

## BASIC LEVEL STUDENTS AND FOCUS-ON FORM: A STUDY IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL

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### Abstract

Recent literature (Swain 1998, 2002) suggests that intermediate and advanced students of foreign language are capable of noticing discrepancies between their production and the target language. Students may also benefit from a focus-on-form approach through collaborative tasks supported by a sociocultural perspective (Kowal & Swain, 1994). This study intended to investigate aspects related to focus-on-form instruction, noticing and awareness. In a data driven analysis of a classroom-based research, 162 basic level students of English as a foreign language in a public federal institution participated in a collaborative task of construction and reconstruction of written production. The intention was to determine whether younger students would notice implicit corrective feedback, benefit from collaborative dialogue during the activity, and maintain their learning through a pushed output production activity (Swain, 1995). The analysis points to the importance of collaborative instruction and to the increase in the quality of production.

KEY WORDS: focus-on-form; sociocultural pedagogy; English language teaching; public school

*Literatura recente (Swain 1998, 2002) sugere que alunos intermediários e avançados são capazes de notar discrepâncias entre sua produção e a língua-alvo. Aprendizes também podem se beneficiar de uma abordagem voltada para a forma através de tarefas associadas a uma perspectiva sociocultural e ao aspecto colaborativo e interacional da aprendizagem (Kowal & Swain, 1994). Este estudo investiga aspectos relacionados à instrução focada na forma, percepção e consciência lingüística. Em uma análise de dados de uma pesquisa originária de sala de aula, 162 alunos iniciantes de Inglês em uma instituição pública federal participaram em uma tarefa colaborativa de construção e reconstrução de produção escrita. A intenção é determinar se alunos mais jovens percebem feedback corretivo implícito, se tiram proveito do diálogo colaborativo durante a atividade, e se mantêm o aprendizado durante uma tarefa de produção estendida (Swain, 1995). A análise dos dados aponta a importância da instrução colaborativa e o aumento na qualidade da produção.*

*PALAVRAS CHAVE: foco-na-forma; abordagem sociocultural; ensino de ILE; escola pública*

### 1. Introduction

Language classrooms cannot be reduced to methodologies or materials used to attain goals. The teaching-learning process should be focused also from the perspective of the interactions that happen in the classroom. It is necessary to see interactions in the language classroom as a whole, an integrated continuum that is not limited to language learning.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has been turning to issues referring to sociocultural perspectives on the learning-teaching process, and to the interactional aspect of learning. Studies by Swain (1998, 2002), Kowal & Swain (1994), Ellis (2001), Doughty & Williams (1998) and others have sought to present how aspects of language learning related to noticing and awareness can be integrated by the use of some form of focus on form instruction, associating this to a sociocultural perspective to learning and education.

One of the motivations for this study was the perception that most researches on SLA dealt with advanced and intermediate learners, often adults or adolescents, and in settings which referred to the learning of a second language. These learners have a greater linguistic experience, due to their age group and exposure to language. My own teaching experience in the Brazilian public sector, however, portrayed a very different reality: foreign language teaching, with children who are in their first year of language instruction, in large classes and with limited teaching resources.

In these conditions, would the assumptions presented above continue to hold true? Would these young learners, with their yet limited knowledge of the target language and restricted learning experience, be able to perform the collaborative task assigned to them and evaluate its interactional aspect? Would it be possible for them to notice implicit corrective feedback during the activity, and retain the linguistic knowledge acquired through a pushed output production task? These are the research questions that initiated and pervaded this study.

The results point to pedagogical and research implications. In the field of research, findings seem to indicate that language investigation can be done in classroom-based settings, involving all the participants in the search for more insight into the life of the classroom.

The results also provide evidence that sociocultural pedagogy may form a solid and suitable alternative for foreign language instruction, especially under unfavorable conditions. Pedagogical implications in addition refer to the apparent validity of a focus on form approach to the teaching-learning process.

Finally, the findings appear to demonstrate that younger children are capable of benefiting from the blend of focus on form and sociocultural pedagogy. This combination can provide learners with autonomy to manipulate and take control of the target language, that is, to appropriate its forms in the search to attain communicative meaning.

This paper first provides an outline of focus-on-form theory and main assumptions, along with aspects of sociocultural pedagogy that are pertinent to the situation, referring to these concepts throughout the description of the study. The findings are analyzed in the light of these concepts, and the results and conclusions also refer back to them.

## **2. Focus on form and basic level pedagogy**

The main emphasis to the teaching of foreign languages in Brazilian public schools lies on what is called “reading approach” or the focus on the teaching of the skills and strategies necessary for understanding written texts. This approach is in accordance with the Brazilian pedagogic legislation, the *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais* (PCNs), which point to the

reading approach as one of ways to make the best use of the resources and teaching conditions present in most public schools. According to the PCNs (1998: 20), “the reading approach suits, on the one hand, the needs of formal education, and on the other, it is the ability that the student can use in his immediate social context.”<sup>1</sup>

The means to implementing this approach must also be taken into consideration. The PCNs recommend the use of a type of pedagogy that integrates social and linguistic aspects, since “the use of language (...) is essentially determined by its sociointeractional nature” (idem: 27). Following this view, it is possible to adopt a pedagogical viewpoint that incorporates both the social importance of language and its interactional aspects. At the same time, it is necessary for language to be seen as a continuing system, with socially and functionally defined purposes. Sociocultural approaches to the teaching of foreign languages seem to fill this need for attention to both the formal aspects of education and to its social and interactional perspective. As Foster and Ohta remember, “for sociocultural approaches (...) language development is essentially a social process” (2005: 403).

The option for collaborative work, performing activities of real interest and intrinsic validity for the student, could make the learning of a foreign language more meaningful and rewarding to the learner, more integrated with his reality and his context of education.

One possible way to achieve this broad aim would be “to incorporate into classroom activities tasks that are communicative, rather than language-as-object, *exercises*”<sup>2</sup> (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 244). This is also the proposition advocated by the PCN: “tasks correspond to communicative activities from the world outside the classroom and work as language construction experiences” (1998: 88). Tasks, then, would be conceived as activities integrating both communication and social purpose, both meaning and form. In other words, to present and teach language as a continuum that begins in communication, accomplished by means of meaning conveyed through linguistic forms: “(...) the best way to learn a language (...) is not by treating it as an object of study, but by experiencing it as a medium of communication” (Long, 1991: 41).

Following this line of thought, Long (idem: *ibidem*) has proposed a “relevant design feature of learning environment” he termed *focus on form*: “focus on form overtly draws student’s attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication” (idem: 45-46). In this study the term focus on form

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<sup>1</sup> This and all other translations from Portuguese have been done by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Original emphasis.

(FonF) is used as an umbrella term to encompass “any planned or incidental activity that is intended to introduce language learners to pay attention to linguistic forms” (Ellis, 2001: 1), a characterization more pedagogically oriented, since the context is that of foreign language teaching in a formal educational environment.

Pedagogically focus on form could be accomplished through choices made in the implementation of tasks and activities in the language class. The focal point is on social interaction and communication, on proposing tasks in which “the immediate criterion of success must be outside the grammar point itself” (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 244). As Nassaji and Fotos point out, “although the tasks are aimed at making grammar forms salient to the learner, this is achieved through communicative activities” (2004: 6).

Integration between focus on form and sociocultural pedagogy can be attained through Swain’s proposal of collaborative output: “tasks that require learners to cooperatively produce language” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004: 6). The whole process of completing the task, of producing the language, would make learners reflect upon it and consequently learn.

Swain’s output theory suggests that “output pushes learners to process language more deeply” (2000: 99). This would happen because learners would be more in control of the language they are producing, and more aware of the relationships between form and meaning.

Swain’s three functions of output can also be attended by a task-oriented pedagogy. The output hypothesis theorizes that the activity of producing language may lead learners to notice the differences between their production and the target language, to formulate hypothesis over this and lead to a conscious reflection upon the language and its use, what came to be called *metatalk*. The addition of a sociocultural feature by means of collaborative task production may increase the possibilities of linguistic gain, for learners would have to focus on the process of making their intended meaning clear to a partner: “learners seek solutions to their linguistic difficulties when the social activity they are engaged in offers them an incentive to do so” (idem: 100).

In the language classroom, these theories represent a shift of perspective from the syllabus, or from the “grammar point”, to the learners and their needs, both linguistic and social. Focus on form would arise from a perception that the process of learning a foreign language takes place in the learner, not outside him, and should be a reflection of learner’s aspirations and needs. It would give the learner more autonomy in the process of appropriating the foreign language.

These processes would be made more apparent to the learner by means of noticing, one of the roles of output. In Swain’s words, “learners may notice a gap between what they *want*

to say and what they *can* say” (1995: 126). During the process of producing the language the learner would become aware of the discrepancies between the target language and his own production, or “notice the gap”.

A focus on form pedagogy through output, or productive tasks, would also make learners aware that they are not able to say what they intend, i. e., to ‘notice the hole’, and to take steps to overcome the difficulties. They “may notice that they do not know how to express precisely the meaning they wish to convey *at the very moment of attempting to produce it*<sup>3</sup> – they notice (...) a ‘hole’ in their interlanguage” (Swain, 2000: 100). While engaged in the process of creating meaning, of communicating with their partners, learners “need to create linguistic form and meaning and in so doing, discover what they can and cannot do” (Swain, 1995: 127).

It must not be forgotten that “focus on form includes *forms, meaning, and function (or use)*” (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 244). Productive tasks should not lose sight of the communicative and social aspect of learning. Collaborative tasks may serve this dual function. On the one side the learner is practicing language through production; on the other, he is practicing social skills in activities that merge communicative aims with a focus on language use and on meaning, for “the aim of FonF tasks and techniques is to engage learner attention to facilitate more effective noticing of these form-function-meaning relationships” (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 245). Collaborative output tasks as advocated by Swain could form the bridge to connect the linguistic and the social aspect of language education.

### **3. The research**

Classroom research could be defined not only as the research that takes place in the classroom, but also as investigation seeking to describe both its educational and social aspects. As Alwright & Bailey affirm, “language classroom research must focus on what actually happens in the classroom” (1991: 14).

David Nunan calls for “far more (...) classroom-based, as opposed to classroom-oriented, studies” (1992: 103). The study presented here is a classroom-based research of a primary type. The researcher is the teacher of the classes and a participant in the social interactions that take place in the learning environment, thus meeting Alwright & Bailey’s argument that “the teacher who is already in the classroom, (...) is surely in a particularly privileged position to decide what needs to be investigated” (1991: 14).

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<sup>3</sup> Original emphasis.

The analysis was data-driven, data consisting of a collaborative class activity of written production and a questionnaire. Although sociocultural approaches to research may generate questions concerning generalizability and reliability, in this study the number of participants and the fact that it was conducted in actual classroom setting may meet these issues. Applicability is achieved through the classroom nature of the research: it can easily be replicable and adapted to other classrooms.

Having this in mind that “research done on children and classrooms is usually done by outsiders, but ultimately it is only the participants in a situation who have full access to all its relevant aspects” (Stubbs, 1992: 97), I decided to carry out the study in my own classes, reconciling researcher and teacher. A focus on the pedagogical practice was given through the choice of a routine class activity to be used as a research procedure.

### **The participants**

The study’s participants consisted of 162 students from 5 elementary (5<sup>th</sup> grade) classes in a public federal institution in the urban area of Rio de Janeiro. The students were in their first year of instruction in English as a foreign language. The five groups, ranging from 30 to 35 students each, consisted of learners aged between 10 to 12 years old. The researcher was the English teacher of all five classes, and was present at every stage of the research.

### **The task**

“A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (Bygate et al, 2001: 11). In this concept, tasks may have three different purposes: learning, testing and research. All three perspectives are present in this study, for besides being a learning activity, it was “used for purposes of measurement” and its data was “the basis for research” (idem, ibidem).

The present task was devised as a collaborative activity of writing and rewriting a small text, used later as part of the students’ evaluation. The learners wrote a short composition in the form of a letter describing themselves. They were expected to state their names, ages, place of living, and any other information they considered valid, such as a favorite color or school subject. The students would not have access to any instructional material. The pedagogical aim would be to ascertain their ability to make use of previous instruction, employing linguistic forms and vocabulary learned throughout the teaching year. It therefore met Pica’s recommendation that “activities and materials used in research (...) must be consistent with what these classroom participants are used to doing” (2005: 341).

The collaborative aspect would be represented by a habitual class procedure: pair work. The learners chose their partners for the activity, and were instructed not to refer to the

teacher for any kind of linguistic clarification. Although the “letters” were individual productions, they could talk to their partners and assist each other in their composition.

To accomplish the goal of noticing, implicit corrective feedback was given to the learners by means of textual enhancement, a FonF strategy. Textual enhancement “involves highlighting certain features of input that might go unnoticed under normal circumstances by typographically manipulating them through boldfacing, italicizing, underlining, or capitalizing” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2005:5). After the dyads completed the letters, the teacher underlined their errors, ranging from punctuation to spelling mistakes, from the lack of linguistic elements to ungrammatical sentence formation. This procedure was chosen because textual enhancement has been considered “the least explicit and the least intrusive method of focus on form” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004:5, citing Doughty & Varela, 1998). The students then rewrote their compositions, trying to correct the mistakes pointed by the teacher, again with the help of the partner. The aim was to determine whether they would be able to notice the marked errors, and to correct them in the second version, for “noticing (...) is a crucial concept in understanding how learners process their second languages” (Wigglesworth, 2005: 99). Because the research was performed at the end of the school year, there was no time for a delayed posttest. The activity of writing, rewriting and evaluating took place during the students’ normal forty-five minute classes. The whole process lasted 2 to 3 classes.

### **The questionnaire**

As it was not possible to record the students’ interactions, an adaptation was designed in the form of a questionnaire, which the learners answered immediately after finishing the rewriting process. Since the participants were both too young and beginners, the questions were in Portuguese, as the expected answers. They referred to aspects of noticing and to the interactional and collaborative characteristic of the task. The aim was to establish whether the participants were able to understand the main goals of the activity.

The questionnaire (Appendix A) represented the moment of retrospection of the activity as a whole and of its results as experienced by the learner. The questions were open-ended, to give these young learners the chance to express themselves freely, according to their own perception of the task. The first question referred to the task as a whole: the intention was to determine the validity of the rewriting activity from the point of view of the learner. The students were also asked to assert the reasons for their responses. The second question, divided into two sections, approached the issue of noticing. The basic purpose was to determine whether younger students would be able to notice errors or mistakes in their written production, with a view to future linguistic improvement. The third question presented the

interactional characteristic of the task, enquiring if the students considered it helpful to work in dyads, again inviting them to state their own reasons for their positive or negative answers.

“The purpose of any data collection is to draw inferences from the data collected”, declares Swain (2005:1). The decision to present open-ended questions was not taken at random. The objective was to let the students free to answer in whichever manner they could, without guidance, and to analyze their answers without predetermined conceptions or hypotheses.

**4. Findings**

One of the principles established by Allwright’s Exploratory Practice states that teachers should “integrate the work for understanding into classroom practice” (2003: 129). The collaborative task used was designed as integration between form and meaning, since the participants would have to make use of linguistic forms and vocabulary learned throughout the year to achieve the communicative meaning necessary to complete the task.

The students were aware that the definitive product would be part of their evaluation, being safe to assume that they would perform as best as they could. The findings reported were interpreted from the answers provided in the questionnaire, following Foster & Ohta’s assertion that “categories for quantification must emerge post-hoc from the data being analysed” (2005: 403).

The first question sought to establish their own opinion on the efficacy of writing and rewriting their essays. Table 1 shows quite definitive positive evaluation. Only four participants in the whole group of 162 students reported negative appraisal. One of them stated that he “did not know what he had done wrong”, probably a sign that he had not understood the purpose of the task. Another student gave a negative answer, but stated that he “understood better after he read the essay”, which could be considered a positive outcome. The other two students reported that they “had no mistakes to correct” – and they really had had nothing to be corrected in their essays!

**Table 1 - Evaluation of the activity**

	Yes	No	NA	TOTAL
Did it help to rewrite the essay?	157	4	1	162

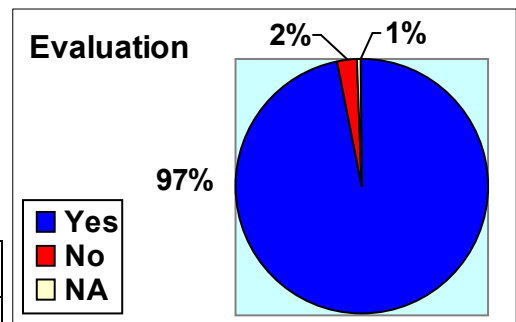


Figure 1

Asked to state their reasons, learners who reported that the activity was positive stated that rewriting was a good way of training the language, and that it helped them perceive or understand their mistakes. Because the question was open-ended, it is surprising how many of



the learners spontaneously refer to the issue of noticing. The students' opinions were given in Portuguese, and the answers were translated trying to maintain the original meaning.

**Table 2 - Positive evaluation of the activity**

<b>Why did it help to rewrite the essay?</b>		
Answers	Raw numbers	%
It helps notice/ understand mistakes	70	45
It trains the language	46	29
It is a chance to correct mistakes	22	14
When we commit mistakes we learn	10	6
It helps to remember	8	5
It is a chance to work as a team	1	1
TOTAL	162	100

It must be kept in mind that the answers are spontaneous, but not totally unexpected. The results of Table 2 could be interpreted as a confirmation of Swain's pushed output hypothesis, which states that it is in the moment of production that students can notice gaps or holes in their linguistic ability: "the activity of producing the target language may prompt (...) learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems" (1995: 126).

It would also be worth noting the learners' opinion on error making, since 6% of them stated that errors are a necessary condition for learning. The pedagogical implication here would involve taking a more reactive stance to FonF, devising subsequent tailor-made tasks to promote more opportunity for the use and the acquisition or learning of the forms in question.

### **Noticing**

The findings referring to noticing suggest that the majority of learners were able to notice at least some incorrectness in their production. The percentage drops in the question related to the understanding of the errors marked, suggesting that these young learners were able to notice that something was not correct, but not to understand all the reasons for that. One explanation may be that implicit corrective feedback in the form of textual enhancement was not totally effective for inexperienced learners to identify and correct inappropriateness in their interlanguage. As Nassaji & Fotos (2004: 5) point out, "this strategy may promote noticing of grammatical forms", but "it may not be sufficient for their acquisition."

**Table 3 - Noticing**

<b>During the activity, could you:</b>	Yes	No	No Answer	TOTAL
Notice your mistakes?	148	13	1	162
Understand your mistakes?	135	25	2	162

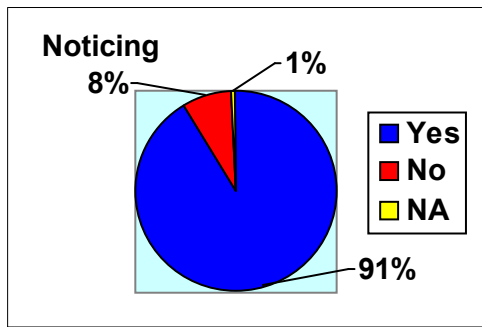


Figure 2

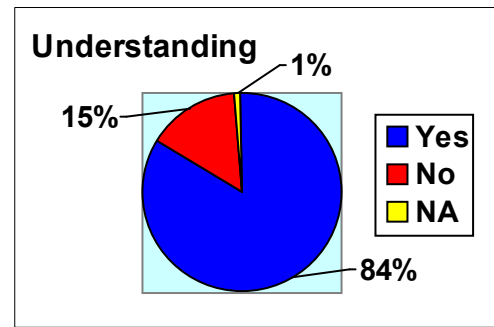


Figure 3

It should be remembered that noticing refers both to the perception of one's own error (self-correction), and to awareness that comes as result of interactional feedback. It is possible that, as the participants are children, their attention span was yet too limited to allow advanced noticing in a foreign language. A pedagogical implication to this aspect would be the realization that “while noticing may be a necessary condition for acquisition, it is not the only condition” (Nassaji & Fotos 2004: 5).

In relation to understanding, learners may have noticed their mistakes but not attempted to correct them – either because they did not know how to do so, or because their attention was diverted by some other mistake they considered more important. Pedagogically, then, integration between form, meaning and use would be necessary, for “the aim of FonF tasks (...) is to engage learner attention to facilitate more effective noticing of these form-function-meaning relationships” (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 245).

### Language Related Episodes

An adaptation of Swain's concept of Language Related Episodes (LREs) was used in this research: “any part of a dialogue in which students talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or other-, or self-correct” (1998: 70). Since the interactions could not be recorded, LREs here refer to what the learners reported in the questionnaires as having understood from the rewriting activity. Thus, in this case “the evidence of language processing is derived not directly from what learners say while performing the tasks, but from posthoc analyses of their language products, that is, the (...) writing samples elicited” (Wigglesworth, 2005: 99). The LREs in this study can be considered as instances of “other- or self-correction”, as they refer to what the student had noticed, understood and corrected, by himself or with peer help, in the process of performing the collaborative activity.

Table 4 displays what learners reported as having noticed or understood in their productions. Students were asked to state two examples of what they had been able to correct

in the final version of the composition. The expected number of answers was 324, two for each participant. However, the results come up to only 214 responses, 14 of these corresponding to students who were not able to give examples. The reason for this apparent discrepancy can be attributed to a misinterpretation of the researcher's request. Some students gave repeated instances of the same kind of mistake. In this case, the answer counted as only one. Again the answers are the spontaneous result of the learners' own judgment of what they considered as understanding.

**Table 4 - Examples of errors noticed / understood by learners**

<b>Give two examples of errors that you understood after doing the activity</b>		
Answers	Raw numbers	%
Spelling / Capitalization	91	43
Awkward / Ungrammatical sentence construction	22	10
Punctuation	18	8
Article use	16	7
Verb use	10	5
Word order	9	4
Lack of words	9	4
L1 interference	9	4
I did not understand things / I did not pay attention	8	4
Pronoun use	4	2
I am not very good at English	4	2
No Answer	14	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100</b>

Spelling and/or capitalization seem to be the great concern for these beginner students. There might be two concurrent explanations for this perception on the part of the learners. One may reflect the pedagogical orientation towards a reading approach, with emphasis on the interpretation and understanding of written texts and limited opportunity for the practice of productive skills.

A second explanation would lie on the assumption that these young participants are yet at a very early stage of their language development. They have not, as Kowal and Swain propose, moved on "from semantic to syntactic processing" (1997: 287). This concept would also account for the ungrammatical sentence construction, the second most cited case: they are still unable to "move beyond processing words as independently functioning lexemes and come to consider them in their relationship to other words in the sentence" (idem, ibidem).

It should also be noted that learners spontaneously referred to what Swain (1998) has called metatalk, or the use of language to refer to and reflect upon language. Students mentioned having noticed their mistakes in verb and article use, problems in word order and the interference of their L1 in their production. It seems that the activity served “the function of deepening the students’ awareness of forms and rules (...) helping students to understand the relationship between meaning, forms and function” (idem: 69).

### Interaction

One of the purposes of this study was to investigate whether learners would benefit from an interactional approach to a classroom activity. Again the whole percentage seems positive in the students’ own evaluation, since 90% of them considered that doing the activity in dyads helped in some way to get a better result, as seen in Table 5 below.

**Table 5 - Interaction**

	Yes	No	NA	TOTAL
Did it help to do the activity in pairs?	147	14	1	162

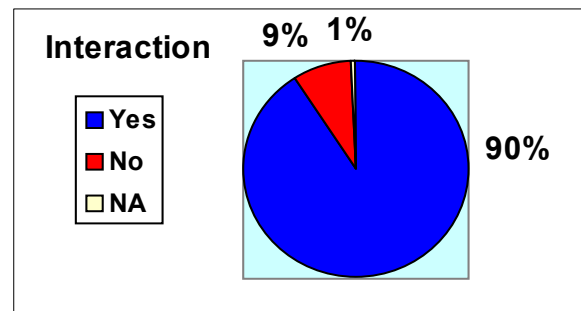


Figure 4

Those who considered the activity as helpful gave reasons such as the opportunity of discussing their doubts with the partner and the possibility of helping and of being helped by their peers. This last answer, the second most cited, reinforces the benefits of a sociocultural approach to teaching languages. These young students seem to have, at a very early stage, sensed that it is good to help and to be helped, that learning takes place in an atmosphere of collaboration, support and mutual aid. As Foster & Ohta affirm, “the interactive task is revealed here as a social event to which learners bring their instinct to be co-operative and helpful” (2005: 425). Table 6 displays the students’ spontaneous answers.

**Table 6 - Positive evaluation of the collaborative activity**

Why did it help you to make the activity in pairs?		
Answers	Raw numbers	%
Because I could discuss my doubts with my partner	61	42
Because I could help and be helped	36	24
Because my partner helped me notice my mistakes	17	11
Because we could talk about what we were writing	15	10
Because “two heads think better than one”	11	7

Because it made it easier to learn	7	5
Just for a change	1	1
TOTAL	162	100

The fact that 10% of the participants stated that talking about their production was helpful seems to support Swain's view that "interaction provides opportunities for learners not only to negotiate the message (...), but, in doing so, to focus on its form as well" (2000: 98). The dyads worked together in search for solutions for problems they had helped each other to notice. As 11% of the learners have stated here, "students can provide useful feedback to one another" (Kowal & Swain, 1994: 87).

From the total of 162 learners participating in the research activity, only 14 reported a negative evaluation to working in collaboration. Again their reasons for this negative view of the task were natural and unprompted.

**Table 7 - Negative evaluation of the collaborative activity**

<b>Why working in pairs did not help you?</b>		
Answers	Raw numbers	%
Because my partner did not help me	4	30
Because I neither helped nor was helped	3	21
Because both students were talking / not paying attention	2	14
Because each student worked autonomously	2	14
Because my partner did not know how to help me	1	7
Because my partner did not ask me for help	1	7
Because I do not like working in pairs	1	7
TOTAL	14	100

It must not be forgotten that the study dealt with children, who can be very frank and objective about their reasons for considering a task as positive or negative. The answers in Table 7 above seem to reflect the candid mentality of the child who sees no reason for lying if he was not paying attention during the class, about his behavior, or about his own preference in terms of class activities.

In relation to the final versions of the students' compositions, the results were also positive. Students were capable of correcting some of their errors, while others remained. This could be a confirmation of the studies in attention and awareness, which state that young learners have a limited span of attention, thus having to be selective in their own focus. As

Schmidt argues, “language learners are not free to notice whatever they want whenever they want”, and, as here, “a number of factors influence notice-ability” (1990: 144).

Kowal and Swain state that “feedback needs to be provided for the learning experience to be complete” (1997: 306). In the task proposed, learners received two kinds of corrective feedback: more implicitly in the form of text enhancement done by the teacher; and probably a more explicit one in terms of peer correction. The option of using this strategy conforms with a more learner-centered approach to education. The goal is to help students take responsibility for their own learning, since they are the ones responsible for the corrections, and eventually, for their own learning. As proposed by Kowal & Swain (1994: 76), it is a way to “help them to gain control of their own language production abilities”.

Although Qi and Lapkin suggest that “learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency may have more difficulty identifying the nature of the gap between their IL and the TL” (2001:295), learners in this study seem to be aware of what they needed. Their evaluation, however, corresponded to the current stage of their linguistic ability. They were able to identify not all, but at least part of their needs during the rewriting activity, and if they were not yet able to correct all of what they noticed, this could be attributed to a yet limited capacity of retaining or focusing attention. As Swain explains, they still have to “move from the semantic, open-ended, strategic processing prevalent in comprehension to the complete grammatical processing needed for accurate production” (2000: 99). Nevertheless, it can still be said that as a whole the activity was successful, both as research and as classroom activity.

## **5. Conclusions**

One possible way to achieve understanding of the nature of the relationships and interactions in the language classroom is through research. Stubbs calls our attention to the need for a “clearer understanding of the sociolinguistic forces at work in schools and classrooms”, reminding us also that “observations are of no interest in themselves, unless we can relate them to general principles of language use in social contexts” (1992: 23). Qualitative modalities of investigation would result in the “involvement of the teacher in reflections over his classroom practice”, (PCN, 1998: 109). As was done in this study, “these interventions can be implemented during regular class time” (Pica, 2005: 340). Theory and research would form the basis for deeper and more open reflection and consideration that might result, in changes into practice by the teacher in his classroom, regardless of students’ language proficiency or age level.

Focus on form implies attention to problematic aspects of the language as it is in use in a communicative learning activity. The written nature of the task in this study gave learners

more opportunity to revise and self-correct their productions. Its communicative content referred to the promotion and development of learners' identity, since they would be describing themselves. At the same time, the interactional element of pair work provided them with peer feedback, and with an opportunity to perceive their own linguistic ability in relation to other's, thus confirming or rejecting linguistic hypotheses. Their negotiation during interaction was in relation to form, not meaning, as "meaning was already transparent for these learners and they were therefore able to concentrate on the more formal features of the structure" (Doughty & Williams, 1998: 248). The opportunity to work in collaboration was seen as positive from learners' own point of view as stated in the research results.

Kumaravadivelu (1994:39) affirms that "promoting learner autonomy is vitally important" in language classrooms. This view is consistent with Swain's own perception when she states that through production "(...) we may be focusing on ways in which learners can play more active, responsible roles in their learning" (1995: 126). Focus on form strategies place the focal point on the learner and his needs, therefore giving him and the teacher more independence of choice in pedagogical terms. The learning-teaching process concentrates on the student, rather than on the syllabus.

The combination of strategies and procedures made available by the use of a form-focused emphasis on language instruction associated to sociocultural pedagogy may help to promote this so necessary autonomy, even in younger learners. Schmidt (1990: 150) has declared that "we have assumed learner ignorance more often than we have attempted to investigate learner awareness". By giving learners a voice through sociocultural pedagogy and research it is possible to develop and take up the issue of the roles of consciousness and of noticing in foreign language learning under a different perspective – one that takes into consideration the main participant in educational interaction, and the one who has most to benefit from it: our student.

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## 7. Appendix A - Questionnaire

Responda individualmente:

1- Você acha que reescrever a redação ajudou a aprender? ( ) Sim ( ) Não

Por que? \_\_\_\_\_

2- Durante o trabalho de reler e reescrever a redação, você:

a) Conseguiu perceber o que errou? ( ) Sim ( ) Não

b) Conseguiu entender por que errou? ( ) Sim ( ) Não

c) Dê dois exemplos: \_\_\_\_\_

3- Você acha que fazer a redação em dupla ajudou? ( ) Sim ( ) Não

Por que? \_\_\_\_\_