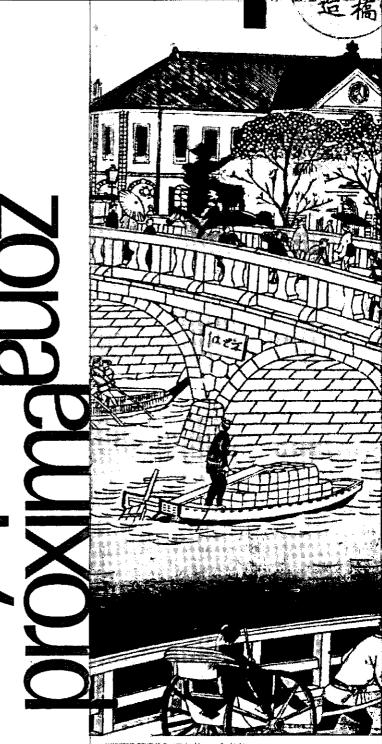# Group work in EFL: constructing zones of learning

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MANNERING, DOUGLAS. Great Works of Japanese Graphic Art

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ABSTRACT

There seems to be agreement amongst EFL researchers that group work is one of the most important interactional contexts for promoting communication in the EFL classroom. However, the reasons underlying this accord cannot be taken for granted and still need closely scrutiny. The present study attempts to provide some arguments in favor of group work and the ways in which it may be implemented as a potentially rich zone for EFL learning. For this, the discussion has been framed by the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the way group work can generate interaction within it. Based on this, the study includes an analysis of group work from a communicative, a cognitive, and a social-affective perspective which introduces the concept of revoicing as a key interactional process that seems to link these three perspectives and allow students' utterances to become mediating devices in their in-group learning process. Other concepts like intersubjectivity, frameworks of interaction, and power relations are also discussed.

Key words: Interaction, group work, Zone of Proximal Development, revoicing, EFL learning, cognition, communication, utterances.

1 Introduction[1]

The world of foreign language learning and teaching has seen outstanding changes in the last two decades. One of them has been, undoubtedly, a move towards considering classroom interaction among learners as a requisite for promoting language proficiency. Within this field, great emphasis has been placed upon the kind of interaction that occurs in group work. Although high-quality longitudinal research is still needed, it is currently accepted that this interactional micro-context offers a lot of opportunities for learning the target language. The arguments advanced in this paper draw on this idea, its main claim being that not only is group work interaction extremely important, for it promotes learners' engagement in collaborative discourse construction which may generate learning, but that the teacher can facilitate the creation of group work interactional contexts that may foster language development. In line with this, this paper will present several arguments in favor of group work, followed by suggestions for implementing group work effectively.

The relevance of group work seems to be still more marked in the educational context this paper is based on, namely that of a target-language

poor environment in which learners have little or no contact with the foreign language outside the classroom. Thus, by assuming group work as the main learning and teaching strategy, it is intended to provide the learners with extensive, non-threatening, rich, and supportive opportunities both for developing their communicative competence in oral interaction and for gaining responsibility and mutual respect when they interact in groups in the EFL classroom.

The paper has been organized in two main sections, the first one refers to all the conceptual and theoretical assumptions, some of them product of our own research, that frame our view of group work. In this, key aspects like interaction, group work, revoicing processes and discourse co-construction are highlighted. The second section presents a discussion of some possible ways in which groups that promote learning can be shaped. None of the considerations here aims to be the last word on the topic; on the contrary, they have been conceived as the starting point for a grounded discussion on the nature and benefits of promoting this type of classroom interaction.

2 Group work interaction as the activation of learning

Before attempting to go into a discussion of the main theoretical aspects dealing with group work interaction, it is important to have a

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[1] This paper is the result of qualitative research in an EFL teacher-training classroom at Corporación Universitaria del Caribe - CECAR (Sincelejo, Colombia). For a description of the complete study see Herazo (2000).

clear working definition of what interaction is and means for classroom language learning. Nevertheless, it is not attempted to unravel this area completely, for there is still much to know about it.

Deriving from the Vygotskian legacy and expressed in the environmental metaphor of human cognition (see van Lier, 1996), learning is considered today as culturally mediated, socially embedded and transpersonal (Erickson, 1996). That is to say, it is constructed or reconstructed thanks to and through people's encounters with other people in different social settings. In this conceptualization, then, interaction has a major role, for learning has come to be conceived as the result of the interplay between the individual and the environment (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Put in other words, it derives from the interaction of the individual with others, with human artifacts and tools, with nature, and with symbolic tools like language. In this respect, Vygotsky's theory of the development of human cognition is very informative, for he considers learning as the result of social interaction. Such a process is explained by his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or zone of learning under guidance, which in his own words is defined as

The distance between actual development level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (1978:86, in van Lier 1996)

This concept underpins the centrality of interaction for learning, mainly the one that occurs in group work collaboration in which individuals -and learners in general- share intentions but have different levels of development. In our opinion, this posture can be applied to the field of EFL learning.

From the above it can be inferred that the concept of interaction goes beyond that which defines it as «conveying and receiving authentic messages» (Rivers, 1987:4), or «action followed by reaction» (Malamah-Thomas, 1987:7), for it involves an array of cognitive, social, cultural, communicative, and physical aspects that frame it and give it its dynamism. Thus, interaction is considered here as an ecosystem of communicative, affective, cognitive, and physical relations that are dependent upon each other, the context of the classroom, and the sociocultural setting, and have the power to activate learning. Like in any ecosystem, a perfect balance of its elements is necessary for it to work optimally. In the same sense, the balance of all the elements that constitute social interaction will account for it to flow in the direction of EFL learning.

Consistent with our concern for group work, is the point of view presented by Rivers (1987:9) according to whom real interaction among learners is more likely to take

place when the teacher steps "out of the limelight", and cedes a full role to the students. That is to say, real interaction is more likely to occur in group (or pair) work where the teacher assumes a collaborative rather than a directive role. We do not mean by this that other types of interaction might not foster learning, but that group work undeniably provides many different, usually high-quality, opportunities for learning the target language. Long and Porter (1985) and Ur (1996:232) have presented a well grounded rationale of the topic. According to Ur, group work offers several advantages: 1) It increases the time opportunities for practice 2) It fosters students responsibility and interdependence 3) It can improve motivation and 4) It contributes to a feeling of cooperation and warmth. However, these advantages do not come out from simply arranging the students in groups. In our opinion, they seem to be the result of the interdependence and balance of the factors that constitute group work in particular, and interaction in general. In the following lines we will concentrate on analyzing these factors and their dynamism.
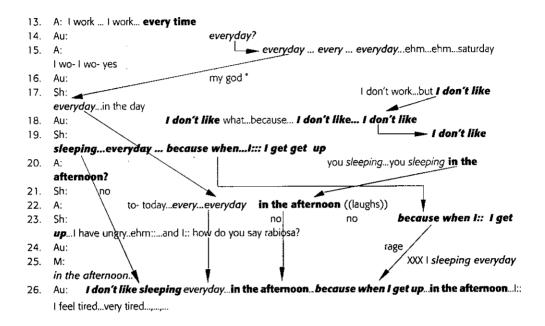
2.1 Group work as a supportive context for learning

The concept of group work can be analyzed from different perspectives, all of which operate in harmonic interdependence. However, they will be presented here separately for the purposes of the discussion, although relevant relations will be indicated when necessary. In our opinion, group work interaction can be interpreted from a physical-spatial, a cognitive, a social-affective, and a communicative point of view. We will concentrate on the last three, due to the fact that the data collected did not provide enough empirical support for a discussion of the physical – spatial view.

From the communicative stance, group work can be seen as the foremost opportunity for the FL learner's engagement in the co-construction of talk, or what is the same, his/her participation in collaborative discourse construction, where joint activity may result in the creation of communicatively functional pieces of discourse. In this respect, Dudley-Marley and Searle (1991:24) point out that the language introduced by the teacher can be retaken by students later, under similar tasks. In this way, students can take the teacher's voice to match communicative and cognitive demands. In the present study there is evidence that suggests that this process can also occur among students themselves when they participate in group work. The process of retaking a classmate's voice and language can be generically named as revoicing, and can be defined as the process by which students use a classmate's utterance(s), repeating it completely, in part, or rephrasing it, in order to fulfill the communicative

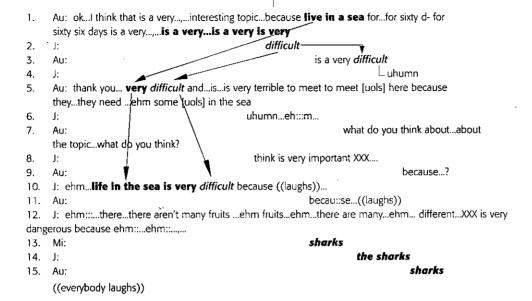purpose of their own on-going turn or participation. The following example explains what we are saying.

```
13.  A:  I work ... I work... every time
14.  Au:                          everyday?
15.  A:                              ┗━► everyday ... every ... everyday...ehm...ehm...saturday
     I wo- I wo- yes
16.  Au:                          my god ˙
17.  Sh: ◄                                              I don't work...but I don't like
     everyday...in the day
18.  Au:              I don't like what...because... I don't like... I don't like
19.  Sh:                                                  ┗━━► I don't like
     sleeping...everyday ... because when...I::: I get get  up
20.  A:                                            you sleeping...you sleeping in the
     afternoon?
21.  Sh:        no
22.  A:        to- today...every...everyday   in the afternoon ((laughs))
23.  Sh:                                  no         no      because when I::  I get
     up...I have ungry..ehm::...and I:: how do you say rabiosa?
24.  Au:                                                    rage
25.  M:                                                          XXX I sleeping everyday
     in the afternoon.
26.  Au:    I don't like sleeping everyday...in the afternoon...because when I get up...in the afternoon...I::
     I feel tired...very tired...,...,...
```

In order to understand what is happening in this transcript[2] more clearly, A's contribution has been written in bold, Sh's in bold italics and Au's own ones in italics. In this way it can be seen how the bold italic parts of Au's utterance (turn 26: «I don't like sleeping» and «because when I get up») can be found in two of Sh's preceding utterances (17 and 19, respectively). The same occurs with the bold chunks, A's contribution, which had been uttered before in

turns 20 and 22. Notice how in this example the utterance found in one of Au's participations (turn 26) is made up of different preceding voices or utterances (illustrated by the arrows and fonts). This type of revoicing can be called *summarizing*, due to the fact that in this particular case Au's multiple revoicing summarizes the group's co-constructed piece of discourse.

Another example of revoicing can be seen in the following transcript. In this one, students are talking about how hard it would be to live in the sea for sixty-six days with little resources.

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[2] The transcripts presented throughout this paper come from my own classroom.

1. Au: ok...I think that is a very...,...interesting topic...because **live in a sea** for...for sixty d- for sixty six days is a very...,...**is a very...is a very is very**
2. J: *difficult*
3. Au: is a very *difficult*
4. J: └uhumn
5. Au: thank you... **very** *difficult* and...is...is very terrible to meet to meet [uols] here because they...they need ...ehm some [uols] in the sea
6. J: uhumn...eh:::m...
7. Au: what do you think about...about the topic...what do you think?
8. J: think is very important XXX....
9. Au: because...?
10. J: ehm...**life in the sea is very** *difficult* because ((laughs))...
11. Au: becau::se...((laughs))
12. J: ehm:::..there...there aren't many fruits ...ehm fruits...ehm...there are many...ehm... different...XXX is very dangerous because ehm::...ehm::...,...
13. Mi: *sharks*
14. J: *the sharks*
15. Au: *sharks*
    ((everybody laughs))

In this example we can see how communication is achieved thanks to a multi-directional process of help and support, that is, support comes from different students and is aimed at anyone who needs it. Let us see its route: in turn 1 Au is trying to state her opinion about the topic, and this is done thanks to J's help (in italics, turn two: *difficult*), which is revoiced by Au in her following turn (turn 3). At the same time, when J was asked about his opinion, he seems to have revoiced -and repaired or corrected- Au's contribution (turn 1, in bold) to structure his utterance: «*life in the sea is very difficult because*».
Furthermore, he also took help from M (turns 13 and 14, in bold italics) to finally voice his opinion.

As can be seen in the two previous examples, the revoicing processes we are talking about are very likely to become frequent when the group works collaboratively in the production of meaningful discourse, allowing for anyone's communicative limitations and abilities (ZPD) to unfold and thus contribute to the group's construction of discourse or benefit from the group's interaction. Besides, it can be stressed that these processes might have not only communicative advantages, but affective ones as well, for not only learners see their voice interwoven with other voices in achieving communicative goals, but they might see themselves as valid and recognized participants of their in-group discourse community, as we will discuss in the presentation of group work from its social affective side.
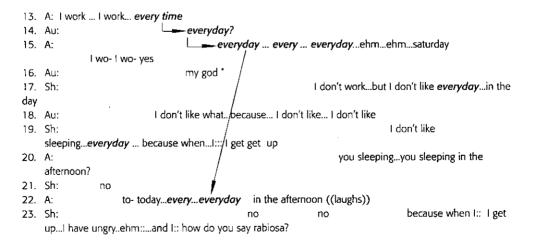
Although the argument that revoicing processes contribute to develop language proficiency still requires longitudinal study, we strongly think these processes might result in learning for EFL students, as we will try to show in the following lines.

It has been demonstrated by the

sociocultural school of learning that human cognition occurs through the interaction of the individual with more capable members of their community, in such a situation and under some conditions that allow for this interaction to activate zones of learning under guidance or ZPDs. In our opinion, group work can be conceived as a multiparty zone of learning, i.e. a potential zone for the target language development. As Gee (1996:274) points out, language, which is a social tool, is internalized as "patterns of tool-within-contexts-of-use as pieces of intramental furniture". So, based on this and on our own data, we suggest that when learners interact in groups in the EFL classroom they not only have the opportunity to revoice their classmates' utterances to suit communicative demands, as was shown above, but they may be starting the process of learning those pieces of useful discourse as well. There seems to be evidence in the data collected through this research that in the EFL classroom context, group work may offer the learners the

possibility of first noticing these "patterns of tool-within-context-of-use" in the foreign language used by classmates or teacher and thus, thanks to revoicing processes, starting the process of developing proficiency through meaningful practice, going through sociocognitive processes such as engagement and intake (see van Lier, 1996). Unfortunately, we do not have enough evidence to go into a deeper discussion of the intramental processes that might occur in learners at the time they revoice a utterance or a word and what this represents for learning, but it does not mean that we may not make some informed assumptions about the way such revoicing might be linked to EFL cognition.

The act of first noticing useful language in a classmate's utterance and then putting it into practice by means of revoicing processes like the one presented in the discussion of group work from the communicative perspective can be appreciated in the following example:

```
13. A:   I work ... I work... every time
14. Au:                          └──everyday?
15. A:                              └──everyday ... every ... everyday...ehm...ehm...saturday
                 I wo- I wo- yes
16. Au:                        my god ·
17. Sh:                                                     I don't work...but I don't like everyday...in the
day
18. Au:                   I don't like what...because... I don't like... I don't like
19. Sh:                                                          I don't like
     sleeping...everyday ... because when...I::/I get get  up
20. A:                                                     you sleeping...you sleeping in the
     afternoon?
21. Sh:          no
22. A:              to- today...every...everyday    in the afternoon ((laughs))
23. Sh:                                    no              no              because when I::  I get
     up...I have ungry..ehm::...and I:: how do you say rabiosa?
```

In this case, A's utterance in turn 13 has a mistake which is corrected immediately by Au in turn 14, this implies that Au provided spontaneous assistance to guide A's learning of the correct use of the word *everyday*. A then repeated the correct word several times in turn 15, like in an attempt to sense its use. After that, in turn 22, A uses the same bit of language correctly to convey meaning. It might be inferred from this that A first noticed the correct word *everyday* thanks to Au's help. (turns 13 and 14) and then repeated it three times, trying to incorporate it correctly to his talk (turn 15). But, what seems to be the most important here, he then revoiced the correct word again with a little hesitation (as implied by the ellipsis), a possible indicator of the newness of its use for him, to communicate his opinion and joke at the same time about Sh's sleeping habits (turn 22). From this example it can be inferred, then, that A's ZPD unfolded thanks to Au's help and the balance of relations in the group, and based on this he started the process of learning the accurate use of the word *everyday*, which could have been beyond his level of performance. If this happens in group work, and the conditions are set for it to happen frequently, we may easily see the potential of this interactional context for meaningful practice -as the one illustrated in the example- and language

development. To complement this assumption, there is evidence provided by one student through a post-task interview that the process of revoicing, with its communicative and cognitive advantages, might be a conscious one, as this testimony suggests:

«...pues en inglés también podemos escuchar las opiniones de otras personas...en este caso ella [referring to a classmate] *es mejor que yo ...y entonces puedo retomar esas opiniones y aprender a utilizarlas en el caso de speaking»* [In English we can also listen to the opinions of other students...in this case she is better than me...so I can retake her opinions and learn to use them in speaking]

There are other examples from the data that can be considered as contributing to the learning of language in group work contexts. In the following one we can see how students appear to repeat other classmate's utterance in an echoing fashion with the purpose, perhaps, of practicing its pronunciation.

E:
very::...very::...very::...cansada // cansada
  23. L:
  24. CA:
  25. E:
  26. CA: *tired*
  27. E: *tired*
  28. L: *tired*
  29. SP: *tired*

ehm::...because...I...I arrive at my house

very:...cansada...cansada
cansada?
[tired...tired]

Notice how from line 27 to 30 students repeat and repeat the word "tired", probably to practice its pronunciation. In this sense, after they noticed the word's pronunciation they might have realized it still needed practice and so set out to repeat it in an echoing fashion. Although less meaningful than the previous example, this might underpin an attitude of engagement with the language.

As regards the social-affective interpretation of group work, aspects like power relations, climate, intersubjectivity (van Lier, 1996), and the construction of frameworks of interaction come into play. In relation to the first one, it seems that in group contexts where the relations of power are asymmetric (in terms of the distribution of talk opportunities and the distribution of roles), the amount of talk and the primacy of opinion tend to be dominated by and favorable to those students who keep the most power in terms of language proficiency, excluding or ignoring others as we shall see in the transcript below. Moreover, this undoubtedly affects the climate or group's atmosphere -the second aspect under consideration, and may result in students' positive or negative views about the meaningfulness and effectiveness of group work, and their desire to take part in it in subsequent tasks. The third aspect worth considering in our discussion of the social affective side of group work is what has been called states of intersubjectivity (van Lier, 1996), and which means that «participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and they draw each other's attention into a common direction» (161). It seems that when group work comes to foster the creation of this type of shared participation and engagement, learning is more likely to start its process, as we saw in the discussion of the communicative and cognitive implications of group work.

The interplay among power relations, climate, and intersubjectivity gives shape to «frameworks» in which the interaction occurs, which is the fourth and last aspect that will be considered in this part of the discussion. The concept comes from what Goffman (in O'Connor and Michaels, 1996) calls participant frameworks, which are defined as follows:

When a word is spoken, all those who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some

sort of participation status relative to it»

In the FL language classroom, these frameworks can be defined as sociocognitive and communicative structures constructed through and in interaction and which may support or obstruct learning. Thus, it can be said that in a group where there is mutual engagement, shared responsibility, variety of roles, and symmetry in terms of distribution of talk, students may easily find a chance to learn, i.e. a supportive framework of interaction propels their learning. In the opposite case, then, students may find few opportunities for development or even they may be excluded from the interaction. Good examples of supportive frameworks can be seen in the transcripts presented above, where students support one another to achieve a communicative intention, and thus give the group the necessary quality to foster learning. The opposite case is illustrated below[3].

```
344.  Ca:        one hundred dollars                              —       fifty dollars
345.  A:  hundre:::d    (seven)          ehm:: seventy::.   Seventy    —
346.  G:                            ...                     —                    --
347.  Y:                      —              (is that right)         is that right?

348.  Ca:                    —                              --                    XXX
349.  A:              seventy:::          seventy FIVE    seventy five dollars   —
350.  G:              XXX                 forty           —                    —
351.  Y:  is that right?         FORTY is that right?                           —

352.  Ca:                                      seven...,...five dollars      five
353.  A:  seventy five dollars...,..seventy five...,...,...     —           seven
354.  G:                  —                            —        seven?      --
355.  Y:                  —                            —                    —

356.  Ca:            seventy five dollars               —     (Bad write) ...four
357.  A:  seventy five    —                       --            —
358.  G:                  —                            —                    —
359.  Y:                  —     forty...is that right?...,...,...is that right?   --
```

Notice in this example how Y's participation (in bold italics) is usually ignored, leading her to assume a secondary role in the task, evidenced in the silent period in turn 355, which implies that she has little opportunities for taking risks, validating her use of the foreign language and thus learning. This constitutes an excluding framework for her interaction and, thus, an inappropriate climate for her learning, for her ZPD is very likely not to be activated in such conditions. Furthermore, her view of the quality of this group interaction was affected negatively, and she asked the teacher for the opportunity to be part of a different group.

So far, the analysis of some of the aspects that may constitute learning-

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[3] This transcript should be read like reading chords in a pentagram. This will permit appreciate students' talk in relation to their classmates'.

generating group-work contexts of interaction has been completed. However, can we as teachers foster the creation of those balanced, complex, and symmetric interactional systems in the classroom? What can possibly be done to avoid the creation of exclusive frameworks of interaction? These questions will be addressed below.

3 Developing group work contexts that support learning

One of the central ways in which we as teachers can help our students grow and develop their language proficiency is by insisting on their role as aware and autonomous learners, who can take control of their own learning process, making it more effective as they gain experience. From this, then, the starting point for contributing to the creation of group work contexts that support learning should be raising students' awareness about the benefits of working with others. Learners should get to the conclusion that group work can be rewarding, both communicatively and affectively, as well as enjoyable. In Cottrell (1999) there is a comprehensive analysis of what good group work and its benefits are. However, it is not an easy affair, and we as teachers might need to put a lot of creativity and effort in attaining this goal. One of the things that can possibly be done with this purpose in mind, and I should say that it needs to be done, is the co-construction of

group work rules that give students clarity of what is necessary, in terms of activity and attitude, for group work to keep its balance and thus foster an appropriate climate for interaction and learning. It is advisable that this system of rules can be constructed as a class endeavor and not set by the teacher; it is easy to break other people's rules, but not your own! For example, it could be agreed that everyone should participate in the group, and that everyone's opinions should be heard. In this way, all three aspects of group work discussed in the previous section could be addressed, for students will have not only the chance to be recognized as valid participants, with the affective implications it may have as we saw above, but the opportunity to take risks in communicating and thus show their discourse potential, which may contribute to the group's co-construction of talk, too.

Another way to foster students' awareness is by evaluating group work activity. In this sense students can develop group work evaluation criteria and/or checklists, and so check its effectiveness as well as their own involvement and collaborative role periodically (see Cottrell, 1999:98 for an example). This will enable both teacher and students to learn from mistakes and gain experience. This evaluation can be done through diary writing, which will not only help learners reflect on their own process, but may create a communication link with the teacher.

As part of this awareness raising process, students should recognize that group work can become a language rich context, in which their classmates' communicative activity can feed their own learning process. With this in mind, the teacher can suggest students take down new expressions, structures, and vocabulary used by classmates, and then try to use them in their own talk during the ongoing group activity or in subsequent group tasks. Besides, as part of the group work outcomes the teacher can ask students to write on the board the new language they noticed during their interaction, and based on this provide whole class practice suggest personalized activities that could expand the students' mastery of the language noticed. I have tried this one myself with good results for students' learning. With this same purpose, the teacher can provide the learners with appropriate amounts of prefabricated language in the form of useful expressions, small talks, or any other form of ready-to-use language. In my own experience as teacher I have seen this strategy provides a feeling of communicative achievement in students, which has affective as well as communicative positive implications, and helps them get familiar with the sounds and communicative uses of language, which has cognitive implications, too.

Another important aspect for promoting learning-supportive interaction is by setting tasks in which learners share status and keep symmetry in terms of roles, valuable

information, amount of talk, etc. Besides raising students' awareness about this, the teacher can provide jigsaw decision making tasks. The central characteristic of this task is that each student has a piece of information which is necessary for taking a group decision (see Ilola et al 1995). In this type of tasks, taking a group decision gives a sense of unity, and may contribute to developing intersubjectivity and supporting frameworks of interaction. Not only decisions can constitute the group's interaction outcome, but different types of products as well, like a drawing, a piece of writing, a poster, etc. The important thing to keep in mind is that students can share their information, whether factual or experiential, and thus contribute to the group's success.

As Ilola et al. (1995:6) state, «putting students in groups does not mean that is teatime for teachers». In this sense, teachers should devote enough time to group planning, looking for the maintenance of symmetry through well designed tasks. Once during group interaction, they should take a collaborative, active, and supportive (never intruding) role in the classroom by monitoring group progress through observation, suggesting new directions or points of view pertinent for group discussion, and presenting his/her own utterances as a starting point for students' revoicing. Equally relevant, teachers must be conscious of the communicative, cognitive, and social-affective processes that might be

happening in group work, and thus assume a real commitment to make group work an important component of her or his agenda, making it explicit in the course objectives, materials, method, content and evaluation: it is the most effective way for developing students awareness of the importance and richness of group work.

As Dudley-Marley and Searle (1991:26) point out, «mixed-ability groupings are more likely to extend the range of available audiences and language models». So, when setting up groups, both teacher and students should be aware of the advantages that heterogeneous mixing involves, which should be talked through with the students themselves. It is undeniable that students have preferences for selecting their own group work peers, and in my case I have noticed that they tend to choose those that are at their same level, so it is advisable to negotiate with them that sometimes the teacher will decide the groupings and other times this will be done by themselves. Above all, they should see the learning advantages of working with both, more proficient and less proficient classmates. In the first case, they should be conscious of the advantages implicit in revoicing and practicing meaningfully the new communication strategies, structures, expressions, and vocabulary which have been used by their classmates. In the second, they can produce language and develop communicative strategies that help negotiate meaning, or even adjust their talk, with the lower

level friends; they should also be conscious that their own talk may become part of other classmates' learning. To facilitate this, high level students should be committed to assume group-friendly attitudes, while lower level ones should be given tricks to take a more participative and communicatively active role.

4 Conclusions

In this report we have highlighted the importance of group work for foreign language learning in broad terms, and in this sense a great variety of suggestions have been made, and some questions have been raised, too. Most importantly, we have tried to picture how the process of revoicing may be related to communicative, cognitive, and social-affective growth when students interact in groups. Nevertheless, there is still much to know about the dynamics of group work interaction and the ways it could be linked to the development of communicative competence. Specifically, longitudinal research needs to be carried out in order to trace the cognitive advantages of the revoicing processes presented in this paper. Equally, there is still the need to explore how the physical-spatial relation of students relates to learning when they interact in groups.

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