7) could be due to the fact, that the higher level participant is aware that he or she needs to explain himself better, i.e to negotiate meaning, due to the lack of L2 of the low level participant. We can also

consider that the low level participant may have also tried to use the L2 more consistently, knowing that he was completing the task with a higher level student.

To sum up, the results obtained indicate that pairing higher level students with lower level students is the best option when forming pairs for task completion, as it increases sentence complexity as well as the amount of L2 used while completing the task. In addition, it allows teachers to integrate both strong and weaker students into oral pairwork following a task-based methodology.

It has also been found that open tasks push students to produce longer sentences as well as to produce more L2 output (see table 7). This is one of the most striking findings of the investigation, as much of the research which has been carried out by other researchers has proved that closed-tasks are more likely to promote negotiation and therefore longer and more complex sentences (Long 1981).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this project was firstly to examine the effectiveness of two different types of task (open and closed) and secondly to investigate whether the type of student pairing can affect L2 production during the performance of the chosen tasks. The relative use of L2 and L1, and the length of the structures were analyzed in order to determine the effect of the afore mentioned variables (type of task and type of pairing).

The data gathered has shown that the open task chosen for the research, promotes more L2 use and also longer sentences than the closed task. In this sense, the open task, which was analyzed during the investigation proved to be more efficient than the closed task. These findings were completely unexpected as closed-ended tasks are expected to promote more use of L2 than open-ended tasks. Loschy and Bley-Vroman(1993) claim that closed tasks are superior to open tasks as they are more liable to facilitate comprehension and produce output.

In addition, the findings have also revealed that the most effective pairing is a high-low level pairing, regardless of task type. The high-low level pairing combination promoted slightly more L2 use and therefore, this pairing combination also pushed participants to produce longer structures than other pairing combinations. Nevertheless, the differences between the high-high level pairings and the high-low level pairing were very small. Therefore both pairing combinations can be considered as adequate for task completion.

Based on these findings, FL teachers ought to use either high low level pairings or high-high level pairings when implementing oral communicative tasks in class. However, in most Primary school classrooms there is likely to be a similar amount of lower and higher level learners so pairing up students following the high-low typing will be easy than

trying to pair up high-high level students. A lower level student will expectedly have less language resources than a higher level student and may ask for clarification like; do you mean? Is it....? A slightly higher level student will be able to re-word and clarify in order to answer these questions; this is obviously based on the fact that higher level students have better language resources. When this type of interaction takes place students will be learning from each other. Therefore a high-low level pairing is able to complement each other. These findings may be relevant to a teacher who is considering following a task based approach, as they can be used as a guide for pairing up students thus helping students to complete the task in a more competent way.

However, this research has some limitations which need to be taken into account. First of all the study focused on measuring the length of structures not on the accuracy of the structures. The structures produced by the participants while doing the open task were longer as previously explained. However, the structures produced by the participants during the closed tasks were more accurate, in other words more grammatically precise. Although this information was not analyzed during the research I believe it should be mentioned as fluency and accuracy are both essential to second language acquisition.

Another limitation of this research concerns the participants chosen for the research. The participants who were chosen to take part in the investigation were not used to doing tasks. Students who do tasks on a regular basis may have completed the tasks in a different way, in as much as they would have been familiar with task requirements and the outcome might have been affected. This limitation could be tackled by providing a model beforehand, e.g. showing a video or acting out a similar task in front of the class. Finally the participants were recorded in pairs in a separate class, away from the rest of the students, and this was an unusual setting for them. The teacher sat with the participants while they were being recorded which may have restricted their use of L1 language as the participants were told beforehand that they should complete the task in the target language. If the participants had done the task in pairs in their usual class together with the rest of the students, there would have been more noise and

distraction and less discipline which could have led to more L1 use which consequently would have affected the results. Further research should be based on a larger group of participants in a real classroom setting, where the teacher is not watching over the students while performing the task. Bigger groups of participants would give a wider range of results and might yield different findings.

Another important feature to be considered and which may be contemplated as a limitation, could be the fact that six participants who were paired up as previously stated (high-high, high-low and low-low) completed one of the tasks, followed by the other group of six participants also divided into the level pairing (high-high, high-low and low-low) completed the other task. By doing this I was able to obtain more information about the efficiency of the different pairings, due to the fact that I had six different pairs to investigate and to compare. However, this did not give me the opportunity to observe the same participants conducting both tasks, which could have been more relevant when discussing which task is more efficient and could have also lead to different findings.

When I set out to do this project I knew very little about the task based approach. I was unsure about the effectiveness of pairing up students to work on a task without a teacher to guide them. In fact I was practically convinced that a teacher-centered class was the only way students could learn a new language. Presently I understand better the dynamics of pairing up students to work on a task, and I feel that this approach is able to promote second language acquisition and should be followed in Primary schools. However we cannot ignore the fact that the success of a collaborative task heavily relies on the students. When students are working in pairs in a classroom setting it is up to the students to work competently in order to complete the task. However this may not always be the case. Students might not be autonomous enough, as most Primary school children are used to being guided by the teacher, this fact may affect the performance of the task. Although by saying this, it is also a well known fact that if a person wishes to become a fluent second language user he or she will need to be an active participant, not just when doing a collaborative task but in all aspects of the learning process. In addition it is highly important to introduce new learning procedures. In this paper we have analyzed the effects of a new learning procedure, a task based. New learning

procedures will attract students' attention; boost their motivation and consequently lead to learning.

In conclusion I would encourage teachers to use communicative tasks in Primary schools as I believe that they will also come to the same conclusion as I have. To end up I would like to say that task based is not only an efficient way of acquiring a second language but it is also an enjoyable one, for both students and teachers. The task approach provides a suitable environment where students are able and willing to learn. Therefore, by doing communicative tasks students will be able to experience a new exciting way of using their interlanguage, which is much more student-centered than the traditional approach often followed in classrooms.

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7. APENDIX

7.1 Tasks

7.1.1 Task 1(Closed-ended)

Introduction

You are going to start secondary school this year but you will be going to a boarding school, you will have to share a room with one of your classmates. You are on your way with your parents to the opening day to get to know your new school your new teacher and most importantly you roommate. When you arrive you will be introduced to your roommate and you will have the opportunity to know a bit about each other. Ask each other questions to get the necessary information to fill in the table provided.

Tom

My name is Tom. I am twelve years old and I have got three sisters. I like heavy metal music and sports. I play football three times a week. I am a Real Madrid supporter and I never miss a match even if I have an exam the following day. I am a happy person and I am fun to be with. I like laughing and making jokes. I am usually tidy, but I often leave my shoes around the house and this makes my mum angry. Another one of my annoying habits is sleeping with the light on. I don't like school much because it is very boring. My teacher Mr Jones says that I need to study more, he thinks I am lazy.

Mark

My name is Mark. I am eleven years old and I am an only child but I have got a lot of cousins, girl cousins. I am bad at sports but I like watching football, playing computer games and listen to music in the car, my mum's car, The Beatles. I am a good student and I like school. I study for an hour everyday because my mother, who is a teacher, says I must. I am very shy and I hate meeting new

people because I don't know what to say. I keep my things tidy and I can't stand untidy people. My mother thinks I am obsessed with tidiness. Another one of my bad habits is that I am very slow and I get to school just on time and when I arrive my mates are already in the classroom hanging up their coats.

Name/Age	
Bothers/sisters	
Free time activities	
Personality	
Bad habits	
Music	
Studying habits	

7.1.2 Task 2 (Open-ended)

27 This is how I see it

Student A

Look at this picture. What is happening?

First give the picture a title: _____

Now get ready to describe it to your partner. Give as many details as you can and say what is happening in your opinion. Your partner may ask you some questions, for example:

**Someone in the water is waving.
A child in a pushchair is crying**

When you have finished, show your partner the picture. Ask **Is that what you imagined?** and **Do you see what I see?**

Then listen to your partner describe a picture. Try to imagine it yourself. Ask questions to get a clearer idea. Do you both see things in the same way? You may like to compare your ideas with another pair of students and then talk about them with the whole class.



27 This is how I see it

Student B

Look at this picture. What is happening?

First give the picture a title: _____

Now get ready to describe it to your partner. Give as many details as you can and say what is happening in your opinion. Your partner may ask you some questions, for example:

**A man is following her.
He is wearing glasses.**

When you have finished, show your partner the picture.

Ask: **Is that what you imagined?** and **Do you see what I see?**

Then listen to your partner describe a picture. Try to imagine it yourself. Ask questions to get a clearer idea. Do you both see things in the same way?



7.2 Transcriptions

7.2.2 Task 1(Closed-ended)

H-H Pair

A I start yeah- What is your name?

B Eh...Nolan

A No, in the paper

B Mark, my name is Mark and...What is your name?

A Tom

B Have you got brothers or sisters?

A Three sisters. Have you a brother or a sister?

B No, no sisters, no brothers.

A Do you play football?

B Only watch no playing. Do you play football? Who is your team?

A I love the sports. My team is Real Madrid.

B Are you happy and fun?

A I am shy I don't make friends but I am a good student.

B Are you tidy? I am tidy, my books, my clothes...everything tidy...but not my shoes.

A What question you asked?

B I don't like untidy.....I like computer games. Would you like computer games?

A I like metal heavy and sleeping.

B What is metal heavy?

A Music, stupid.

B My mum listened to Beatles in the car. What is your bad habit?

A I sleep in the bed with the lights on. Do you have a bad habit?

B I get to school on time.

A This is a bad habit?

B Don't know, it puts I get to school just on time.

A Yeah means justo a tiempo.

B I think we finished.

A Yeah very well.

H-L Pairing

A	Hello nice to meet you...My name is Tom and you?
B	Mark
A	I am 11 years old... How old are you?
B	I am 12 years old. Have you got a brother or a sister?
A	I haven't brothers. I am only.
B	Have you got any hobbies?
A	Football, computer, music.
B	Ask me.
A	What hobbies you like?
B	I play in a team. My favourite team is Real Madrid, and heavy metal music. Are you tidy people?
A	Yes. I not like untidy people.
B	Is school good?
A	I like school, I study everyday and you?
B	School is boring my teacher think I study more, must.
A	What is your personality?
B	I am laughing, I am making jokes, I am happy... What do you like?
A	Shy, not like meeting new people, I am shy.
B	Have you any bad habits?
A	Slow y algo de just on time to school, untidy.
B	Don't know. I have bad habit too. I leave my shoes in the house, and I sleep with turn on lights.
A	You have complete the questions?
B	Yes, I have complete.

L-L Pairing

A My name is Mark and your name?

B My name Tom

A I am only children, and you?

B Three sisters.

A Pregunta tú.

B Eh... do you like football?

A Watch football and play computer games and you?

B I play football. I watch Real Madrid. Are you happy?

A I am shy...meeting people don't like, and you?

B I am fun. I tell jokes.

A Do you annoying habits.

B Yes, I sleep with the light.

A You are baby.

B No dice eso....which are your bad habits?

A I am slow, to go to school...slow.

B Ehh...music. Do you like?

A My music, The Beatles...your music?

B Heavy metal. Que queda?

A No se...ehhh...studying, habits...

B Lazy. I don't study, says my teacher. You?

A I am good. I study every days.

B Ya esta, hemos terminado.

A

Vale.

7.2.2 Task 2 (Open-ended)

H-H Pairing.

A

- It is windy.
- There are a lot of people.
- They are in park,....err...maybe....errr the dog is playing.
- There is a woman speaking on the phone.
- There is a woman with a baby in a carrito, un momento, push-chair.
- There are some boys sitting on the floor, drinking or eating.
- I don't know.
- There is a boy in the river with his hand up.
- The baby is crying.
- A woman is looking at her watch.
- No more.
- , this is my picture, What do you think?
- Do you see what I see?

B

Yeah, you describe it well.

A

- Okay, now my turn.
- There are a lot of people in the street, standing on the street, watching.
- There is a store, a big shop, I think.
- The woman is afraid of the bird.
- The bird is flying on her head.
- The children are in the bus stop.
- One has a board, a skate board.
- There is an old woman with a worried face.
- There is a cat, extraño, an angry cat.
- There is a man carrying a handbag.
- There is businessman with a handbag too.
- Ok, that is all.
- I am going to show you the drawing.

B

- A man with a handbag, a gay...hahahah.
- Maleta, suitcase, silly.

H-L Pairing.

A

- I have a picture of some people in the park.
- The boys are having a picnic sitting in the floor.
- The baby that is with his mother is unhappy.
- The dog is wet, he is the river.
- A man is shouting to anybody.
- A girl is speaking with the phone to her boyfriend.
- I know because she is smiling.
- It look like it is windy there are big trees.
- Okay, ahora mira la foto.
- What do you think?

B

- Yes, this is right.
- Ahora yothere is a street and people and a cat, a boy, a bus stop, a store, a bird,...errr...

A

- What are they doing?

B

- People standing..., cat running, boy playing, errr...no cars.
- A boy wearing a schoolbag.
- Bueno, now I show you it.
- I describe well?

A

- Right, well, yes.
- Not well, but okay.

L-L Pairing.

A

- My Title is the park.
- I can see three women...six boys...one man and one dog.
- The woman is speaking.
- The baby is shouting.
- The dog is playing.
- Do you see what I see?

B

- Well, I can see a river...no lo dijiste.
- In the river is the dog?

A

- I said dog.

B

- Right, right now me turn.
- Ok, let me see.
- This is a road, a street.
- It is plenty of people.
- The people are boys and girls and men and women.
- There is bird with woman.
- The boys are talking near to the stop, the bus stop.
- The old woman has buying, she has a big bag.
- The cat isn't happy.
- In the street there is a Megostore.

A

- What do you say?

B

- A megastore, una tienda o algo.
- One of the boys wears a hat.
- One of the boys has skates.
- I finished, look.

A

- Okay, is a nice describe.
