WORKING *IN* AND *ON* GROUPS:
AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF EXPLORATORY PRACTICE IN AN ESP CLASSROOM

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Have you already found the beginning, then, that you seek for the end?

Gospel of Thomas

Sinopse

Neste artigo, descrevo e analiso uma actividade de trabalho em grupo desenvolvida para uma aula da disciplina de Língua Inglesa VI das turmas do 3º ano do Curso de Línguas e Secretariado do Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto (ISCAP). No enquadramento teórico, abordam-se questões relacionadas com o trabalho em grupo numa aula de língua estrangeira, nomeadamente a dimensão social da sala de aula em geral e da interacção aluno-aluno em particular. Apresentam-se então os princípios da *Exploratory Practice*, com ênfase na possibilidade preconizada por esta abordagem de se poder transformar uma actividade de reflexão e discussão sobre o processo de ensino/aprendizagem numa unidade pedagógica.

Segue-se a apresentação da proposta didáctica, respectivo plano de aula e alguns exemplos dos textos produzidos pelos alunos. O artigo termina com a apresentação de alguns comentários críticos, realçando-se a contribuição da *Exploratory Practice* para o desenvolvimento de uma maior consciencialização por parte dos alunos do seu processo de aprendizagem.

Palavras-chave: *Exploratory Practice*; English for Specific Purposes; Group Work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The classroom materials presented and discussed in this article were prepared for third-year students of English *(Língua Inglesa VI)* of the BA Course in Languages and Secretarial Studies (LSS) at *Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto* (ISCAP). The materials are shown together with some of the texts produced by the learners in two different classes where they were used (in school year 2002/2003). I am aware that this choice of including a description and brief analysis of learner statements written as a result of the actual use of the materials may look unorthodox. Nevertheless, I hope I will be able to make the case that a mere presentation and discussion of the materials and tasks as 'workplans' (Breen, 1989) would be totally unsatisfactory in the light of my own preconceptions of what is entailed in teaching and learning a foreign language.

A lesson is not an island, and I borrow this image to mean that, when planning a particular lesson for a particular group of students, a teacher calls upon a plethora of aspects that are as complex as they are difficult to disentangle. Woods (1996), for example, has put forward an acronym - BAK, that stands for *Beliefs, Assumptions, and Knowledge* - given the impossibility he faced in his studies of arriving at operational definitions that would allow him to distinguish between the different aspects that concur to teachers' decisions and their interpretations of classroom events.

The literature is in fact full of attempts to uncover and classify whatever aspects are said to influence teacher practice. These taxonomic exercises are often a *redutio ad absurdum*, especially whenever teachers are portrayed as 'free agents', i.e. when their professional behaviour is seen to be solely dictated by and explained in reference to their beliefs, without taking into account the myriad of factors (professional, organisational, societal) that may in fact prevent them from behaving according to their beliefs. As I see it, teacher behaviour and the lessons we plan are 'nested' phenomena (Clark & Yinger, 1987: 87) and so should be construed as *responses* to institutional constraints, as on-the-

spot *reactions* to unpredictable events, and direct *results* of professed beliefs about teaching.

I must confess here that I myself have contributed to the already overcrowded field of teachers' theories and beliefs, by proposing elsewhere the notion of *teaching operating principles* (Pinto da Silva, 2001), a term I borrowed from Psycholinguistics (see Slobin, 1979: 83) and have tentatively used to mean both the knowledge and the assumptions about teaching and learning the teacher is seen to draw upon and the strategies s/he uses to operate within the classroom. This notion, albeit embryonic, has shown some promise as a means of making sense of the intricate, dynamic, and often contradictory relationship between observed teaching practice and expressed espoused theories. In this sense, it is hoped that this piece of writing will unveil some of my own *teaching operating principles*.

Given all this, I will now try to uncover the main threads that contributed to the planning of a particular lesson, namely my previous teaching and research experience, the contributions from the literature on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the notion of the classroom as a social encounter, and the tenets of Exploratory Practice (EP).

2. TOWARDS A LANGUAGE LESSON

2.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

In spite of the debate on whether English for Specific Purposes (ESP) can be considered to be an autonomous branch of English Language Teaching (Swales, 1985; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), I think one can non-controversially describe the teaching and learning of foreign languages at ISCAP as pre-occupational ESP (Robinson, 1991: 3). Indeed, it shares some of the characteristics usually considered to be, if not distinctive, at least typical, of ESP (Robinson, 1980: 13-14): adult students, with diverse past language learning experiences and diverse levels of proficiency; locally-produced curricula and materials, with formal supervision by co-ordinating teachers; syllabi organised around

future target needs; content-specific materials; optional co-ordination among teachers of the same level, but relative autonomy as far as the choice of materials, methods and exams are concerned.

Teacher autonomy at ISCAP, although considerable, does not in fact extend to all levels of decision-making: not surprisingly, there is some institutional pressure, even if only sensed and largely dictated by tradition, towards course content based on learners' future professional needs, in this case Business English. The content of the syllabi is therefore largely based on the perceived future professional needs of the students - there is an institutional trend to view language classes as an *equipping* procedure (Prabhu, 1987: 190), with the stated objective of providing students with the necessary linguistic repertoires to perform effectively in those professional situations where L2 is required. Thus, foreign language learning in ISCAP seems to comply with the prevailing ethos of polytechnic education - stress on the practical training of students and a strong link with the job-related needs of the community.

It follows that there are no externally-imposed curriculum, syllabus, materials or tests. In education in general, highly detailed syllabi seem to be a *sine qua non* for the large scale implementation of any curriculum. They seem to be in order when there is a number of teachers teaching the same type of student, or when the level of accountability (to parents, to school boards, to governmental offices) is high. As it is, in ISCAP the need for unifying criteria is minimal, or, at best, reduced to an agreement on a broad division of content areas across the different levels.

The selection of teaching materials, a perennial issue in ESP (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987: 106; Pinto da Silva, 1990, 1993: 40; Robinson, 1980: 34-35; Swales, 1985: 103), takes up a considerable amount of preparation time among the English teachers in my school. Textbooks are seldom adopted, at least completely. Indeed, a published ESP textbook is often looked at as a contradiction in terms - they never seem to be specific enough (if they were, they would not be commercially feasible, as DeEscorcia notes, 1985: 232). So our teaching materials follow the usual pattern of many ESP situations - a *mélange* of *realia*, published, and home-made materials. The rationale behind this laborious process follows the pattern of many ESP situations: a compromise between

what teachers think the students will need in their future jobs, students' subjective needs (or *wants*, according to Allwright, 1982: 24), remedial work (to obviate students' *lacks*, Allwright, 1982: 24), and an earnest concern for up-to-date, topical, and relevant content-specific materials.

Both this piecemeal process of gathering materials and the concern to provide students with a communicative repertoire have visible consequences in course planning. In the absence of a general curriculum, or of a set of pre-defined achievement goals, the very nature of the teaching materials helps to determine the predominant methodological approach in most language classes in my school: task-based language teaching, albeit born out of necessity, rather than conviction.

My suggestion, at the beginning of this section, that language classes in ISCAP can be classified as ESP ones invites the question of the extent to which their 'specificity' generates particular expectations on the part of teachers and learners and whether it has any bearing on the way the participants react to and interpret classroom events. However, only five of the 32 students I interviewed in the data collection phase of my PhD referred to the perceived future usefulness of some of the classroom activities; overall, the issue did not seem to have a strong bearing on these learners' expressed statements about the lessons or on their views on teaching and learning a foreign language, which mostly focused on the more immediate aspects of their present needs as language learners. It seems that the 'face validity' (Pilbeam, 1987: 121) of the syllabus is sufficiently catered for by the fact that Business topics predominate, and so participants' preoccupations seem to evolve around their present teaching/learning situations.

From my readings and reflections on ESP, then, three notions are worth bearing in mind and have had lingering effect on my teaching practice. First of all, there is the assertion that 'ESP has as its main concern the needs of the learners' (Waters, 1987: 3). That this statement is valid to all teaching/learning situations is perhaps obvious, but it seems nevertheless to be particularly appropriate to those in the final stages of their formal education, when their professional life is looming. More intriguing, though, is how one should define students' *needs*, which leads us to my second point, namely that *future professional needs* should not override students' *current learning needs* (Pinto da Silva,

1993). Finally, there is the notion that foreign language teacher and learners are in a privileged position to explore their needs, given the fact that in our classrooms the foreign language is both the medium and the content of instruction.

I am aware that the preceding paragraph puts forward three notions that seem too simplistic. Taken as a professional rationale, it is difficult to see how they can even begin to address the complexity of the teaching/learning process, let alone provide useful operating principles to one's professional practice. Yet, I have found that the consequences of applying them in any consistent manner are far-reaching.

2.2 The classroom as a social encounter

For Prabhu, the classroom is simultaneously

> *... a unit of a planned curricular sequence, an instance of a teaching method*
> *in operation, a patterned social activity, and an encounter between human*
> *personalities.* (1992: 225).

The perspective of looking at the classroom as a social event, and not only as an instructional one, is elegantly reinforced by Breen's metaphor (1985: 1429) of classrooms as *coral gardens*, places with a culture of their own, where participants engage in a twofold operation, as it were: on the one hand, the inter-subjective construction of meaningfulness, and on the other hand a subjective process of interpretation of events. This perspective of the classroom as a complex microcosm calls for an ethnographic approach to the classroom, which takes into account '...the socio-cognitive experience made available through the meeting of individual and classroom group' (Breen, 1985: 154).

The view of the classroom as a 'joint endeavour' (Breen, 1985: 148) acknowledges the active role of the students in determining, to some extent, the course of events in the classroom: 'There is growing recognition that students influence instruction and its outcomes as much as teachers' (Weinstein, 1985: 332).

This influence takes different forms and operates at different levels. Allwright (1984: 160) suggests the following modes through which students contribute to the management of classroom interaction: *compliance* (doing what you are told), *negotiation* (trying to reach a consensus), and *navigation* (trying to steer events to suit individual needs). The idea that learners are not passive recipients of whatever the teacher chooses to teach is not new, and it is acknowledged that

> *...learning from teaching is not automatic. It occurs primarily through active and effortful information processing by students who must perceive and interpret teachers' actions for them to influence achievement.* (Wittrock, 1986: 298)

What is not so widely recognised, though, is the active role learners play in the actual flow of classroom events, be it through their *power of veto* (Allwright, personal communication), or through also Allwright's less drastic *navigation mode*, when they attempt '...to steer a course between, round or over the obstacles that the lesson represents for the participants' (Allwright, 1984:160).

Students' interventions seem to work at different levels, no matter how geared towards learner autonomy and independence the lesson may be. At task level, Breen (1987, 1989) claims that students seem to reinterpret and contextualise any language learning task according to their own purposes, background knowledge, preferred ways of working, conceptualisation of the language learning process, and the particular social context of the classroom where the task takes place.

Another useful insight into the language classroom seems to be Allwright's suggestion (1989) that quite often there is a conflict between the social and pedagogical (taken here as a synonym of 'academic') factors. That is, the discoursal demands of the lesson as a pedagogical event (problems are created so that learning opportunities may occur), may threaten the co-operative nature of the lesson as a social event. More importantly, the argument goes, is that there seems to be a *covert conspiracy* between teacher and students, whereby conflicts

... seem typically to be resolved in a way that succeeds in minimizing social strain but only at the expense of a pedagogically satisfactory outcome. (1989: 10).

This line of investigation in classroom language research that looks at the social dynamics of language classrooms has been particularly illuminating in itself (Allwright 1989, Breen 1985, Prabhu, 1992). But this more complex view of classrooms as both pedagogic **and** social encounters that are co-produced by the participants leads inevitably to a re-evaluation of the respective roles of teacher and learners, with the concomitant need to explore new ways of planning and managing lessons that may account for this all-important dimension.

Given all this, it seems that, by ignoring the social dimension of the classroom, we may be neglecting an important source of information and debate on an issue that must surely have a strong bearing on learners' attitudes towards the teacher, their colleagues, the materials, the activities, and ultimately the discipline itself.

2.3 The principles of Exploratory Practice

Among recent attempts at narrowing the rift between teaching and research, I would like to refer to Exploratory Practice (EP), Allwright's framework for teacher development and education (Allwright, 1992, 1993, 1999b, 2003; Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Exploratory Practice has been mostly developed at Lancaster University, where a research centre is run by Dick Allwright, Judith Hanks, Inés Miller, and Morag Samson. An EP approach has also been carried out in different teacher development and education projects in Turkey (Özdeniz, 1996), Britain, (O'Brian *et al.,* 2000) and especially in Brazil (*inter alia*, Allwright & Lenzuen, 1997; Miller & Bannell, 1998).

More recently, EP has also gained considerable *momentum* by the *Language Teaching Research Journal*, which dedicated a whole issue to articles written by researchers and practitioners who have developed projects along EP lines. A group of EP practitioners, led by Inés Miller and Isabel Cunha, from the Catholic University of Rio de

Janeiro, held a one-day workshop at ISCAP in January 2004. This session, attended by both language and communication studies teachers, bodes well for the development of a collaborative stance between our two institutions.

At the core of EP lies its proposal for the integration of teaching, learning, and research in a way that is relevant to all classroom participants. The fact that teachers and learners pursue their own research agendas while conducting their normal classroom activities is a key feature in this proposal, as it advocates

> *...the deliberate exploitation of standard classroom language learning and teaching activities as the means for collecting data on what happens in the classroom, preferably making at the same time a direct contribution to the learning, and certainly without lessening in any way the value of lessons as language learning lessons.* (Allwright, 1999b: 6)

More pertinent to the discussion at hand is the fact that this approach entails a novel view of both research and teaching, and an inversion of the traditional relationship between research and teaching, on the one hand, and teachers and learners, on the other. In fact, it constitutes a sustainable way of doing research *through* teaching and learning, rather than *on* teaching and learning. The issue of relevance is thus satisfactorily addressed - teachers and learners become the *initiators* rather than the *subjects* of the research process, as they make use of the opportunities provided by the language classroom to deepen their understanding about their personal puzzles about teaching and learning. Besides, the emphasis placed by an Exploratory Practice perspective on trying to *understand* the classroom before trying to implement *change* makes it a considerably less threatening proposal to both teachers' and learners' senses of plausibility. Finally, the investigative stance proposed, which takes up class time 'but promote[s] language development rather than get[ting] in its way' (Allwright, 1999a: 16), allows for the active involvement of the learners - whose voice, I would like to argue, is heard the least in traditional classroom research, let alone in the classroom itself.

It is important to mention that Exploratory Practice does not aspire to become a new research or teaching *method*, in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, it purports to offer a sustainable way for teachers and learners of understanding their classes better.

This approach is deceptively low-key, since it has as it ultimate goal the promotion of 'quality of life' for all classroom participants (Allwright, 2003). It is also a very empowering notion, since it advocates total freedom for the participants to set and pursue their own agendas and concomitant research tools. I present next the main premisses of this approach to practitioner research, which, true to its organic nature, has been evolving along the years:

EXPLORATORY PRACTICE IN SEVEN PRINCIPLES, AND ONE PIECE OF PRACTICAL ADVICE.

Principle 1: put 'quality of life' first.

Principle 2: work primarily to understand language classroom life.

NB: integrating the work for understanding into classroom practice is usually the best way, we find, to approach the above two principles within the framework set by the remaining five.

Principle 3: involve everybody.

Principle 4: work to bring people together.

Principle 5: work also for mutual development.

Principle 6: do not let the work lead to "burn out".

Principle 7: make the work a continuous enterprise.

__Dick Allwright,__
Lancaster, November 2003.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that an Exploratory Practice approach to the issue of learners' beliefs and learner heterogeneity in the language classroom seems particularly appropriate, since it allows teachers **and** learners to explore their diverse intentions and interpretations while going about their everyday business of teaching and learning a foreign language. As Breen has pointed out,

The classroom is the meeting point of various subjective views of language, diverse learning purposes, and different preferences concerning how learning should be done. (Breen, 1985: 144)

That this 'meeting point' can also be used as a forum for teachers and learners to reflect upon their views and perceptions in a personally and pedagogically meaningful way seems to be a very promising investigative and professional conjecture.

3. A LEAP OF FAITH: FROM RESEARCH TO THE CLASSROOM

The classroom materials presented in this paper had at their starting point the data I gathered at ISCAP in 1995-96. Those are fully presented, described and analysed in the PhD dissertation I submitted at Lancaster University in 2001 (Pinto da Silva, 2001). My role as an observer and interviewer at a school where I had been a teacher for a considerable number of years provided me with a wealth of insights that opened up unsuspected lines of reflection and led, inevitably, to a re-evaluation of my teaching practice.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can say that the information gleaned from the learner interviews was especially fruitful. Indeed, the volunteer learners I had a chance to talk to about their English classes were able to articulate an astounding range of complex opinions, views, and beliefs about lessons, tasks, and the teaching/learning process. The strictly theoretical issues raised by the learner data were immediately obvious, especially the deceptively simple conclusion that learners do perceive classroom differently and that these individual perceptions may impinge considerably on their learning process. More to the point here, my raised awareness of the importance of learner heterogeneity and individuality and, not least, of learners' capacity to fully articulate their opinions and beliefs, has also had far-reaching consequences upon my professional practice. However, I would like to point out that epiphanies are historically few and far between, and this research endeavour proved to be no exception: a new teacher was not born. Rather, it helped me deepen my understanding of what had been so far scattered pieces of

information amassed throughout my previous teaching experience, and whetted my appetite for pursuing the issue of learners' perceptions further.

3.1 Working *in* and *on* groups

Therefore, I decided that it would be worthwhile to use learner statements as a starting point for a classroom activity. The idea was to devise a questionnaire, followed by a group activity, that would require students to reflect and discuss the issue of working with their colleagues in the course of a language classroom. One of the drawbacks of educational research, and indeed research in general, is that we tend to impose our own preoccupations on 'informants' (the name alone is quite telling). On the contrary, here I had the opportunity to use learner-generated opinions that would hopefully resonate with their peers.

I hasten to add that I included a parameter that belies this principle, more precisely number 11 *(It's easier for the teacher: he/she doesn't do much while we work)*. This was obviously a fishing expedition on my part, since it tried to gather information on how exactly learners view the teacher's role while the groups are working. I confess that quite often I have doubts about how much to intervene during the task, so any input from my learners would be welcome.

3.2 The materials

The class handout is presented below. The questionnaire was used in two third-year LSS Course classes in 2002/2003.

Working in groups

How do you feel about working in groups in your English classes? Do you agree or disagree with the following? Tick the answer that suits you best:

QUESTIONS	Agree	Disagree	Depends
1. I like being able to discuss ideas with my colleagues.			
2. I think it's a waste of time.			
3. I hardly ever speak in English when I work in a group.			
4. I always try to speak in English when I work in a group.			
5. It's nice to be able to make mistakes without the teacher correcting me all the time.			
6. I hate making mistakes and I want to be corrected when I do.			
7. Working in groups allows me to know my colleagues better.			
8. I feel more comfortable speaking in a small group than in front of the whole class.			
9. I prefer to be able to choose the colleagues I work with.			
10. It's hard work for students.			
11. It's easy for the teacher: he/she doesn't do much while we work.			
12. I learn mistakes from my colleagues.			
13.			
14.			
15.			

Now get into groups and compare your answers. Negotiate a **statement** about working in groups, taking on board all the different points of view from the different members of the group. Then select a spokesperson to present your group statement to the class.

Good morning. ....
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<div align="right">C. Pinto da Silva, 2003</div>

3.3 The classes

As we can see, this activity was divided into two parts. First of all, students were asked to answer the questions individually, by ticking their opinions in the appropriate column. Then, they were asked to join a group and write a group statement that would encompass the different views on group work. This in turn would be presented to the whole class by a spokesperson.

During the instructional phase, I was asked by a student if they had to write down their differences, or only those points everybody agreed upon. Otherwise, the task did not raise many questions, and students seemed to take the topic in their stride. I should add here that, in both classes, this activity was held in the second semester, when there was already a well-established relationship between students and myself. Therefore, one may speculate that this has helped pre-empt any visible reactions to the unfamiliarity of the topic, which was not part of the syllabus. More worryingly, it may well be the case that students were quite accommodating because that is what has been expected of them throughout their school life, but any discussion of this somewhat provocative hypothesis is well beyond the scope of this paper.

The activity was wrapped up by a plenary discussion, where students had the opportunity to voice their opinions in more detail, and which they did in all classes with commendable candour.

3.4 Group statements

Next I present a selection of excerpts from the texts produced by the five different groups. I selected some of the statements that were both the object of further comments during the classroom discussion or that I find particularly interesting, and which I will then comment briefly.

STATEMENTS ABOUT GROUP WORK - 2002/2003

...working in groups improves our communication skills without too much stress.
... we all agree that it is good to be corrected when we make mistakes, but not all the time. Making mistakes is actually the only way of learning a language.
Group work is not so easy as it seems because matching ideas is very complicated.
Sometimes it is really embarrassing to be corrected in public. However, it gives us a chance to improve our English. Therefore, sometimes we feel that when working in groups we don't have enough feedback from the teacher. On the other hand, we feel more at ease when working in a small group, because it is less face-threatening. (...) A student's life isn't always easy, but we also know that being a teacher isn't easy either. In spite of being in opposite sides of the fence, teacher and students alike have to work hard in order to make group work succeed.
Although it is easier to speak in small groups, we feel we miss the opportunity to be corrected by the teacher.
We think that working in groups is a very demanding task, because we must be able to deal with several different and sometimes inflexible opinions.

3.5 Emerging topics

What follows does not aspire to be an exhaustive analysis of the statements, given the limitations of this paper. Nor can I presume to be able to generalise the expressed opinions to other learners or teaching/learning situations. That would actually defeat the whole purpose of the activity, which was precisely to bring to the fore the beliefs and assumptions of **those** particular students.

The notion that working in groups diminishes the potential for face-threatening situations was mentioned by most groups. It brings to mind Smith's assertion that language learning can be an 'intellectually humiliating business' (1980: 211), and the dangers of a lesson becoming an exercise in public humiliation were also touched upon, not only in the texts, but also during the plenary discussion that followed. However, these students did equate the issue of addressing a large audience with the question of missing out on being corrected by teacher. This bears witness to the complexity conveyed by these statements, and of how sophisticated their view of the different aspects of life in the classroom is. Indeed, these students seem to be well aware that there is a close, albeit often conflicting, relationship between the social and the cognitive dimensions of the classroom. This proved to be a cruel reminder of how often I tend to ignore this complex relationship, by focusing too much on the strictly managerial and cognitive implications of the lessons I plan.

The issue of teacher correction was hotly debated, and there was no unanimity about how, when or how often the teacher should correct the students. This lack of consensus should not surprise us - researchers have found that we teachers are notoriously inconsistent in our corrections (Allwright, 1980). Particularly striking here was the repeated assertion that group work diminishes the opportunities for being corrected by the teacher, a situation put forward as a disadvantage of this particular task format. Even here, though, some of the groups showed remarkable acumen, by stressing that it may not be a clear-cut question: *...we all agree that it is good to be corrected when we make mistakes, but not all the time.* When I introduced the dichotomy *fluency vs. accuracy* at some point during the discussion, the distinction seemed to strike a chord, but opinions

did remain divided. In one class, when I asked why I should correct every single mistake, one of the students replied with a final, 'Because you're the teacher!', which provoked laughter and quite a few nods from her colleagues.

As we can see, these students reveal well-established habits and views about learning a foreign language. Indeed, most of them seem to have firm ideas about what to learn, how to learn it, and when to learn it. This alone is hardly surprising, since these learners are in their third year of higher education and learned two or three foreign languages for most of their secondary education. Therefore, all of them are seasoned foreign language students, and have chosen to attend a course that will enable them to become bilingual secretaries or translators, which denotes an interest in foreign languages.

More important, though, were the perceived differences in personal learning styles and preferences that surfaced, in spite of the fact that a group statement had to be negotiated. Cunha *et al.* (1997), while conducting learner interviews, detected traces of beliefs and assumptions that have been widely vented in the field of foreign language pedagogy in general and EFL in particular by different approaches. These tenets seem to have become part of a common sense, uncritical, and at times inconsistent view of what is important in learning a foreign language. And if research quite often bears witness to the need felt by (or imposed on) teachers to pay lip service to what is seen as the new fashions in language teaching, it should not surprise us that these new trends find their way into the teaching materials and, ultimately, into learners' beliefs and aspirations.

In retrospect, some of the group statements can actually be seen in this light, including the importance attributed to spoken practice or the role of the teacher as corrector of mistakes, which can be easily traced back to different methodological trends in foreign language learning. More to the point, this apparent endorsement of widely disseminated beliefs were complemented by others which are more difficult to trace back to any received wisdom, namely that group work allows for *a better and closer relationship* between teacher and learners, or that this format makes it easier for the teacher to monitor the students' work.

4. BEYOND THE LESSON

At this stage, I would like to reiterate earlier statements that the classroom activity presented does not aspire to be an example of a new method. Rather, in the line of the principles of Exploratory Practice, its aim is to bring forward underlying preoccupations of the participants while they go about the normal business of learning a language.

Also, it is not my intention here to promote the advantages of group work, or of any specific task format, come to that. The topic of group work is in fact quite accidental. As mentioned before, it just happened that a lot of the data collected for my PhD dissertation touched upon an organisational aspect of the classroom that has intrigued me throughout my teaching practice. I have always had mixed feelings about group work, and in fact I have changed the way I manage this type of task along the years. The question here is that I had never thought of actually asking the students about this issue, or of devising a task that would hopefully help them articulate their views.

Nor can I make claims about the usefulness of this task for the students, or even about what they learned. In my defence, the latter would be unattainable anyway, since it seems very difficult to establish a clear-cut relationship between types of tasks and learning (Dreeben, 1973; Prabhu, 1995; Slimani, 1987), not least because different people learn in different ways. Besides, language learning materials tend to have a life of their own, given the interactive nature of the classroom encounter. Therefore, it should not be too controversial to postulate that materials are, at most, declarations of intentions, rather than scripts that will determine what actually takes place in the classroom. In this sense, the materials presented and the tasks they promote yielded different observable results with the two different classes where they were used.

Having said that, I am fully aware that there is here a question of degree, in that the very nature of the materials, the type of tasks they propose, and the roles they impinge on the participants, among many other factors, may influence the extent to which classroom events can be predicted. Crucially, though, they cannot possibly predict who learns what, a truism that most of us (and, sadly, I have to include myself in this group),

tend to ignore. At best, materials will help teacher and learners *manage* whatever learning takes place; from a strictly language acquisition point of view, though, it may well be impossible to pinpoint exactly what the purpose of each activity is. As Prabhu remarks,

> *It is (...) difficult to establish any one-to-one correspondence, on rational or commonsensical grounds, between specific types of classroom activity and specific concepts of what learning they promote.* (1995: 61).

Another important issue concerns the social aspect of the classroom. I referred above to how much researchers and teachers alike tend to ignore the social dimension of the classroom encounter. I am not an exception to the rule - my own preoccupations as far as group work is concerned tend to focus on managerial and cognitive aspects. Not that these are small matters, but I find my decision-making process tends to address questions such as, *Can these tables be moved? Will it take too long if I ask them to work in groups? Will they digress? Will they speak in English?*. In hindsight, there seems to be a whole repertoire of questions worth asking, which may be, incidentally, of more immediate interest to my students: *How much should I intervene during group work? When and how and how much should I correct my students? Do they feel that the negotiation side of this particular task is hampering their learning? Do these students feel comfortable working together?*. The list is endless, and highly subjective; above all, asking these new questions may help shift the onus of many classroom decisions onto the learners themselves, not only as individuals, but as co-producers of and full-fledged participants in the classroom.

What I can undoubtedly claim is that this activity has helped me know my students better and has even provided me with new insights about this particular task format. The main objective of these specific materials is to bring forward learners' opinions and beliefs about a particular task format - in this case, group work. Seen in this light, they were very successful, in that they made room for a lively discussion, in English, about what is entailed in working in groups and how differently individual students react to and feel about this type of activity.

To conclude, the ideas presented here should be 'judged by their explanatory power or their capacity to inspire the work of others' (Wolcott, 1990: 39). Or, as

Allwright puts it, 'Think globally, act locally, think locally' (2003: 115). The way I see it, one may find one's inspiration in research and glean powerful insights from other people's reflections. But our own teaching practice is ultimately the most fertile and fascinating source of observation, reflection, action, and collaboration.

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