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ABSTRACT

Interaction in general or negotiation of meaning in particular plays a crucial role in language learning as it provides learners with comprehensible input that leads to speaking fluency and language acquisition. This paper is an attempt to look into student interaction in a high intermediate English class. It aims to find out what strategies for negotiation of meaning the students used and possible problems arising during task-based interaction. The participants were fifteen international students of various citizenships studying at a university in the United States. The data sources were taken from a video with its transcription filming an English learning session. The qualitative research method is employed for data analysis. Long's (1980) three strategies of negotiation of meaning are used as the analytic framework. It was found that the students of high language proficiency infrequently resorted to negotiation of meaning during task-based interaction. Clarification requests were the most common while confirmation checks and comprehension checks were at lower frequency. Uneven participation, however, was a problem as a student tended to dominate the discussion. The findings imply that the role of group leader should be circulated to overcome the personal dominance during discussion; and task-based activities should be inclusive and collaborative to ensure equal contributions among the participants.

Keywords: Interaction, negotiation of meaning, task-based activity, clarification requests, confirmation, comprehension checks.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has found itself in language education for over four decades now (Richard & Rodgers, 2014). It is the teaching that encourages language learners to engage in meaningful communication in the target language rather than focus on forms. In recent years, an increasingly popular realization of CLT has emerged: Task-based instruction (TBI) (eg.: Long, 1985; Willis, 1996; Skehan, 2003; Nunan, 1999; 2004; Ellis, 2003; Niemeier, 2017; Tütüniş, Ünal & Babanoğlu, 2022). According to Nunan (1999), TBI is “an approach to the design of language course in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks” (p.24). Brown (2001) also emphasizes the central focus of TBI as the organization of a course around communicative activities that learners will perform outside the classroom. In task-based classes students can choose whatever language forms at their disposal to express themselves so as to achieve the task goals. This teaching approach has the advantage of bringing learning activities closer to the real world, and thereby meeting learners' social, academic and work-related needs. Additionally, since the task-based approach is process-oriented, it allows structured repetition and creative transfer of knowledge items. It, therefore, leads to higher level of automaticity than the traditional communicative approach (Ridder et al., 2007).

The notion of tasks has been defined in various ways. Willis considers task as “a goal-oriented communicative activity with a specific outcome, where the emphasis is on exchange meanings not producing specific language forms” (1996, p.36). She distinguishes two main groups of tasks. Close tasks consist of ones that are highly structured and have specific goals. For instance, work in pairs to find seven differences between these two pictures and write them down in a note form. These instructions are very precise and the information is restricted. There is one possible outcome, and one way to achieve it. Thus, the information-gap task also falls into this category. Open tasks refer to ones that more loosely constructed with a less specific goal. For example, comparing memories of childhood journeys, or exchanging anecdotes on a theme. In addition, she introduces six types of tasks which include: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks. She suggests that if the text is linguistically dense or complex, it is advisable to set an easy task, and follow it with others that encourage learners to focus on different aspects. If the text is easy, the tasks should be more challenging, for example understanding implications or inferences. She notes that it is better to grade the tasks rather than the text.

Nunan (1999; 2004) made a distinction between real-world or target tasks and pedagogical tasks. The former refers to the sorts of things that individuals typically do outside the classroom, and the ultimate purpose of language teaching is to enable learners to do these things using language. Therefore, classroom time should be devoted to the rehearsal of performing real tasks such as making reservations, deciding where to go on holiday after reading the brochure, etc. In this sense, task is defined as the things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in-between (Long, 1985). Pedagogical tasks comprise those things that learners will do in class that are not rehearsals for performance outside of the classroom. Examples of pedagogical tasks include doing a jigsaw reading, or solving a problem in small groups in class, not because learners will do them outside of the classroom, but because it is assumed that these tasks facilitate the development of a learner's general language proficiency. Thus, it can be seen that Willis's categorization of tasks is narrower than Nunan's, and her task types are similar to Nunan's pedagogical tasks. In practice, a variety of task designs have been proposed (eg.: Brown, 2001; Lambert, 2019; Nunan, 2004; Pica, 2005; 2008; Willis, 1996; Canaran & Mirici, 2020).

In designing tasks, several principles should be taken into considerations. According to Nunan (1999), the following three principles are essential for task designs:

- a) The authenticity principle: refers to the extent to which linguistic data that learners work with are authentic. The advantage is that learners encounter target language items in such contexts where they naturally occur, rather than in context modified by textbook writers.
- b) The form/function principle: suggests that form and function relationships should be made clear, i.e., the functional purpose for having different linguistic forms should be pointed out. To activate this principle, the teacher needs to design tasks that require learners to use inductive and deductive reasoning to develop their own understanding of the relationship between form and function.
- c) The task-dependency principle: views that each succeeding task in the instructional sequence should flow out of and be dependent on, the one that precedes it. In this way, a series of tasks in a lesson forms a kind of pedagogical ladder, and each task represents a rung on the ladder, enabling the learner to reach a higher and higher levels of communicative performance.

Since implementation of tasks has interactive nature, central to task-based learning are pair work and group work, which involve negotiation of meaning, co-construction of ideas and information exchange. Of these components, negotiation of meaning has been extensively investigated (eg: Long, 1985; Pica, 1994; 2001; 2005; Zenouzagh, 2016). It is a process in which learners modify and restructure interactions as they experience difficulties in comprehending a message. This can be done by repeating the sentence, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, etc. until the message is understood. The benefit of negotiation is that it helps learners make input comprehensible to the interlocutor and also helps modify their own output (Pica, 2003).

There are various ways to negotiate meaning. This process can be divided into three categories, including comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Among the task types discussed earlier, the information gap task has great potentials to promote negotiation of meaning and modified output. Pica (2005) argues that this task type lends itself to negotiation of meaning because when access to one participant's information becomes difficult, the interlocutor signals the need for clarity, and the first participant responds by paraphrasing the language or expanding the information so that the listener can understand.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Negotiation of meaning in task-based interaction

A number of studies have been conducted to gain insights into the issue of task-based instruction. Schinke-Llano and Vicars (1993), who studied the correlation between the affected filter and negotiated interaction, contend that group work is a good solution to create anxiety-free environment as there is little control from the teacher. Since group work in class typically involves negotiated interaction, it is both necessary and sufficient for successful L2 acquisition. Their findings reveal that students generally feel more comfortable with negotiated interaction with their peers than teacher-fronted activities. It is therefore advisable to design classroom activities that promote as much negotiated interaction as possible so that students feel confident to fulfill the task. The benefit of group work is also highlighted by Weinstein (2004), who notes that creating opportunities to collectively develop strategies for action is one of the principles of learner-centered instruction.

Pica's (2002) study of negotiation revealed that negotiators seemed to work mostly on lexical items and larger syntactic units. They did not negotiate over verb tenses and aspects since in everyday interactions, these areas of grammar might not cause difficulty for comprehension. She also argues that not all negotiation involves lexical and syntactic focus. For instance, an interlocutor might not be able to interpret the other partner's intended meaning due to differences in message content expectations or cultural backgrounds. Such problems might lead to a negotiation of message meaning, although the message is linguistically acceptable and appropriate.

It should be noted that communication strategies are also important components for successful negotiation of meaning. At certain levels, effective use of these strategies can help solve communicative problems during interactional activities (Nakatani, 2005; 2006). Huang and Naerssen (1987) found that successful Chinese EFL

students tended to use different communication strategies than those used by less proficient students. Nakatani (2005), who investigated the benefits of explicitly teaching the use of oral communication strategies in Japanese mixed-level classes, found that students in the experimental group considerably increased their oral proficiency test scores. They also used longer utterances and employed more achievement strategies such as modified interaction, modified input, time-gaining and maintenance strategies. They used reduction strategies, such as message abandonment, less frequently. In examining the effects of developing an oral communication strategy inventory, Nakatani (2006) found that when the learners had difficulty listening to their partner, they utilized modified interaction to avoid communication breakdown. They might repeat the student's words or asked for clarification so as to understand the interlocutor's intention. It was also revealed that the high oral proficiency group reported higher frequency of using such strategies. She concludes that there is a correlation between language proficiency and certain negotiated interaction strategies.

Her findings, however, are challenged by Foster and Ohta (2005), who studied high-intermediate students' interaction, found that the incidence of negotiation of meaning was very low. Instead, they actively helped each other to fulfill the task through co-construction and prompting. They showed their interest and encouragement while seeking and providing assistance and initiating self-repair of their own utterances without any sign of communication breakdown. They conclude that negotiation of meaning is only one of the ways in interactional processes that promote SLA as students work to understand and express meaning in the target language.

In a similar study, Chen (2016) investigated EFL learners strategies use during task-based interaction in a 10-session virtual course. Four types of tasks were used to elicit the participants' use of interactional modification strategies during negotiation of meaning via voice chat. Eight communication strategies were analyzed, including: Request for help; Self-correction; Topic shift; Metacognitive strategies; Spell out the word; Clarification requests; Confirmation checks; Comprehension checks. It was revealed that three major communication strategies, namely Clarification requests; Confirmation checks; Comprehension checks were most frequently used by the learners. She also found that communication tasks that are meaningful, authentic and relevant can stimulate task-based interaction, foster motivation, retain task engagement, and as a result, optimize learner language processing and output.

In addition to enhancing interaction, task-based activities can also increase students' motivation. Truong (2021) investigated teachers' and students' perceptions of task-related motivational strategies in EFL classrooms a Vietnam's context. Employing a 48-item Likert scale questionnaire and 34 journal reflections to collect the data, he found that there were perceptual convergences and divergences among teachers and students. Both groups showed a consensus on the motivational value of five domains, including task nature, task relevance, task materials, task-related feedback, and during-task teacher behavior. They also agreed on six most rated strategies about clear task instructions, task variety, teacher encouragement, task interestingness, interactive tasks, post-task feedback as robust motivation. However, the teachers tend to attach greater importance to strategies that influence learning gains, while the students showed preference to the factors affecting their learning experience. The findings suggest that strategies that teachers perceive as motivating might not be those appreciated by students. It is, therefore, implied that surveys of student preference should be conducted before an EFL course.

2.2. Possible problems in implementing task-based activities

In practice, there might be potential challenges in implementing task-based activities. Carless (2002) conducted a qualitative study which involved three non-native English speaker teachers in Hong Kong. It was revealed that the teachers who taught young learners faced the following obstacles, the first of which was the discipline factor. They found it hard to balance communicative tasks and good behavior since there were many students in the class, especially when learners' proficiency levels were considerably varied. This problem was sometimes resulted from the teacher's unclear instructions, which made students puzzled. The fact that tasks might be too easy or too difficult was also responsible for the discipline issue because they might finish the task too soon, or they might not be able to fulfill it. Another problem was students' use of their first language. They might use their mother tongue to clarify what the teacher had said, or to discuss the task requirements. Their use of first language tended to increase when they got overexcited or distracted. The third issue was students' uneven participation. During group work, one student tended to dominate the class and the rest seemed to be passive. To overcome these potential problems, Carless suggests that teachers' instructions should always be clear. The teacher should set a good example using the target language as much as possible when talking to the class. It is necessary to teach students communication strategies so that they can negotiate meaning with their peers. To increase student involvement, it is necessary to design tasks that involve more inclusivity, and it is important to circulate the role of leader to avoid dominance. The teacher should also monitor students' contributions during discussion in a tactful way.

In summary, from the studies discussed above, it is evident that task-based learning is beneficial as it promotes interaction among students; however, it is not without challenges. Negotiation of meaning seems to occur more frequently with low-level students than with those at higher proficiency level since the latter group has much less difficulty in expressing themselves and making themselves understood. Given the fact that there is not much

attention paid to participants in task (Murphy, 2003), this case study aims to make a contribution to shedding light on the issue. In the scope of this paper, I will attempt to answer two major questions: (1) What strategies for negotiation of meaning were used by the students during the implementation of the task? (2) What are the possible problems that need to be considered?

3. METHODOLOGY

Data

The sources of data for analysis include a 43-minute video tape recorded by teachers from a university in the United States with 33-page transcription. The participants were fifteen international students involved in group work. However, the data analysis will especially focus on a zoomed group, one male and two females (henceforth referred to as A, B and C, and actually B is the male). Their English proficiency level was high-intermediate. The unit they were working on was entitled "Advertising".

Tasks characteristics

Their task for the session was to design a perfume product and plan a marketing campaign. Prompts for the new product design and marketing strategies were given, such as brand name, color, smell, targeted consumers, media for advertising etc. They would work together to make a decision or a design for each of the prompts. For instance, they would collectively decide one option among the two given types of dispenser, namely pump spray and no pump. Another example was to create a catchy slogan for the perfume. Each of them was expected to verbally compare his/her decisions with those of the partners in his/her discussion group, explain and defend his/her opinions. They were asked to reach a group consensus on the best solution to the problem. One person in the group was responsible for writing down the group's decisions.

Methods

The quantitative method is employed for investigation. In order to answer the first research question, Long's (1980) three strategies of negotiation of meaning are used as the analytic framework. These strategies are characterized as follows:

(1) Comprehension checks: involve any expression designed to establish whether the speaker's preceding utterance has been understood by the interlocutors. Such utterances are typically formed by tag questions, repetitions of all or part of the same preceding utterance spoken with rising question intonation such as "Do you understand?"

(2) Confirmation checks: are expressions which immediately follow an utterance by the interlocutor designed to elicit confirmation that the utterance has been correctly understood by the speaker. For example, the lady? following with the lady by the other speaker is a confirmation check. Confirmation checks are always formed by rising intonation questions, with or without a tag (the lady? or the lady, right?). They always involve repetition of all or part of the interlocutor's preceding utterance.

(3) Clarification requests: are any expression designed to elicit clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterances. They are mostly formed by wh- , yes-no, or tag questions, and statements like "I don't understand" and the imperatives can be counted as Clarification requests (Foster & Ohta, 2005, p.410).

In addition, Conversation Analysis methods (Hutchby, & Woodffitt, 1988) are also employed to investigate the communicative intentions in the negotiation of meaning process, i.e. to find out whether an interlocutor negotiates meaning due to his/her misinterpretation of structural or pragmatic aspects.

To answer question (2), first I used a hard copy of the transcription to count the turns taken by each participant manually. Turns which only have some meaningless sounds, such as hmm, hhh, um, hu.. are not counted as a turn. Then I used the soft file for word counts. The transcription is copied in three files, each of which contains only one participant's turns. The other two speakers' turns are deleted. The number of words uttered by each speaker is counted by computer to see how much one participant quantitatively contributed to the task accomplishment.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. What strategies for negotiation of meaning were used by the participants during implementation of the task?


In this advanced-level class, the students did not seem to have many comprehension problems. Throughout the task implementation, they discussed quite comfortably with hardly any sign of difficulty in understanding their partners. Of the three strategies proposed by Long (1980), the number of occurrences of clarification requests is the highest (5), while the numbers of confirmation checks and comprehension checks are equal with two occurrences for each. The strategies used for comprehension checks were a Yes/No question and a statement with rising intonation at the end of the utterance. The Yes/No question is given below.

1. C: we can make a:: (.) from (.) direction of a woman. (.1) (Special) women to man.
2. C: no very man-man's perfume very attractive to women?

3. A: [mm hmm]
4. C: so w[e can de]ci:de from women's view (.)
5. A: yeah
6. C: (view) side (.5) do you know what I mean?
7. B: no. repeat.
8. C: mmm tch we can make a: dis name or dis target from women's view?
9. (.)because this men's perfume for (.)h I think there's mans perfume for women, or women's perfume for man. I
10. think that. (.) so: (.)
11. B: ohh:: (.) good idea.

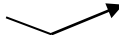
In the excerpt above, through B's facial expression, C anticipated that B might not understand her; she therefore asked him the question to make sure whether he could see her point. When B replied "No. Repeat.", she clarified her previous sentence with longer utterances so that B could understand her. The evidence of his comprehension is manifested by his comment "Oh. Good idea". This problem seems to be at the discourse level, meaning that B did not get C's communicative intention which requires the interpretation of all previous chunks (lines 1, 2 and 4), not just a sentence or a phrase.

In the second example below, C employed a statement with rising intonation (line 14) to check B's understanding of her previous utterance (line 12). B asked C for clarification of her utterance (line 13) not because he did not know the sentence structure or vocabulary, but he did not get what she meant by that.

12. C: Ah hu::h. (..) [You] have to make a plot point.
13. B: [What?]
14. C: =You know plot point? 
15. B: Yeh,
16. C: Like we have to make a:: (..) Story.
17. B: Yeh I think [it must] be a situation uh:,
18. C: [(and a clima)]

B's response "Yeh" to C's comprehension check in line 15 indicates that he had no problem with the two words "plot" and "point" but he did not understand what was meant by the phrase. This clarification request (line 13) and comprehension check (line 14) can be grouped into the lexical level.

Of the two confirmation checks below, one is associated with the syntactic aspect, the other is with interpretation.

19. A: What perfume do you wear? 
20. C: Uh::: (0.8) do you? (.) I- I am wearing n[ow]?
21. A: [um hm.
22. C: No.
23. B: Who pre- Who has the better letter. hehehe (I don't know.) °hhhhhhh who likes to wri::te in the board. °I
24. don't know.° Because you have to write big.
25. A: Mm hmm,
26. C: How- how can I write down:: wha- just this sentence?
27. B: Yeah. (or) are you going to be the woman who write the sentence on the board, or are you going to be the
28. woman in the library.
29. C: OK.

C's emphasis on "now" with rising intonation (line 20) shows that she was confirming her interpretation of A's utterance whether A was implying the temporal reference as the moment of speaking or in general. However, in line 26, C's response has to do with both a clarification request (How- how can I write down) and a confirmation check (just this sentence?).

Of the five clarification requests, four of them were due to linguistic problems.

30. A: Perceptible huh
31. B: What (did you) what'd you say?
32. C: Captive? is (there/that) a word? huh
33. B: I don't know. maybe. heh he [he (.) hu hu hu [.hh
34. C: [I don't know. [aw[::
35. B: [I know the I know the idea <but I don't know how to express> (it [in a]) word.
36. B: oh
37. A: irresistible?
38. B: yeah
39. C: wassdat? (.)
40. A: [nobody can]

- 41. B: =heh
- 42. C: and sigh.
- 43. B: what's t-th-the the word?
- 44. C: sigh.=>
- 45. B: =sigh?=-
- 46. C: h:uh:
- 47. C: sigh (0.2) S E-S I G H.

The clarification requests in lines 31, 39, 43 and 45 indicate that the interlocutors did not know the words, and the strategies they utilized were Wh-questions, except for a repetition in line 45, which was also a clarification request (C's spelling in line 47 indicates that B did not know the word "sigh"). The following clarification request (line 55) was not to clarify a linguistic problem, but an act of asking for elaboration.

- 48. B: Ju[s:t(.) put many ideas an[d then we cho]ose the=
- 49. A: [Yes[:. [y e : s : :]
- 50. C: [um hm
- 51. B: =best o[ne.
- 52. A: [Yeah.
- 53. B: [(Sure.)=
- 54. C: [(Okay.)=
- 55. A: =Like ideas for names? or ide[as for:.,
- 56. B: [f:or:.,
- 57. B: Ide[as.
- 58. A: [Ideas.=
- 59. B: Ye(h)ah. i(h)d(h)eas [for ide]as.
- 60. C: [Ok a y.]

Thus, it can be seen that these advanced students sparsely resorted to negotiation of meaning during their 43-minute discussion to fulfill the task. It is noticeable that the negotiations involved not only lexical items (lines 13, 14, 31, 39 and 43) and syntactic aspect (line 20), but discourse level (lines 6, 26 and 55) as well as. In fact, they hardly had any difficulty understanding their partners and expressing themselves. Rather, the interaction process for task accomplishment was constructed through co-construction, prompting, showing interests and encouragement, self-repair, and seeking assistance and agreement. However, these aspects are beyond the scope of this paper.

4.2. What are the possible problems that need to be considered?

The most noticeable feature in the interaction is unequal contributions by participants to fulfilling the task. B dominated the discussion with 472 turns, followed by C with 388 turns. A made the least contribution with only 225 turns. B's turns were also the longest, and A's turns the shortest. Noticeably, of A's 225 turns, 123 of which (54.7%) contain only one word such as Yeah, Yes, Ok, Good, etc. These utterances served only as backchannels, not as a contribution of ideas. The following chart graphically compares the turns taken by each participant.

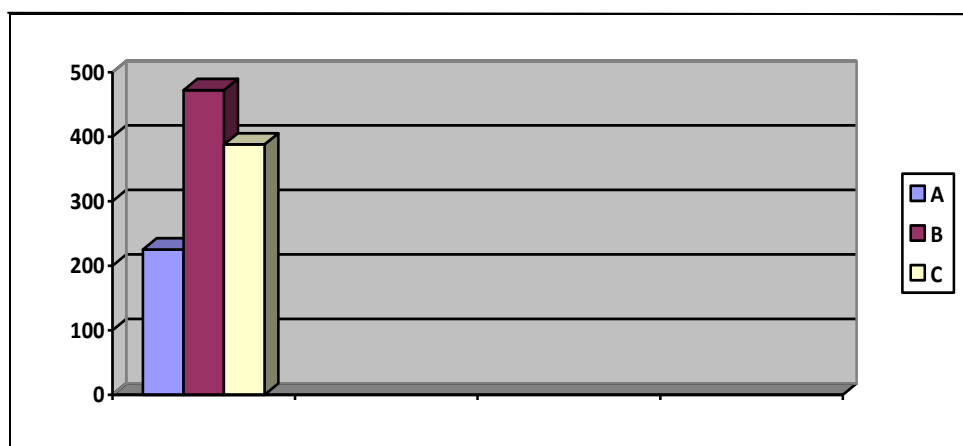
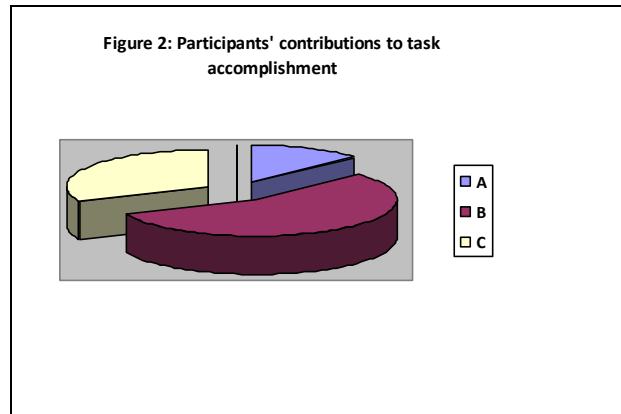


Fig.1: Distributions of turns taken by each participant

Although the imbalances in turns taken by each participant are not so great, the calculation of words uttered by each participant reveals much more striking differences. B spoke most of the time with 3,472 words (55.2% of the total) in comparison with 1,991 words (31.7%) by C and only 824 words (13.1%) by A. Hence, it can be

seen that B's contribution to the task implementation was greater than the total of A's and C's. In addition, while B and C occasionally resorted to negotiation of meaning during the task resolution (4 and 5 occurrences, respectively), not once did A negotiate meaning. This indicates that A was not an active participant, and it does not necessarily mean that she had no problem in communication. The pie chart below further illustrates their degree of involvement.



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that the frequency of negotiation of meaning was very low in this advanced-level group. They appeared to be efficient in implementing the task with only a few minor difficulties comprehending each other. When a comprehension problem occurred, it was solved with little effort of clarification; typically they could understand their interlocutors after one or two turns of rephrasing. The interaction process was performed quite smoothly through concerted efforts, including co-construction (For instance, A said "starts reading a book" then C added "coming to the library"), expressing interests and encouragements (eg: "That's a good one; Oh. Good idea"), as well as seeking and providing assistance (eg: B: how can I spell succ(h)exful?; B: How can I say? I mean...I'm using the perfume...every body's pay attention at me, and C responded: "notable?, I think notable") and self-repair (eg: B: and watch the television, so any kind of: uh, uh, not any kind of, but high culture program). These findings concur with what Foster and Ohta (2005) found in their research, which also indicates a few occurrences of negotiation of meaning and high level of involvement in co-construction of task requirements. The aspects of negotiation of meaning were also similar to those found in Pica's (2002) research, including lexical, syntactic and discourse levels. Especially, this case study of adult learners revealed a challenge noted by Carless (2002) insofar as the participants' uneven contributions to the task implementation. Quantitatively, the number of words uttered by the dominant student outnumbered the total of the other two, and was more than four times that of the least talkative participant.

Nevertheless, the question of discipline did not seem to pose any problem in this 15-student class. I noticed that all of the five groups participated seriously and they did not appear to be distracted by the other groups. Their active involvement might have been due to the age factor and the class size. Thus, for adult learners and small classes, the problems of discipline and level of noise might not be obvious and special attention needs not to be paid to these issues as suggested by Carless (2002) for younger learners.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that this case study makes any interpretations tentative; however, some insights should be considered. For high-proficiency levels, negotiation of meaning might not frequently occur. Hence, it might not be necessary to provide explicit training of communication strategies to learners as suggested by Nakatani (2005). Rather, it is advisable to design tasks that involve inclusivity, creativity and collaborative learning to promote students' activeness. To overcome the uneven involvement problem or dominance, participants in a group should circulate the role of leader during discussion. For example, in completing tasks such as the one above, participants should take turns to be the group secretary for 14 minutes. Taking this role requires even the passive student to engage in the process.

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